

## Remarx

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### *“To Those Born Later”: Brecht’s Centenary and Other Commemorations*

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Loren Kruger

Wars bring the world to ruin, and through the rubble goes  
A specter . . . come  
To change everything and to stay forever; its name is  
*Communism.*

(Brecht)<sup>1</sup>

Celebrated on 10 February 1998, the centenary of Bertolt Brecht’s birth anticipated by a week or more the 150th anniversary of the publication of the Communist Manifesto in late February 1848. Whereas the first event has been commemorated with great enthusiasm—and not a little irony—in Germany, and acknowledged, albeit grudgingly, in the United States (almost always in the form of Marc Blitzstein’s sweet and harmless version of “Mack the Knife”), the second has received relatively little attention.<sup>2</sup> As the communist (if not Communist) Brecht is buried—along with Communism—under the weight of classical prestige, a monumentalization even more impenetrable than the steel coffin in which he chose to be interred, and as functionaries such as the minister for culture in Brandenburg (the state surrounding Berlin) represent this antibourgeois activist as a poet of “tender verses” (*zärtliche Verse*) on the local landscape (Wagenau 1998), it is all the more important to remember Brecht’s debt to Marx. The coincidence of Brecht’s centenary and the anniversary of the Communist Manifesto in this era of apparent capitalist triumph and communist demise provides a timely opportunity to reevaluate the ongoing impact of Brecht and his collaborators for a vital anticapitalist culture.

Although a lifelong critic of capitalist society and bourgeois culture, Brecht's connection to official communism was, as is well known, thoroughly ambiguous. As he told the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1946 (the year after he had written a verse variation on the Communist Manifesto, and the year before he left the United States for good), he was never a member of any Communist party. Nonetheless, he studied marxist theory and practice, wrote plays and film scripts on behalf of communists, and chose to return from exile to the then Soviet Zone of East Germany in 1948, before it became a state—the German Democratic Republic—able or willing to offer him a theater, which he received officially only in 1954. Even his crafty response to the House Un-American Activities Committee, in which he made no mention of communism, defended a democratic antimilitarism under threat by preparations for a not-so-cold war (Brecht 1994, 100). The inconsistencies in Brecht's commitment are likewise well known. His plays, prose, and drama exposed the contradictions of capitalist society and bourgeois mores, and socialist attempts to transform them, yet his personal relations with his family and (especially female) collaborators have been described as exploitative; his creative appropriation of found material contrasts with his vigilant defense of intellectual property. Although anticommunist commentators from the House Un-American Activities Committee team through Martin Esslin (especially in *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* [1959]) and John Fuegi (especially in *Brecht and Company* [1994]) have used these inconsistencies as the basis for a cold war melodrama in which Brecht appears as a Stalinist or, more recently, chauvinist demon, the influence of Brecht and his collaborators (writers Elizabeth Hauptmann, Margarete Steffin, Günter Weisenborn, and Lion Feuchtwanger; designers Caspar Neher, John Heartfield, Teo Otto, and Karl von Appen; photographer Ruth Berlau; composers Kurt Weill, Paul Hindemith, Hanns Eisler, and Paul Dessau; and actors Helene Weigel [also his wife], Ernst Busch, Carola Neher, Erwin Geschonneck, and others) remains unparalleled. While the work of these collaborators should be acknowledged, Brecht remains the catalyst and director without whom this extraordinary output would not have been possible.<sup>3</sup>

1. This citation is from the opening lines of Brecht's versification of the Communist Manifesto (third draft, July 1945). All citations from Brecht from the new *Grosse Kommentiere Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe* in thirty volumes (Brecht 1988–98) include volume and page numbers. Translations are my own.

2. Apart from the program for the Berliner Ensemble's production of *The Measures Taken* (the first sanctioned production in over forty years), which consisted of a copy of the Manifesto annotated with commentary from the play and other texts by Brecht, his contemporaries, and ours, only the *Berliner Zeitung* of the former German Democratic Republic carried a detailed commentary; Wolfgang Engler's (1998) article included reflections on the continuing relevance of the Manifesto to the downsizing of Europe as well as on Brecht's engagement with that text. Later in 1998, Verso Press's reissue of *The Communist Manifesto* in a coffee-table edition received some publicity, chiefly as a curiosity.

3. Despite Esslin's and Fuegi's popularity with the reflexively anticommunist media in the Anglophone world, the ideological character of their comments have been thoroughly critiqued, most thoroughly by John Willett (1997). Despite its popularity, Fuegi's (1994) argument that Brecht's collaborators were exploited is not new. Similar arguments have been made by German writers from Peter Weiss (in *Aesthetik der Widerstand* [1971]), at once a novel and a treatise on the politics of art) to Fritz Raddatz (1993), and the subject has received serious critical treatment from Paula Hanssen (1995) and Sabine Kebir (1997, 1998), among others.

1

I'm at home in Asphalt City.

(Brecht, "On poor B.B.")

A key contributor to Brecht production and to the production of Brecht is the city of Berlin. Although Brecht was born in Augsburg, the city fathers put up a plaque at his birthplace (and, more recently, opened a museum and a Brechtshop) only after shunning him for nearly half a century. Berlin, by contrast, was the only place (from 1924 to 1933, and later, from 1949 to 1956, the year of his death) where Brecht had the full resources of his collaborators and audiences. While he may have written plays, poetry, fiction, and theory more extensively in exile in Scandinavia and the United States, exile deprived him of the language, the institutions, and the social support—and antagonism—vital for the production and reception of a “theater for instruction” that could be pedagogical, playful, and politically provocative all at once. Moreover, Berlin in 1998, a city in the process of reinventing itself after being divided for over forty years, is an exemplary place and occasion for investigating the historical foundations and present contestation of cultural politics. Eleven years after the rival celebrations of the 750th anniversary of the city, eight after the reunification of Germany, and barely two after the controversy over a monument to the Holocaust planned for the old Gestapo property exploded, Berlin is literally a building site on which the activity of construction (and deconstruction) calls attention to the still potent tensions between past and present, east and west, communism and capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

Walking tours organized under the rubric of “I’m at home in Asphalt City” (*In der Asphaltstadt bin ich daheim*) addressed these tensions indirectly. “Brecht and the Powerful” toured Unter den Linden, the main thoroughfare of interwar bourgeois culture, and the quarters of the Weimar and Nazi governments. “Brecht in Stalinallee” explored the tensions in Brecht’s uneasy loyalty to the German Democratic Republic, juxtaposing the site of the workers’ uprising in June 1953 with Brecht’s public solidarity with the state’s retaliation and private doubt expressed, for instance, in a poem about the state as paternalist Prussian eagle force-feeding its young (1988:12, 307). “Brecht’s Unknown Stages” included lesser-known places of Brecht performances but left unexplored sites in working-class districts, such as Wedding, where Brecht worked with communist choirs and acting groups to perform the *Lehrstücke* (learning plays), his most politically and theatrically advanced theater for actors without spectators. Even if the halls and the party that maintained them are no longer there, this tour might have provided a useful counterweight to the monumental Brecht.

4. The conceit of Germany as construction site (*Deutschland als Baustelle*) was one of the most enduring metaphors for the German Democratic Republic or East Germany. Both officials and dissidents used the expression to capture the unfinished character of socialism and the process of building a new socialist society on German soil. But, as Heiner Müller remarked, the cellars were never cleared out, and the buildings were never stable (1981, 14–21).

The cunning needed to disseminate the truth.  
(Brecht, "Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth")

Although not explicitly engaged with the topography of Berlin, the exhibition of Brecht's work at the Akademie der Künste pointed toward some of these and other unexplored sites. Under the motto "my work is the swan song of the millennium" (*der Abgesang des Jahrtausends*), the exhibition displayed in twenty-two cabinets "twenty-two essays in describing (a way of) work(ing)" (*eine Arbeit zu beschreiben*). The title alludes to Brecht's serial publication of *Versuche* (essays, experiments), which included plays, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction prose and thus escaped the conventional distinction between "creative" and "critical" work, hence the pressure to commodify the first as an object of culinary or leisure consumption and the latter as hard-to-swallow theory. Arranged in an area called the rehearsal space (*Probebühne*), the cabinets were offset by photographs of Brecht's family and friends on the walls and by the actual stage objects made for key Berliner Ensemble productions, from masks for *The Trial of Lucullus* (*Der Verhör des Lukullus*, 1951) or *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1953) to the globe for *Galileo* (1956) and the fully fitted wagon for *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1949), which inaugurated Brecht's return to Berlin and his battles with the defenders of socialist realism, who denounced the production for "decadence alien to the people" (Erpenbeck 1971, 112).<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the flimsy cardboard flats representing Brecht's study, complete with painted books, the solidity of these objects (too solid to be called props) amply realized Brecht's call for usable stage objects whose use might demonstrate the labor and social value imprinted on them (1988:23, 116).

Whatever the sensuous pleasures to be had from (almost) touching these objects—protected by the usual museum prohibitions against actual handling—the greatest use-value of the exhibition lay in the documentation of the reading and visual matter that stimulated Brecht's production, as well as in the plethora of works in progress known previously only to the archivists and their professional clients. These cast light (and shadow) on familiar productions on similar themes: "The Life of Einstein" highlighted more directly the topical concern about annihilation by A-bomb, which *The Life of Galileo* addressed only indirectly; the photograph of Einstein pulling his tongue at a photojournalist registered Brecht's perception of the connection between experimental thinking and a cheeky sense of fun (*Spass*). On the other hand, *Die Horst-Wessel-Legende*, notes for a play on the Nazi theme song, suggested a more pointed attack on Hitler mythology than the allegorical gangster show, *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui. Jae Fleischhacker* [meat chopper] in *Chikago* (one of the fragments receiving a world premiere at the Berliner Ensemble). The accompanying materials

5. As editor of the Theater Association organ, *Theater der Zeit*, Erpenbeck was well placed to attack Brecht. This particular essay is remarkable for its strategic combination of Stalinist orthodoxy and the deployment of a fascistoid appeal to the "Volk." The German original, *volksfremde Dekadenz*, is a curious but telling mixture of Stalinist orthodoxy and leftover Nazi hostility to "degenerate art."

assembled by Hauptmann—from the floor plan of the Chicago Board of Trade and Frank Norris’s novel *The Pit* to German economic textbooks—highlighted the “random and reckless character of world markets” in the 1920s that surfaces more enigmatically in *St Joan of the Stockyards*. A note entitled “Confucius or Ford?” suggested not only the difference between bureaucratic traditionalism and imperial capitalism but also the possibility of affinities between two variations on the concentration of power.

As this note suggests, Brecht’s exploration of capitalist and anticapitalist themes and topics followed some unexpected paths. His versification of *The Communist Manifesto* (only recently published in the new edition of the collected works) draws on his study of Marx with Karl Korsch and Fritz Sternberg at the Marxist Workers School in Weimar Republican Berlin and on the observation of American capitalism during the war, but also on earlier experiments with *Lehrgedichte* (pedagogical poems) on the model of Lucretius’s ruminations on natural science. Brecht’s reading of Marx was supplemented not only by Lenin but by one of his fiercest critics, Rosa Luxemburg, who was to have been the subject of a play but whose critique of party infallibility (encapsulated in the famous defense of freedom as necessarily “the freedom of those who think differently”) may have proved too touchy for the East German state. More surprising than the material on Luxemburg was Brecht’s extensive collection of writings by and about Trotsky. Trotsky was taboo (not to say erased from history) during Stalin’s rule and even after, yet Brecht’s library contained Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* and his *Flight from Siberia* (both in U.S. translations), as well as pamphlets by Stalin and Trotsky, alongside Brecht’s notes and typescript of *Me-Ti: Book of Changes*, his allegorical narrative analysis of state socialist sclerosis in Confucian costume.

### 3

Dialecticians bring out the contradictory elements in all phenomena and processes; they think critically—that is, they bring phenomena to crisis, so as to grasp them.

—Brecht, “Katzgraben-Notate”

If the exhibition offered a rehearsal space in which visitors might stage experimental variations on Brecht in their mind’s eye, the theaters in Berlin used the centenary to present audiences with texts from the archive as well as to reevaluate the canon not only of Brecht’s plays and productions but also of Brechtian performance conventions more generally. Although the Berliner Ensemble, the theater of Brecht and his heirs, had the lion’s share of Brecht, other theaters offered new perspectives on old plays. The Deutsches Theater production of *Man is Man* (1924/7) was directed by wunderkind Leander Haussmann in the experimental underground space, the Baracke (barracks). The name of the space proved particularly apt as Haussmann’s staging reviewed Brecht’s antimilitarist drama of a man transformed into a “fighting machine” through the lens of Stanley Kubrick’s violent and ambiguous *Full Metal*

*Jacket.* The Volksbühne, whose director Frank Castorf has usually dismissed Brecht as old hat, staged only the agitprop fragment, “The Bread Shop,” but Brecht reappeared nonetheless in the text and technique of Castorf’s adaptation of *the* pre-Brechtian socialist classic, Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Weber* (Weavers, 1892).

Postmodern in his ironic, even cynical deconstruction of Hauptmann’s modern (progressivist, committed) depiction of the plight of textile workers in 1840s Silesia on the eve of revolution, Castorf used anachronism to mock socialist rhetoric of solidarity in struggle. The rabble-rousing “red baker” (played here by a woman, Silvia Rieger) offers the weavers a pastiche of socialist rhetoric (in the original text) backed by veteran actor Ernst Busch’s vigorous rendition of “The Party is always right” (Fürnberg 1996)—a song that is now the object of derision as well as commodification in *Ostalgie* (East German nostalgia) shops—and quotations on direct action from Brecht, Subcomandante Marcos, and Quentin Tarantino, juxtaposed in a manner that eluded a clear political line. At the same time, portraying the weavers as ex-citizens of the German Democratic Republic dressed in the distinctive unfashion of the East German prole, in a makeshift unemployment office, waiting for nonexistent jobs, with Dreissiger (played by Volksbühne leading man, Henry Hübchen) as a new German capitalist in designer wear, was pointedly topical (fig. 1). This staging was met by a thoroughly Brechtian reaction from members of the audience who engaged with the actors, especially with the favorite Hübchen, who remained on stage during the intermission. Several picked up on the irony of the program: a cast list on a single sheet of German Democratic Republic-era, roughly recycled paper sold in a wrapper of multiple-page glossy advertising for Mercedes Benz under the rubric, “All people are not equal.” Others challenged the perceived motives of Hübchen’s character, as well as his antagonists, providing a striking contrast to the usually polite German theater audiences, who tend to confine themselves to final applause (or the occasional boo).

Unlike the Volksbühne, whose productions (especially of Heiner Müller’s work) began challenging the limits of officially tolerable forms of political theater at least in the 1980s, the Berliner Ensemble is still dealing with the monumentalization of Brecht perpetuated by his heirs, especially daughter Barbara, son-in-law and leading actor Ekkehart Schall, and director (and Central Committee member) Manfred Wekwerth, who ran the theater from the mid-1970s until the demise of the German Democratic Republic in 1990. By the 1980s, the theater that astonished the world in the 1950s and 1960s had become little more than a museum for archival productions of the master, filtered through Wekwerth’s normalizing lens. Taken over by Müller along with other prominent German directors but run essentially by Müller until his death in 1995, the theater company was revived with a mixture of maverick productions of unfamiliar Brecht texts (including Müller’s version of the *Fatzer* fragments [see Kruger 1992]); stagings of Müller’s critical dramas on the contradictions between socialist theory and East German reality (*Der Lohndrucker* and *Der Bau* [construction site], written in partial response to Brecht’s failed attempts to deal with the same material; and new versions of classic Brecht, such as *Arturo Ui* (1995), directed



Fig. 1. *Hauptmanns Weber*, with Harry Hübchen as the factory owner Dreissiger (in suit), adapted and directed by Frank Castorf, Volksbühne, Berlin, 1998. Photograph by Ingolf Seidel. Courtesy of Volksbühne.

by Müller, with Martin Wuttke as Ui. Although featured in the centenary season, this production was edited by Wuttke, who took over as interim director after Müller's death. Where Müller's staging maintained and sharpened the topical, political edge of Brecht's critique of fascism, especially in the scenes depicting Ui's perversion of justice and the thuggery of his followers, the version currently on display dispenses with these contextualizing seasons to focus on Wuttke's bravura performance as a demon dog in an entertaining but essentially toothless gangster show.

While Wuttke's truncated version of *Arturo Ui* represents a defeat of sorts, a capitulation of *Verfremdung* (best translated as "critical distancing") to the alienation of the charismatic star, Robert Wilson's version of *Der Ozeanflug* (Flight over the Ocean, 1929) and Klaus Emmerich's *Die Massnahme* (Measures Taken, 1929–32) both attempt critical re-presentations of charisma, albeit in rather different ways. Wilson is not in any obvious sense a Brechtian director, since he is less interested in the theatrical analysis of social contradiction that might instruct the audience than in the creation of a modernist *Gesamtkunstwerk* of minimalist image, sound, and movement that captures the imagination. Like his early and exemplary work, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), Wilson's version of *Der Ozeanflug* is a meditation on the contiguity and incongruity of science and art (fig. 2). Using Brecht's original radio play *Der Lindberghflug* (1928/9), which celebrated the charismatic figure of Charles Lindbergh as well as the technological achievement of his trans-Atlantic flight, Wilson's *mise en scène* included an ingenious imitation of a flying machine (a table suspended in midair, at which the pilot (Stefan Kurt) sits, balancing on a unicycle), which aptly indicated Lindbergh's stripped-down aircraft but omitted any reference to Lindbergh's own fascination with the social as well as technological engineering of the Nazis, which compelled Brecht to cut the man's name from his play for its revival on Süddeutscher Rundfunk in 1950. While an incisive biographical essay in the program filled this gap (Böhmel 1998), the majority of spectators not reading it before the show would more likely have been captivated by the image of flight and the small-boy-with-radio in period dress, representing the "boys and girls" whom Brecht designated as the target audience for his original radio play.

## 4

The contradiction between learning and enjoyment must be clearly grasped and its significance understood—in a period when knowledge is acquired in order to be sold for the highest possible price.

—Brecht, "Appendices to the Short Organum"

Brecht's polemical emphasis on the difference between learning and enjoyment is perhaps his most famous and certainly his most misunderstood slogan. Yet his remark, which is best understood as noting the contradiction between learning and consuming, is a timely reminder that the capitalist culture industry thrives by marketing anticapitalist messages as commodities. Like Marx, Brecht understood the revolutionary capacity of capitalism to turn ideas and ideals into objects of exchange, while sharing his



Fig. 2. Bertolt Brecht, *Der Ozeanflug*, directed and lit by Robert Wilson, Berliner Ensemble, 1998. Photograph © Brigitte M. Mayer. Courtesy of Berliner Ensemble.

mentor's conviction that "the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it . . . also created [*gezeugt*] the men who are to wield those weapons—the modern working class" (Marx and Engels 1953, 468; 1974, 478; translation modified).

This tension between the heroic image of an international proletariat taking on capital with its own weapons and the sobering picture of the localization, even isolation, of labor struggles against the globalization of capital haunts the Berliner Ensemble's revival of Brecht's most notorious play, *The Measures Taken*, a *Lehrstück* through which worker-players might test the validity of revolutionary action. The script traces the attempt of three young comrades to account for their elimination of a fourth whose rash behavior endangered the identities of the others, who were attempting to conscientize a hostile population. Although Brecht argued retrospectively (in 1936 and again in 1956, when he withdrew the play from further production) that *The Measures Taken* was written for the education of the performers, not for spectators (1972, 251, 258), the original performance in the Berliner Philharmonie—accompanied by three worker-choirs and an orchestra playing Hanns Eisler's score, and animated by solo performances by well-known actors Helene Weigel and Ernst Busch as well as by the tenor Anton Topitz—was treated by friend and foe alike as a *Schaustück*, a showpiece for Communist theory and practice. Praised by some communists for its clear representation of the difficult necessity of revolutionary discipline (the young comrade agrees to his own death after jeopardizing the group's efforts at conscientization), the performance was criticized by others for oversimplifying the complexity of party work and thus endangering the Communist cause on the eve of Nazi victory (Brecht 1972, 319–471). To the House Un-American Activities Committee members who interrogated Brecht and Eisler, the play was a simple instance of communist brutality (254–8). Brecht's decision to forbid even nonprofessional production of the play was no doubt a response to its appropriation as a weapon in the cold war.

Despite this ban, the Berliner Ensemble revival was not the first publicized production of the text, although it was the first public performance for an audience. An experiment based on this material was conducted over seven days in December 1990 at the Akademie der Künste in East Berlin (since absorbed by its Western counterpart) by the Austrian director Josef Szeiler and twenty-four other participants.<sup>6</sup> Unlike the Akademie experiment, the Berliner Ensemble production did not pretend to be anything other than a *Schaustück*, a display of theatrical and musical skill on the part of Brecht, Eisler, the present stage director Klaus Emmerich, music director Roland Klüttig, and the performers (fig. 3). To be sure, the *mise en scène* staged the tension between learning and consuming by juxtaposing the matter-of-fact delivery and simple white tops and black bottoms of the singers representing the comrades with a tenor (Götz Schulte) in full tuxedo and Richard Tauber-ish coiffure who represented the young comrade in full passionate flight, but it also indulged the male

6. This experiment was conducted by and for the participants in the Akademie building without being pulled together for an audience. Its open-ended character was emphasized by the documentation (Haas and Szeiler 1990), which juxtaposes reports by most participants without drawing conclusions from them.

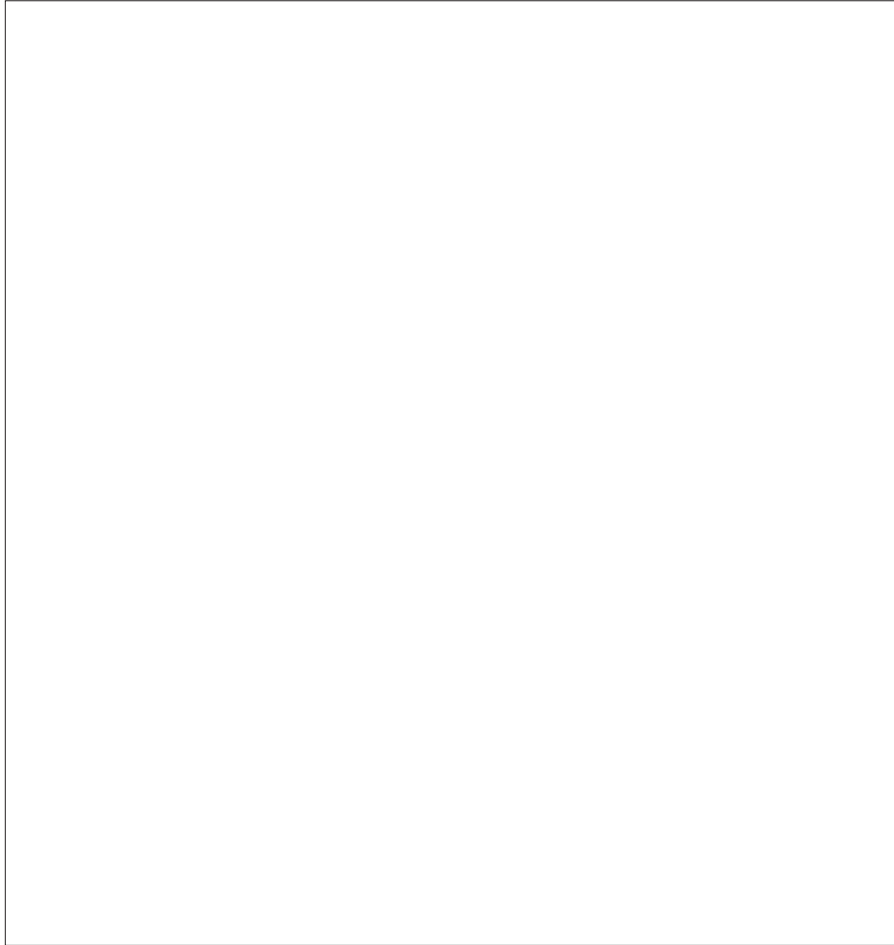


Fig. 3. Bertolt Brecht, *Die Massnahme*, directed by Klaus Emmerich, Berliner Ensemble, 1997. Photograph © Ute Eichel. Courtesy of Berliner Ensemble.

spectators in the house by dressing the female soloist in a short skirt for no good reason. The program, an abridged version of the Communist Manifesto, provided, in its multiple annotations, commentary on the links between the manifesto and *The Measures Taken*, by way of political and social theory then and now. The overall effect, however, was that of a beautiful museum piece. The spectacle of communist deliberation and ratification was impressive, even moving, but it provoked in its sympathetic spectator precisely the kind of sentimental “moral affect” (*moralische Affekte*)—rather than “critical thought and intervention” (*eingreifendes Denken*)—that Brecht (1972, 258) wished to prevent (fig. 4).

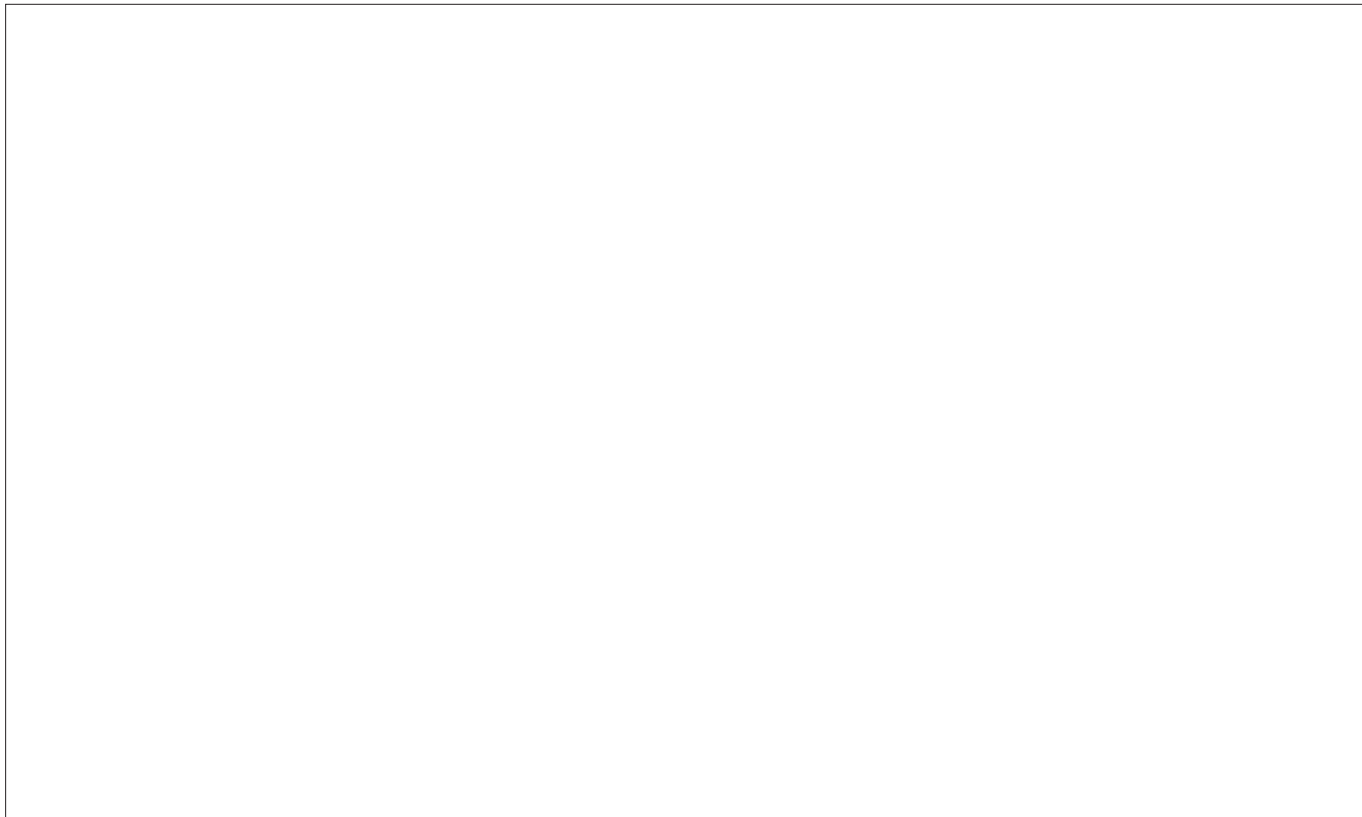


Fig. 4. Young comrades, commentators, and revolutionary choir in *Die Massnahme*. Photograph © Ute Eichel. Courtesy of Berliner Ensemble.

In retrospect, the aftereffects of this revived communist classic seem thoroughly spectral, especially in comparison with the plebeian improvisation among audience members at the Volksbühne's *Weber* where the spirit of Heiner Müller might be heard to remark, "To use Brecht without criticizing him is to betray him" (1981, 21).

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*Truth and Inconsequence: Who Speaks Now? For Whom?  
And for What Purpose?*

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*E. San Juan, Jr.*

The current controversy over Nobel prizewinner and Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchu, and her authority as an indigenous spokesperson, brings into sharp relief the substantive issues of objectivity versus human interest in what has come to be known as the “culture wars.” It serves as a timely reminder that the dispute over truth (now referred to as the “truth-effect,” after Foucault) and its representation is transnational in scope and perennial in nature. It evokes the memory of some durable controversies in the humanities and social science disciplines that have assumed new disguises since the “two cultures” of C. P. Snow or, much earlier, the anarchy/culture polarity of Matthew Arnold. Should the tale be trusted over the teller, as D. H. Lawrence once advised? Or is it the case that if there is no teller, there is no worthwhile tale?

Obviously the question of knowledge—of what is real, and of its legitimacy and relevance—occupies center stage. Much more than this, however, in the secular/technological milieu of late modernity, what concerns us is the use to which such knowledge, whether of the natural world or society, is put. Inflected in the realm of knowledge about culture and society, the problem of representing the world (including its events and personalities) looms large, distilled in such questions as: Who speaks now? for whom? and for what purpose?

One way of responding to such questions is by evasion. The pursuit of truth ironically dispenses with speaker, circumstance, and addressee. It displaces what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the dialogic scene of communication. The truth-seeker interested in the content of the tale asks: Is Rigoberta Menchu telling the truth—that is, conveying accurately the objective facts about the torture of her family?

Anthropologist David Stoll, author of *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans* (1999), testifies that Menchu is lying. Seemingly adhering to a traditional positivist standard, he argues that her *testimonio* “cannot be the eyewitness account it purports to be” because he compares it with the reports of his informants in Guatemala. No one, however, has checked the veracity of these informants. Are they more reliable? Under what criteria? Stoll contends that Mayans who did not side with the guerillas are more trustworthy, or at least that their reports vitiate Menchu’s credibility. He accepts quite naively other versions of what happened in Guatemala and, for him, they are more authentic, if not more veridical. Those versions invalidate the truth-telling authority of Menchu’s autobiography.

Protagonists on either side do not stake their positions on details but on the theoretical framework that makes intelligible both Menchu’s narrative and Stoll’s inter-

rogation. Literary critic John Beverley (in Wilson 1999, A16), for example, emphasizes the genre or discursive structure of Menchu's *testimonio*, underscoring her ideological agenda and her pragmatic aim of inducing solidarity. On the other hand, Stoll, D'Souza (1991), and other detractors try to counter Menchu's revolutionary agenda by their politically correct demand for truth regardless of genre or stylistic form in which such truth is to be found. In their review of Stoll's book and Menchu's recent *testimonio* (1998), Greg Grandin and Francisco Goldman (1999) cogently show the inconsistencies of Stoll's position. The two sides, it seems, do not quarrel over certain "givens" that are described in other accounts (see, for example, Galeano [1973]). For instance, sociologist John Brown Childs writes: "At least 100,000 indigenous peoples have been murdered by (U.S. supported) government forces; at least 40,000 have 'disappeared,' which is to say they have been murdered; 450 villages have been destroyed; and 250,000 people have been turned into refugees because of government 'anti-guerilla' campaigns aimed at the Mayan population" (1993, 20). Since Menchu is not expressing this "given," it seems acceptable to all parties.

We are not rehearsing the ancient dictum about objective scientific truth in chronicles and annals. Many members of the academic community are familiar, to one degree or another, with the antithetical modes of historiography and the attendant controversy elucidated some time ago by E. H. Carr. There is a continuing debate between those who espouse a naturalist or scientific point of view (as typified by historians like Marc Bloch) and those who advocate a hermeneutic or interpretive view (as upheld by R. G. Collingwood, Geoffrey Barraclough, and others). Carr himself tried to strike a compromise when he asserted that "the historian is engaged on a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts," unable to assign primacy to one over the other (1961, 34–5). But what are the facts? Obviously one cannot search for the facts without some orientation or guideline concerning the totality of social relations and circumstances where those "facts" are located; otherwise, how could one distinguish a fact from a nonfact?

Postmodern thinkers influenced by poststructuralist trends (say, by deconstruction or by Michel de Certeau's work) contend that objective truth in historical writing is impossible. History is not a body of incontrovertible, retrievable solid facts (in Mr. Gradgrind's sense) but a text open to various, disparate interpretations. Michel Foucault's lesson for us is that historical accounts are problematic representations of life because they are constituted by heterogeneous cultural codes and complex social networks entailing shifting power differentials. Knowledge, in short, is always complicit with power. Ultimately, questions of truth reflect conflicting ideologies and political interests associated with unstable agencies. Not that reality is a mere invention or fiction, but its meanings and significances are, to use the current phrase, "social constructions" that need to be contextualized and estimated for their historically contingent validity. Such constructions are open to critique and change. From this angle, both Menchu's and Stoll's texts are riddled with ambiguities and undecidables that cannot be resolved by mere arbitration over facts: such arbitration and facts are

themselves texts or discourses that need to be accounted for, and so on. In the end, it's all a question of power and hegemony.

The excesses of postmodernist reductionism are now being acknowledged even by its practitioners. What discipline or method of inquiry can claim to be justified by a thoroughgoing skepticism and relativism? While I do not subscribe to an overvalued notion of power, whether decentered or negotiated through an "infinite chain of signifiers" (a power not embedded in concrete sociopolitical formations), I think the stress on historical grounding is salutary. This is perhaps a commonplace. But I mention it nevertheless to foreground the need to be more critical about the contemporary resonance of what is involved in historical representation of non-Western groups, collectivities, and peoples by intellectuals of the economically powerful North. Self-awareness of the limits of one's mode of knowing Others is now a precondition for any engagement with subjects that once were defined or constituted by ethnocentric, preemptive, and often exploitative world-views and their coercive apparatuses.

We confront here an enactment of the subtle politics of Othering, not the now banal identity politics, when Stoll subjects Menchu to interrogation. When "first world" producers of knowledge of indigenous peoples claim to offer the "truth" or the credible representation of people of color inhabiting colonized, "postcolonial," or neo-colonial regions and internal dependencies, shouldn't we stop and ask what is going on—who is speaking, to whom, and for what purpose? There are no pure languages of inquiry where traces or resonances of the intonation, words, idioms, and tones of the Others cannot be found. I want to cite a recent and somewhat analogous case here which concerns the relation between contemporary U.S. scholarship and the production of knowledge about Philippine history.

The centenary celebrations of the 1896–8 Philippine revolution against its former colonial power, Spain, had just ended when interest in Spain's successor, the United States, was sparked by the U.S. government's demand for virtually unlimited rights of military access to Philippine territory. With the loss of its military bases in 1992, the United States is trying to regain, and to reinforce in another form, its continuing hegemony over its former colony.

The Philippine revolution that succeeded in defeating the Spaniards ended when the United States intervened in 1898. The Filipino-American War broke out in February 1898 and lasted for at least a decade. A lingering dispute exists as to how many Filipinos actually died in this "first Vietnam." Stanley Karnow (1989), the popularizer of U.S. scholarship on the Philippines, cites two hundred thousand Filipinos while the Filipino historian Renato Constantino (1970; see also Ocampo 1998) puts it at six hundred thousand—the number of casualties in Luzon alone as given by General Bell, one of the military planners of the "pacification" campaigns. Another scholar, Luzviminda Francisco, concludes that if we take into account the other campaigns in Batangas, Panay, Albay, and Mindanao, the total could easily be one million (1987, 19). Do we count the victims of "collateral damage" (civilians not involved in direct fighting)? The U.S. strategy in fighting a guerilla war then was to force all the na-

tives into concentration camps in which many died of starvation, disease, and brutal treatment. What is the truth and who has it? Where are the reliable informants who can provide authentic narratives? Whom are we to believe?

In the Balangiga, Samar, incident of 28 September 1901, exactly forty-five U.S. soldiers were killed by Filipino guerilla partisans. The Filipinos suffered 250 casualties during the attack and another twenty soon after. In retaliation, General Jacob Smith ordered the killing of all Filipinos above the age of ten; in a few months, the whole of Samar was reduced to a “howling wilderness.” No exact figures of total Filipino deaths are given by Karnow or other U.S. historians. Exactly what happened in the numerous cases of U.S. military atrocities against Filipinos investigated by the United States is still a matter of contention. But there is general agreement that the war was characterized by, in the words of Filipino historian Teodoro Agoncillo (Agoncillo and Guerrero 1970), “extreme barbarity.” Exactly how many died in the Samar campaign, or during the entire war, is again a matter of who is doing the counting, what are the criteria employed, and for what purpose. Historiographic methodology by itself cannot answer our demand for a sense of the whole, a cognitive grasp or mapping of the total situation.

Of more immediate relevance to the Menchu/Stoll nonexchange is the recent hullabaloo over the stature of the Filipino revolutionary hero Andres Bonifacio (1863–97). A U.S. specialist in area studies, Glenn May, acquired instant notoriety when his book *Inventing a Hero: The Posthumous Re-creation of Andres Bonifacio* came out in 1992. May questioned the veracity of certain documents attributed to Bonifacio by Filipino intellectuals and political leaders. Without any actual examination of the documents in question, May (1992), hedging with numerous “maybes” and “perhaps,” accused Filipino historians—from Agoncillo to Reynaldo Ileto—of either forging documents or fraudulently assigning to Bonifacio certain texts responsible for his heroic aura and reputation.

Except for evincing the customary and pedestrian rationale for the academic profession, this exercise in debunking an anticolonial hero lends itself to being construed as a cautionary tale. It can be interpreted as a more systematic attempt by a member of the superior group to discredit certain Filipino nationalist historians who are judged guilty of fraud and other underhanded practices unworthy of civilized intellectuals. Ileto’s (1998) defense tries to refute the prejudgment. He accuses May of privileging “colonial archives” over oral testimonies, deploying a patron/client tutelage paradigm that prejudices all his views of Filipinos, and one-sidedly discounting any evidence that contradicts his thesis that the Philippine revolution was really a revolt of the elites, not of the masses. In short, May’s version of the “truth” cannot be trusted because he functions as an apologist for U.S. imperial policy, a role that has a venerable genealogy of scholars from the anthropologist Dean Worcester to academic bureaucrats like David Steinberg, Theodore Friend, and Peter Stanley. Their scholarly authority cannot be divorced from the continuing involvement of the U.S. government in asserting its control, however indirect or covert, over Philippine political, cultural, and economic affairs. I suppose that joining this group of luminaries is enough compensation for May and other “disinterested” seekers of fact and truth.

As in the Menchu/Stoll confrontation, May's outright condemnation of at least four generations of Filipino scholars and intellectuals is revealing in many ways. The following heuristic questions may be offered for reflection. Should we still insist on the axiomatic dualism of objective truth and subjective interpretation in accounts of fraught events? Shouldn't we consider the exigencies of the dialogic communication? Who are the parties involved, and in what historical moments? In what arena or set of circumstances can a citizen of a dominant global power question the veracity of a citizen/subject of a subordinated country without this act being considered an imperial intrusion and imposition? Can the investigation of individual facts or events in these dependent polities be considered legitimate as sources of "objective" knowledge without taking into account the hierarchical ordering of nation-state relations? What attitude should researchers from these powerful centers of learning adopt that will dispel the suspicion of "third world" peoples that they are partisans of a neocolonizing program, if not unwitting instruments of their government? Obviously, the more immediate stakes in the ongoing "culture wars" are social policies and programs within the United States, with secondary implications in terms of foreign policy and academic priorities. Still, we cannot ignore how the attacks on indigenous *testimonios* like that of Menchu, or on heroic figures of nation-states that claim to be sovereign and independent (including scholars and intellectuals of those nation-states), are both allegories of internal political antagonisms/class warfare and the literal battlefields for recuperating the now attenuated imperial glory of the *pax Americana* of the cold war days.

Contrary to some pundits of deconstruction, I believe that the subaltern, whether Menchu or Agoncillo (now deceased), can perform the role of witness and "speak truth to power." Menchu can and has indeed ably struggled to represent herself and her people in times of emergency and crisis. For the indigenous peoples of Guatemala and other places, the purpose of speech is not just for universally accepted, legitimate cultural reasons—affirming their identities and their right of self-determination—but, more crucially, for their physical survival. Such speech entails responsibility, hence the need to respond to criticisms or questions about "truth" and its grounding.

A warning by Walter Benjamin may be useful to clarify the notion of "truth" in lived situations where "facts" intermesh with feeling and conviction. In his famous "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin (1969) expressed reservations about orthodox historians like Leopold von Ranke whom Marx considered "a little root-grubber" who reduced history to "facile anecdote-mongering and the attribution of all great events to petty and mean causes." Benjamin speculated that the "truth" of the past can be seized only as an image, as a memory "as it flashes up at a moment of danger." I believe this moment of danger is always with us when, in a time of settling accounts in the name of justice, we see the Stolls and Mays suddenly come up with their credentials and entitlements in order to put the "upstart" subalterns in their proper place.

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*Debates on the Economic Crisis within the Korean Left*

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*Seongjin Jeong and Jo-Young Shin*

In Korea today, after the cataclysmic economic collapse in late 1997 and the subsequent bailouts by the International Monetary Fund, there is no one who would deny that Korea is in a deep crisis—indeed, the most serious crisis in the history of Korean capitalism. There is, however, a wide range of different views on its causes and the political and social consequences. Different theories hold different people accountable for getting Korea into this serious situation, and these conflicting theories also lead people to adopt conflicting strategies in response. This holds true as well for the progressive forces in Korea, among whom there exist three different theories of the crisis. The first lays the blame primarily on the *chaebols* (large business conglomerates), the second holds neoliberalism responsible, and the third stresses over-production.

This paper offers a Marxian assessment of each of these theories. Taking into account the interplay among the various constituents that constitute the crisis, it attempts a Marxian synthesis. The paper tries to interpret the current crisis as an overdetermined outcome of the three temporal dimensions of Marxian crisis theory—that is, chronic, structural, and cyclical crisis—by using the concepts of the long wave and the social structure of accumulation. Finally, it argues that workers’ demands for the right to live, especially for job security, can act as the transitional demands toward more fundamental transformation in the current Korean crisis.

### **Blaming Chaebols**

One theory on the current crisis in Korea lays blame primarily on the inefficiency of the large business conglomerates known as chaebols. The inefficiency of the chaebol system is best exemplified by the excessive diversification called “octopus style” or “vessel fleet style,” heavy reliance on debt (irrespective of domestic or foreign), and opaque management due to family ownership and mutual payment guarantees between and among subsidiaries. In order to overcome the current economic crisis, it is argued, it is of crucial importance to dismantle the chaebol and eliminate the favoritism, irregularities, corruption, and the dark connection between politics and economics associated with it.

Needless to say, this theory does not come out of the blue. The chaebols have long been a target of Korean progressive forces’ criticism for their active role in the disfigured economic development led by the previous authoritarian regimes. Propelled by the economic and social crisis under the International Monetary Fund conjuncture, this theory has quickly asserted itself as the major discourse within the Korean progressive forces. However, it seems problematic on at least four counts.

First, the contention that the chaebols caused the current crisis is not able to explain why capitalism in Western countries or in Japan (where there are no chaebols or they disintegrated a long time ago) suffers now from the same recession. The theory argues that the chaebols exacerbate the problems of overinvestment and overproduction that result in depression. However, it should be remembered here that such problems as overinvestment and overproduction tend to come not so much from a particular organization or a particular financial system of capitalism as from the nature of capital itself. The normal workings of the capitalist system create overinvestment in production, speculative bubbles, and market collapse. This theory seeks to justify its argument by drawing on the historical experiences of the disintegration of the chaebol in Japan after World War II, concluding that the solution to the Korean economic crisis can and must be sought through the breakup of the chaebol. However, the key to the economic success of postwar Japan should be sought in the defeats of the Japanese working class after World War II and the effects of the “permanent war economy” sustained by the Korean and Vietnam Wars rather than in the disintegration of chaebols.

Second, although the argument for dismantling the chaebol appears at first sight to be a theory and program of the progressive forces, in essence it is indistinguish-

able from the neoliberal bourgeois project to better accommodate Korean capitalism to global standards. In fact, this theory shares the International Monetary Fund's diagnosis that the Korean crisis is a direct outcome of the structural defects of the Korean economy. Indeed, some theorists rejoice at the Fund's takeover of the Korean economy and, upon its demand that the chaebol be disintegrated, simply assume that the time has come to deliver the final blow to the chaebol against which they have waged a decadeslong struggle. In their false belief in the Fund's impartiality, they assert that its bailout is the only, even indispensable choice whose harsh terms are unavoidable in resuscitating the Korean economy. They go on to say that the chaebols—stained with overexpansion, inefficiency, heavy debt, corruption, favoritism, and nepotism—are the main culprit in bringing down the Korean economy, thus must be disintegrated in order to get over the crisis even if that means bowing to external pressures from the Fund. However, this theory fails to comprehend the nature of the International Monetary Fund. Contrary to their wishes, it is neither impartial nor omnipotent in international economic matters, but rather is a kind of powerful task force representing the interests of transnational finance capital; its stiff austerity policy can best be explained in light of the global economy so affectionately advocated by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism wants to replace state capitalism (characterized by state planning, interventions, and regulations) with private capitalism (championing unrestricted exploitation in the name of the free market, free competition, deregulation, restructuring, and creating a flexible labor force).

This theory erroneously sets the chaebol, not the International Monetary Fund's neoliberalist offensive, as the main enemy of the progressive forces. It thus contributes to having people overlook the imperialist and antilabor nature of the Fund's neoliberal offensive. The theory helps to obliterate the fact that the Fund unjustly squeezes Korean workers into making up for the losses incurred by unsound, excessive loans of imperialist finance capital. Moreover, it helps to create a passive atmosphere in which the Fund's bailout and demands become taken for granted as the only and unavoidable option.

However, acceptance of the Fund's bailout was not the only option. Although a debt moratorium was considered the worst scenario imaginable during the acute foreign exchange crisis of late 1997, if indeed a moratorium had been declared the situation would have taken a much different shape. The Korean workers might not have been forced to take on the entire responsibility for compensating for the losses incurred in transactions between Korean and transnational finance capital. The Korean foreign exchange crisis would have spread immediately to an accumulation crisis of imperialist finance capital and, therefore, the crisis and the losses would have been distributed internationally within transnational finance capital.

Third, after accepting the Fund's bailout, the progressive forces continued to prioritize disintegrating the chaebol over struggling for workers' right to live, centered around opposition to massive layoffs and the demand for subsistence wages. As a result, the present government led by President Kim Dae Jung, pretending to accept the breakup of chaebols, succeeded in making the workers swallow massive layoffs

in the name of “sharing the pain” by way of the so-called tripartite committee between labor, management, and government. However, the antilabor essence of the tripartite committee was soon laid bare by the workers themselves in the following May Day struggle of 1998. In opposition to the labor bureaucrats and the other two parties in the tripartite committee, rank-and-file workers put forward as their top priority the renunciation of layoffs approved by the tripartite committee.

Fourth, even in those versions of this theory having the most radical rhetoric, chaebol disintegration is presented not as a steppingstone for going beyond capitalism but instead as a remedy to heal a capitalism in trouble. The theory is neither anticapitalist nor reformist but merely another form of a bourgeois project: to effect a putatively healthier, more efficient capitalism. Chaebol disintegration in this case is not a concession by capital to labor but simply a restructuring of capital in the process of which workers are bound to be “restructured more flexibly.” Thus, it does not amount even to a reformist agenda: at this juncture, it is a bourgeois project pure and simple.

### **Blaming Neoliberalism**

The theory that blames neoliberalism displays a wide theoretical spectrum that, despite its diversity, shares a common belief that the main cause of the crisis is neoliberalism. One version, commonly called “conspiracy theory,” argues that the Korean crisis does not come from the structural defects of the Korean economy but from the speculative attack of transnational finance capital on an economy with, presumably, all its fundamentals basically in good shape. This version of the theory goes so far as to say that transnational finance capital set up and executed a scheme to subordinate Korean capitalism by way of cataclysmic collapse. Thus, it argues that the struggle against the International Monetary Fund is more important than that for the disintegration of the chaebol, and it calls for “the solidarity of Southeast Asian nations to renounce the debt payment.”

The other version of this theory stresses financial deregulation under the Kim Young Sam government since 1993 as the main background to the current crisis. Amsden and Euh (1997), Crotty and Dymski (1998), Chang, Park, and Yoo (1998), and Wade and Veneroso (1998) are the main theorists of this version of blaming neoliberalism. Even some prominent mainstream economists like Stiglitz (1998) appear to agree in some part. Amsden and Euh (1997) argue that “not until the early 1990’s, when financial markets were deregulated, did the economy sink. Indeed, it was the Government’s decision to allow banks and other financial institutions to borrow and lend without interference that created the current crisis.” Crotty and Dymski argue that “in contrast to the near universal opinion expressed in the Western press, most Koreans correctly understand that their crisis was not caused by too much government regulation, but by too little. It was excessive liberalization, not the traditional East Asia model that failed” (1998, 44). Stiglitz (1998) seems to agree when he says that “the East Asian countries have departed from the policies that were so successful in the past. Financial liberalization and capital account opening, with-

out commensurate strengthening of regulation and supervision . . . can explain both the past success and current crisis in East Asia.”

Although proponents of this theory represent a minority voice within the Korean progressive forces, it enjoys a wide audience outside Korea, especially among the Western institutionalists. It is true that some Western left economists view the Asian economic model, especially the Japanese or Korean model (i.e., developmental state capitalism), as far superior to neoliberal free-market capitalism in terms of growth performance as well as social equity. For them, the meltdown of the Asian model was so unthinkable that they could not but attribute it to some forces external to the model, like neoliberal globalization, rather than to its own internal failures.

It is not clear whether the Korean crisis is really a direct result of a prefabricated conspiracy of transnational finance capital, but it is evident that the foreign exchange crisis and the International Monetary Fund bailouts provide a golden opportunity for transnational finance capital to realize its interests to the maximum. It is therefore unwise to discard the theory simply as derived from a “disguised chaebol patron” or an “ultraright nationalist ideology.” This theory has merit in debunking the Fund myth, interrogating it not as an impartial arbitrator but as an imperialist force. It also deserves attention for laying bare the imperialist nature of the neoliberalist offensives and properly positioning the Korean crisis not in the closed model but in the global dimension.

Nonetheless, blaming neoliberalism can be faulted on the following five counts. First, the alleged imperialist conspiracy in which the Fund and transnational finance capital intended a breakdown of Korea in advance does not correspond with the facts. The theory that blames neoliberalism advances the fact that the international credit-evaluation groups blocked (let alone helped) the influx of foreign currency at the time of the crisis by lowering Korea’s credit rating, which firmly corroborates that a default by Korea was intended by the Fund, the U.S. government, and transnational finance capital. However, the Fund’s first objective is to get a debtor nation to pay its debt, not to drive a debtor nation into bankruptcy. It is true that the bailout did not immediately stop the dramatic rise of the foreign exchange rate in Korean currency or the downgrading of Korea by international credit-evaluation groups, but that should be construed as the Fund’s failure to secure its own initial objective for that specific moment, not as a conspiracy to drive Korea further into crisis.

Second, this theory tends to underestimate the structural contradictions of Korean capitalism before the current crisis. Viewing the current crisis only as a financial panic, it tries to locate the reason that panic developed into a real development crisis in the neoliberal structural-adjustment program imposed by the Fund. However, financial panic was a symptom rather than a cause of the crisis of the real economy. The problems are more deep-seated, and the real issue is much more fundamental and structural, related to the basic structural limitations of the Korean model. Financial deregulation may trigger a financial panic, but a sluggish real economy proves to be a more fundamental problem. Rather than being posed as cause of the current crisis, the neoliberal shift since the early 1990s, including financial deregulation, should

be understood as the policy response to a structural crisis that began in the late 1980s with the demise of state-capitalist social structures of accumulation.

Third, this theory still argues the merits of developmental statism, suggesting that the current crisis resulted not from too much intervention but from too little. Indeed, it seeks a prescription for the current crisis in the former developmental statist model. However, it seems undeniable that the current crisis invalidates the so-called Asian model. The attempt to resuscitate it is anything but a progressive project. As Hart-Landsberg says, “in their desire to demonstrate the failure of neoliberalism and build resistance to it, progressives all too often end up embracing existing Asian regimes and calling for a strengthening of their state-directed, export-driven growth models. Unfortunately, this political strategy leads to a political dead-end . . . Asian state capitalism contained its own contradiction. And even during its period of rapid growth, working people suffered greatly” (1998, 29).

Fourth, it is hard to avoid charging this theory, together with that blaming the chaebol system, with reductionism. Both reduce complexity (the crisis) to simplicity (the responsibility or the main culprit). Within the external/internal dichotomy, blaming neoliberalism takes up one end of a spectrum (external = transnational finance capital) whereas blaming chaebols takes up the other end (internal = chaebol). Although they seem to take diametrically different positions, they share the same reductionist framework. Marxism does not explain a crisis in such a simple, voluntaristic, and reductionist theoretical framework as transnational capital’s conspiracy or chaebols’ responsibility. Furthermore, within the external/internal dichotomy, there is no room for contradiction, complex interplay, mutual penetration, or interdependent transformation—in a word, the overdetermination that lies at the core of the Marxian framework.

Fifth, the political implications of blaming neoliberalism can be detrimental to Korean workers. It is no surprise that for this theory, the archenemy is the International Monetary Fund, U.S. imperialism, transnational capital, or neoliberalism—in a word, the “external force.” This theory prioritizes the anti-imperialist struggle over others in its political campaigns. In its call for the self-esteem and autonomy of the Korean people, it pushes for struggle against the Fund’s trusteeship. The question arises, “who is this Korean people, and where is the place for the struggle for the workers’ right to live?” The form that blaming neoliberalism takes may seem noble, but there is no content to it. As is clearly demonstrated in so many workers’ rallies and strikes in Korea, the path the Korean people’s struggle should follow in this conjuncture is not a nationalist, anti-imperialist one but a classical workers’ mass struggle based on the class contradiction between capital and labor. As Tabb says, “the imperialism of finance brings to the fore the class contradiction of the debt relation, demonstrates how debt is used to force redistribution of wealth and power, and is a powerful tool of capital in subjugating labor” (1998, 38). The slogan of anti-neoliberalism without questioning capitalism is in fact as much a bourgeois project as is that of disintegrating the chaebol. Indeed, some theorists who blame neoliberalism actually serve as a mouthpiece for the chaebol when they argue that “Korea’s supposedly pathological corporate governance system was neither the main source of the current crisis nor something that has to be radically re-

structured if Korea is to regain its growth momentum, as many observers outside and inside Korea currently believe” (Chang, Park, and Yoo 1998, 735).

Recently, the demarcation line between blaming neoliberalism versus the chaebol has become increasingly blurred. It is surprising that as both theories share the same reductionist methodology and reformist politics, some leftist academics have attempted to take a compromise position between the two: blaming both the chaebol and neoliberalism. This position maintains that the crisis was caused by the particularities of Korean capitalism, such as chaebols and dependency embedded in neocolonial, state-monopoly capitalism. Here, neither the general theory of Marxian political economy nor its particular theory (state-monopoly capitalism) can properly deal with the problems facing a neocolonial, dependent country; the Korean crisis can be explained only in relation to the specific structure of a neocolonial, state-monopoly capitalism. In order to overcome the crisis, this version argues that it is necessary to resolve the strains of monopoly and dependency, for which it posits the disintegration of the chaebol and the founding of a national economy as a “democratic alternative.” The criticisms of the theories blaming neoliberalism or the chaebols also apply here. It is considered a compromise position from the standpoint of the theory of the general crisis based on a determinist understanding of Marxism. In addition, the following three points are worth mentioning.

First, the compromise position denies the applicability of Marxian crisis theory to the interpretation of the current Korean crisis. It states that among the three temporal dimensions of Marxian crisis theory, the category of a periodic industrial cycle does not apply to the crisis of Korean capitalism whereas the categories of chronic and structural crisis do. However, it should be noted here that the category of a periodic industrial cycle has pertinence in that, behind the Korean crisis, there was in fact a long-term and cyclical fall in the profitability of real economy, which can be explained by the Marxian theory of the falling rate of profit owing to an increase in the organic composition of capital.

Second, the compromise position posits as the main task not the defense of the workers’ right to live and the counterattack against capital in general but the struggle against monopoly and imperialism. It sees the International Monetary Fund conjuncture not as an offensive phase of total capital against total labor but as a crisis phase resulting from monopoly and dependency and, accordingly, as a reformist phase of escaping the crisis (“reviving the economy”). Thus, it commits the same mistake as the other theories in putting aside such issues of crucial importance as the ongoing massive layoffs and the workers’ right to live, which is now in danger.

Third, the compromise position deems it sufficient to present policy alternatives, but its “democratic alternative” (such as structural reform and an independent national economy) is reformist at best. Its democratic alternative recognizes the globalization of capital but at the same time aims for changing the economic structure from outward-oriented and foreign-dependent to inward-oriented and self-reliant. The democratic alternative also means a change from the chaebol’s rule to public ownership and social control, and attempts gradually to replace the rule of the market and

capital with that of social regulation. The compromise position claims that the democratic alternative is in direct opposition to neoliberalism (characterized by open markets, privatization, deregulation, market competition, the profit drive, and the like); thus, it calls for protection of the domestic market, state regulation, income redistribution, and democratic control of the state and public sphere. Despite its list of impressive phrases, the compromise position is not at all clear about how to achieve all this in the age of a global economy. “Socialism in one country” has been an abject failure in history.

### **A Cyclical Overproduction Crisis?**

What is obvious in the debate over chaebols versus neoliberalism is the absence of Marxian theory and politics. This is all the more surprising when the current global crisis seems to validate what Marx predicted in the *Communist Manifesto* 150 years ago. Disappointed with the reformist politics shared by existing theories, some left groups have attempted to apply Marxian crisis theory to Korea’s current crisis. They define the essence of the current crisis as cyclical overproduction, viewing the crisis as caused by the intensification of the contradiction between production and consumption through overinvestment and overproduction in the process of capital accumulation. This theory argues that overinvestment and overproduction led to a mounting deficit in the balance of payments and insolvent credit in financial institutions, which resulted in the current crisis. Accordingly, the primary cause of the economic crisis in Southeast Asia, including in Korea, is not specific to these countries—that is, it does not lie only in the structural defects of their economic systems. Rather, it is a global overaccumulation crisis of capital spurred by the contradictions inherent in the capitalist system.

Unlike other theories discussed so far, this one takes a Marxian stance in that it views the crisis as an outcome of the contradictions inherent in or specific to capitalism. Other theories seek the cause of the crisis in some particular forms of capitalism (chaebol/crony capitalism or dependency/neocolonial capitalism), in neoliberalism, or in other external factors such as transnational capital (an imperialist conspiracy). The overproduction theory correctly recognizes this International Monetary Fund conjuncture as the phase of capital’s total offensive against labor. Rather than a reformist or anti-imperialist struggle, it establishes the struggle for defending the workers’ right to live as the immediate task of progressive forces. These merits notwithstanding, it seems insufficient in its application of Marxian theory and politics on several counts.

First, merely to note that the crisis is an overproduction crisis does not go very far. In other words, it does not explain the cause of a depression. The thesis that a crisis in capitalism is one of overproduction is not a conclusion but an entry point in Marxian crisis theory. Indeed, to assert that a crisis is an overproduction crisis is a tautology (“a crisis is a crisis”). It tells nothing about the nature, causes, and characteristics of the current crisis. There are few Marxists who would deny that a crisis in capitalism is an

overproduction crisis. What is of concern here, however, is how to explicate the causes of a capitalist depression as an overproduction depression. As the history of Marxist controversy on economic crisis shows, there are competing theories for causes of a depression, such as underconsumption due to capitalist overexploitation, disproportionality among different sectors due to the anarchic nature of capitalism, the tendency of the rate of profit to fall due to an increase in the organic composition of capital, a neo-Ricardian profit squeeze due to labor militancy, and so on.

Second, the overproduction theory denies the structural dimension of the current crisis, reducing it to an overproduction crisis in the cyclical dimension. However, pinpointing the cyclical nature of the current crisis has meaning only as a critique of theories like that blaming the chaebols, which do not relate the structural defects of the Korean economy to the internal contradictions of capital in general. Otherwise, the overproduction theory falls very short of providing a concrete analysis of the crisis. The most decisive drawback is that it does not theorize the specificity of the current crisis. Without explicating how the contradictions of capital in general are specifically concretized in the structure of Korean capitalism, making an empty declaration that the crisis is what Marx calls an overproduction crisis does not bring about the appropriate countermeasures.

Third, like the theory on neoliberalism, that on overproduction holds to a determinist theory of the general crisis of capitalism. Among the three temporal dimensions of Marxian theory of chronic/structural/cyclical crisis, the structural dimension is completely left out and the chronic dimension takes the form of a catastrophic and determinist general crisis theory. In it, such instances as the postwar golden age of advanced capitalism or the three-decade-long boom of Korean capitalism are taken simply as exceptions or temporary mirages.

Fourth, overproduction theory correctly posits the struggle for the workers' right to live as the primary task of progressive forces, but fails to relate it to a transitional program. Moreover, the theory deems it of little importance to connect workers' mass struggle with Marxian politics. This is due in part to its inclination toward syndicalism. In fact, one of its arguments (that a wage increase is a way of overcoming the crisis) is a good example of how syndicalism, more often than not, joins sides with reformism.

### **Toward a Marxian Alternative**

The above criticisms are focused primarily on the political implications of different theories current among Korean progressives. To discard these theories in toto, however, is not the purpose of this paper. Each has both merits and shortcomings, and the merits—if transformed properly by being separated from antilabor implications and purged of determinist distortions—can and will serve as valuable constituents in constructing a Marxian alternative.

For this purpose, the important element to extract from the theory blaming chaebols and the compromise position is their recognition that the crisis is structural, not just cyclical. The important points to take from the theory blaming neoliberalism are its

perception that the crisis was triggered by the peculiar relation between Korean and global capitalism and its understanding that financial deregulation and transnational finance capital's imperialist accumulation provoked the crisis as a form of foreign exchange crisis. As for overproduction theory, it is its view that the crisis can be explained by a Marxian crisis theory that is important. Finally, the rational kernel of each of these theories should be fused with the framework of Marxian long-wave theory. In this way, the countermeasures appropriate for progressive forces in responding to the crisis can be formulated.

Marxian crisis theory understands the crisis of capitalism as an overdetermination among periodic industrial cycles, long-term fluctuations, and chronic crisis. The temporal overdetermination among chronic, structural, and cyclical crises can be explained by long-wave theory centering around the Marxian law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.

From the standpoint of Marxian long-wave theory, the roots of the foreign exchange crisis that exploded in late 1997 can be traced back—before the cyclical crisis emerged in full dress in 1996—to the long-term recession that began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It follows from this that the current crisis is not just the overproduction crisis of a ten-year cycle, as the overproduction theory has it, but an overdetermined explosion of a long-term recession piled upon and exacerbated by cyclical crisis. Both the overproduction theory and the compromise position are insufficient for understanding the complex nature of the crisis; the former fails to recognize the long-term recession and structural crisis, which are distinct from the cyclical crisis, while the latter underscores only a structural and a chronic crisis while denying a cyclical crisis.

The long-term recession begun after the early 1990s originates from the late-1980s collapse of the state-capitalist social structure of accumulation, which had sustained the three-decade-long boom from the 1960s to the late 1980s (Jeong 1997). The social structure of accumulation of the boom period was characterized by the relations of international politics (cold war), the state and capital (the upbringing and control of the chaebol by the state), capital and labor (overwork, low wages, and super-exploitation), the state and the citizen (authoritarian government), and the international economy (an export-led economy based on triangular trade between Korea, the United States, and Japan). It began to break down around the late 1980s and early 1990s due to the collapse of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the growth of the chaebol beyond state control, the establishment of the so-called 1987 system (settled by the “June struggle” and the subsequent “workers’ great struggle” in 1987), and an increasing deficit in trade with the United States. With the delay in formation of a new social structure of accumulation to replace the old, a long-term recession is now in full swing.

The long-term recession since the early 1990s is both a result and a funder of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, which was already in progress during the three-decade-long boom (Chang 1997). The falling rate of profit since the 1980s results not from a profit squeeze due to wage increases, but from an increase in the

organic composition of capital. The fact that various profitability indexes were severely worsened right before the foreign exchange crisis in 1997 shows that the current crisis is one of the real economy, not just a financial panic. The financial panic theorists, including those against neoliberalism, argue that right before the foreign exchange crisis there was no problem (there was even an improvement) in the economic fundamentals, expressed in such macroeconomic indicators as the growth rate, the current account balance, prices, and the unemployment rate. However, they fail to pay due attention to the rapid decrease in profitability indexes. They also try to deny the undeniable fact of a significant weakening of economic “fundamentals.”

The foreign exchange crisis of Korea is more serious than those of other Asian countries in that it is combined with a long-term and a cyclical falling rate of profit. Overinvestment and overproduction based on excessive lending are exacerbated by increasing competition among capitals under the pressure of the falling rate of profit. This appears as competition for additional capital investments to make up for the falling rate of profit with an increasing quantity of profits. In turn, overinvestment and overproduction spur an increase in the organic composition of capital, accelerate the falling rate of profit, and finally result in an absolute decrease in the amount of profits. Overproduction is therefore a phenomenon resulting from a crisis originating from the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. In other words, overproduction is not a cause but a result of crisis.

One reason the profitability crisis of the real economy exploded in the form of a currency crisis in late 1997 was the neoliberal deregulation of the previous government, led by former President Kim Young Sam, in addition to the outmoded state-capitalist mode of regulation. The globalization policy of the previous government, especially the financial liberalization before and after entrance into the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development, served as a trigger to the foreign exchange crisis. The previous government recognized that the existing state-capitalist accumulation structure was confronted with limitations, and it sought a way out of the cul-de-sac by resorting to neoliberal deregulation policy. However, that ended up precipitating the explosion of the crisis. With neoliberal deregulation, Korean capitalism began to become an arena for speculation by transnational finance capital. Accordingly, the instability of Korean capitalism quickly spiraled up.

After the International Monetary Fund's bailout the economic crisis, which started as a foreign exchange crisis, deteriorated into a great depression. This is mainly because the present government headed by President Kim Dae Jung takes neoliberal policies as a prescription for the crisis, more forcibly implementing them than the previous government. Also, it is due in large part to the neoliberal austerity measures of the Fund and exploitation by imperialist finance capital, which is taking advantage of the crisis. However, global capital, represented by the Fund and the Kim Dae Jung government, tries to find a way out of this impasse through a ruthless attack on the working class.

In case the economy is rejuvenated, there is no question that the fruits of that success will be kept out of the reach of the workers, for the so-called reviving of the economy will be achieved only by their forcible sacrifice. If the workers fail to ward off the offensive by capital, restructuring by the Fund and the present government will turn out to be a success for capital and a defeat for labor regardless whether it succeeds or fails in reviving the economy, as is evident from the experiences of Latin American countries in the 1980s (see Ruccio 1991). Even if some factions like the chaebol within the capitalist class are weakened, there is a strong possibility that the hegemony of the capitalist bloc in general will remain intact and, moreover, will reconstruct itself as more effective and stronger through the crisis.

In the present conjuncture, Marxian politics needs to break with nationalist and class-collaborationist frameworks like “reviving the economy” or “rebuilding the nation,” which all theories of the crisis within the progressive forces share. In addition, the struggle for workers’ right to live needs to be positioned as a transitional program toward socialism. Under the circumstances plummeting into a great depression, the workers’ defensive economic struggles can grow into a fundamental challenge to the capitalist system for, as Trotsky (1973) explained, the workers’ urgent demands (such as subsistence wages and job security) cannot easily be achieved within the boundaries of capitalism at a critical conjuncture like this. In the current Korean crisis, not the nationalistic struggle against neoliberalism or the reformist Keynesian control of capital from above, but the workers’ struggle from below for the right to live should be the entry point for Marxian politics.

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### *Cuba: A Question of Social Solidarity*

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*John Milios*

I was in Havana for ten days to take part in the international conference organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Cuban Academy of Sciences in collaboration with the Cuban Society for Philosophical Research and the periodicals *Marx Ahora* and *Ciencias Sociales*, under the general title “Social Liberation 150 years after the ‘Communist Manifesto’” (17–20 February 1998).

The conference was attended by academics, social scientists, researchers, and activist intellectuals from Cuba, North America (the United States, Canada, and Mexico), various countries in Latin America, Australia, and Europe (Britain, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Turkey). Among those who participated we might mention Isabel Monal, chief of the Chair on Marxist Studies, and Olga Fernandez Rios, director of the Institute of Philosophy in Havana, George Labica of the University of Paris X, Wolfgang-Fritz Haug of the Free University of Berlin, and Martha Harnecker, director of the Memoria Popular Latinoamericana in Havana, who is well known to the European public through her book *Basic Concepts of Historical Materialism* (first published in French in 1971).

The significance of the conference consisted in its functioning as a barometer of the international “Return to Marxism” tendency. At the same time, it was apparent to me that Cuban Marxism is pluralistic and open to different revolutionary Marxist currents and schools of thought (from Lukács and Gramsci to Althusser and contemporary theorists, with emphasis on the Cuban revolutionary tradition). The Cuban delegates (university teachers, members of the Academy of Sciences, party functionaries, students, a female army officer in uniform, etc.) participated in almost all the theoretical debates that took place throughout the conference, without always adopting common positions. There were a considerable number of theoretical disagreements

between Cubans, who in fact often belonged to different echelons of the academic (or party and/or institutional) hierarchy (e.g., students who were critical of the views of their teachers). From my conversations with various Cuban comrades, my impressions were that pluralism has always been a distinguishing characteristic of Marxist thought in Cuba, though it has admittedly been strengthened since the collapse of the Soviet Union; in the humanities faculties of the universities, for example, all the Soviet textbooks have been replaced by newer books written by Cubans, which are demonstrably open to Marxist dialogue. The pluralism of Cuban Marxist thought was reflected in the fact that, with the exception of the majority of delegates coming from the United States, the foreign guests who had been invited were clearly not exponents of Soviet Marxism, nor were they members of the corresponding traditional Communist parties of their countries.

I had the opportunity to talk on the fringes of the conference, along with other delegates, with high-ranking cadres of the Cuban Communist party about the situation in the country and the problems they face. The main issue that concerns Cuban governmental officials is the economic blockade by the United States and its manifold repercussions for the Cuban community. What was especially striking was the radical left image that party officials projected. Most were members of the younger, postrevolutionary generation. In appearance there was nothing at all to distinguish them from other ordinary people. On the ideological front, they opted systematically for the language and symbolism of *class struggle* and the *interests of the working people*, not of (public) “order,” “progress,” and “development,” which until the recent past were the typical preoccupations of Eastern European officials. They felt the need to apologize for the economic reforms now being implemented, declaring at the same time that they recognize the “dangers” and that they will never allow their country to return to capitalism. They also emphasized that all the important decisions of the political leadership are exposed to the judgment of representative bodies of the working people before being ratified.

It wasn't possible in the context of such a short stay in the country to verify the statements of Communist party officials. Nevertheless, walking in different Havana neighborhoods and above all in the poor neighborhoods in the central city area, I didn't get the impression of people being afraid to speak openly or criticize the government. At the same time it was abundantly clear that the most significant symbolic figure for the majority of the Cubans is still Che Guevara, something which is obviously of huge importance for the future of the Cuban revolution. Moreover, it is the portrait of Che (and not Castro) that one sees on numerous factory walls and also in some houses.

### **The Tourist's Perspective**

Cuba is a relatively developed country. The standard of living of the inhabitants—as reflected in their habits as consumers, the way they dress, get about, and entertain themselves, and all the standards of public services (most notably, education and health)—is closer to the image the tourist has of a poor (compared to the West) country

of Eastern Europe, such as Bulgaria or Rumania, and less (or rather not at all) like pictures of countries of the Third World. In Cuba there is no sordid poverty, hunger, homelessness, or deprivation of other basic human “rights” as is the norm in the countries of the Third World. Poor people’s apartments in Centro Habana are not lacking either in space or in the “necessary” elements of modern civilization, notwithstanding the fact that by West European standards one would be justified in describing the consumer goods as “low quality.”

Since Cuba has become a fashionable destination over the last two years for the European tourist, popular magazines in Greece have made repeated reference to the fifties-model American cars in circulation on the city streets (though in fact, in Havana one-third of the cars are new Japanese and European models), to Cubans’ friendly and hospitable attitude toward foreigners, to the way the young people are so clearly out to have a good time, and to the high-spirited mood one finds in all sections of the population.

But what most impresses the observant tourist is the absence of those milder forms of racism and sexism that seem endemic to Western communities. In Cuba it is *not* the case that 80 percent of senior state and party officials are white males, and 80 percent of street sweepers blacks. In all professions and all social milieux, one finds more or less the same racial and gender mix, something that also becomes obvious with friendships in all their manifestations and with male–female couples. It would be no exaggeration to say that the majority of Cubans of the future will be people of mixed race. The difference between this and what one finds in Europe is so great that most tourists, although they perceive it, have not fully come to grips with it. This, I think, is the reason that while the presence of numerous males “on the make” for girls in the streets and bars of Havana passes more or less without comment, its equally conspicuous female equivalent is equated with prostitution.

### **The Dual Economy**

According to international statistical estimates, the per capita gross national product of Cuba in 1996 stood at \$1,480 (*Herald Tribune*, 23 April 1998) as against \$2,080 in El Salvador and \$5,500 in Costa Rica. But this picture is misleading because in Cuba, with the living standards I described above, the mean *monthly* salary is no higher than 200 pesos—that is, \$10! The fact is that the system is completely different, with exceptionally low prices that are simply incomparable to those of the international capitalist economy. After the collapse of the Comecon, whose consequences were very painful for Cuba (a 34 percent fall in the gross national product between 1990 and 1993), the Cuban economy began to conduct its transactions with the international economy by means of a newly created, *parallel* (with the preexisting) economic sector, which functions exclusively in dollars, using a pricing system adjusted to international conditions.

The dollar economy (which employs over two hundred thousand workers) is, for the most part, integrated into the state sector. Most hotels and shops belong in this

category, as do taxis, export businesses, and so forth. Nevertheless, it is inside the dollar economy that the rising private sector of the economy is also functioning. It comprises two separate divisions: that of the small businesses started by Cubans (the employment of wage-labor by Cubans is not allowed, except for members of their own families), and businesses created by direct foreign investment (coming chiefly from Canada and the countries of the European Union). Foreign companies are required to settle all questions related to employment and workplace relations in collaboration with the government and the trade unions. Thus, the most conspicuous aspect of the dual economy in Cuba is the dollar economy, not polarization between a private-capitalist and a “planned” sector (as in China, where the situation is encapsulated in the slogan “one country, two social systems”).

In the dollar economy, a taxi ride across central Havana or an admission ticket to a disco costs ten dollars, the “equivalent” of a month’s salary, while a meal in one of the many up-market restaurants costs between twenty-five and forty dollars. Apart from tourists, any Cuban who wishes to participate in this parallel economy and, obviously, who is in a position to pay to do so, can. With the growth of tourism (with more than one million visitors now arriving in Cuba each year), a certain section of the population is now able relatively easily to obtain dollars. Apart from the owners of family businesses or tourist-industry employees receiving tips in dollars, profitable forms of petty crime are becoming widespread in a certain sector of the population: the owners of private cars who work as unofficial taxi drivers, street traders who sell cut-price cigars (possibly stolen from state factories), and good-time girls or boys who acquire through their sexual partners access to the goods traded on the dollar economy.

Strange as it may at first seem, practices such as these, which are “overlooked” or tolerated by officialdom, do not appear to provoke any notable friction, economic, moral or otherwise, among Cubans. Nor do they undermine solidarity or social cohesion. In any case, what is involved is a pervasive petty corruption, which does not amount to systematic racketeering or to “mafia”-like formations (an illegal bourgeoisie) of the kind seen in Eastern Europe. The ban on larger-scale exploitation of wage-labor by Cubans also impedes the development of a legal private-capitalist class, and foreign capital appears to be required to function in accordance with rules designed to protect, not undermine, the prevailing social relations.

Of course the chief “enemy” of the Eastern European regimes was neither the “mafia” nor the legal entrepreneurial classes but the managers of the nationalized enterprises, who broadened their powers so greatly and acquired such autonomy from state authority (the so-called economic plan) that finally they succeeded in expropriating the state enterprises and bringing about the transition to “liberalism” and the “private economy.” In Cuba there is no need for anyone to fear a development of this kind, at least in the medium term, *if the assurances of party officials are to be relied on* that the “socialist regulation and planning” of the state enterprises is not about to slacken, and given the additional fact that the country has now overcome its foreign exchange crisis (through the thriving dollar economy) and achieved high rates of growth of its gross national product (7.8 percent in 1996).