

Marxism, Scientific Method, and Cuba— Pursuing an Essential Discussion

by Steve Bloom (NY Branch, September 17, 2003)

I agree with Joel F. (DATE DB) when he tells us that this discussion is important for younger comrades. I would add that it is also essential for the more experienced generation in Solidarity, because it will help us to avoid misunderstandings and grapple with real disagreements—disagreements that have consequences in terms of political analysis and proposals for action.

A misunderstanding, and a note about our approach

One misunderstanding runs throughout Joel's article and we should get it out of the way before we take on the heart of our real disagreement. I take full responsibility for this since I assumed something to be a common frame of reference that, apparently, Joel did not. He writes: "Steve attempts to convince us that Cuba must be either socialist or on the road to socialism or was born in a socialist revolution, or something along these lines." He then proceeds, in the rest of his article, to explain how bad it would be to call Cuba "socialist," as if this is what I were proposing, and it is of no consequence whether I am asserting that Cuba is "socialist," or "on the road to socialism," or "was born in a socialist revolution." But these three statements are not equivalent.

I'll illustrate with an example that I hope will be uncontroversial: The Russian revolution of October 1917 was a socialist revolution. The Soviet Union, in 1918, however, was not a socialist society. In fact the Soviet Union was never a socialist society. Thus, clearly, socialist revolutions can lead to something other than socialism. In the context of Cuba I would say that the revolution of 1959 was, indeed, a socialist revolution. It did not lead to socialism in Cuba. (The historical current I identify with has never used the term "socialist" to describe Cuba, precisely for the reasons Joel states. We have, however, said that there was a "workers' state" in Cuba after the Castro regime expropriated the capitalists.) Whether Cuba is, or was, on the road to socialism remains an open question. The answer is contingent on a series of historical factors that are, for the most part, not in the control of the Cuban people or their leadership. (The same, by the way, was true for the Soviet Union in the 1920s.)

Joel offers us an excellent definition of socialism. I agree with it completely. The problem for contemporary Marxism, however, is not primarily to come up with a good definition of socialism. It is to figure out what needs to be done to move the world from where we are now to the one we envision. If these two problems were the same then the second (how to get there) would have been solved long ago by the utopians. There would have been no need for Marxism in the first place. On one thing I'm sure Joel and I agree: Society does not leap directly from capitalism to socialism, as he has defined it. A transition has to be engineered.

So the main problem we have is to understand the *process* of transition—what are its possibilities and contradictions. It is always difficult for those living through such a process (as we are, believe it or not, living through the process of transition, in a global and historical sense, from capitalism to socialism) to analyze and understand the times they are living through. We will inevitably make mistakes, go down false roads on the path to the correct solution, etc. But we nevertheless have to try to recognize what elements of the transition are present in particular contemporary developments, even if those developments are incomplete and contradictory (as all particular developments will inevitably be). We must make an effort to understand each of these specific experiences and its relationship to the socialism we envision, even though it is not the socialism we envision, so we can add to our general store of knowledge about the process of transition based on real experience, not merely on theories about what the transition *should* be like or what the end-product will be.

Joel, however, refuses to proceed in this way. Instead he chooses to hold up an abstract definition of socialism, compare that abstraction to the reality of the Cuban revolution, and inform us that the necessary correspondence does not exist. This then becomes an excuse for washing his hands of any further examination of the actual relationship of these two things (the Cuban revolution and our abstract definition of socialism). Such an approach will never lead us to the understanding we need if we want to create the socialism that Joel describes since, to repeat an essential point, no specific step in the direction of socialism will ever equal the abstract reality of socialism that we are able to achieve, at this point, only in our definitions.

Marxist method and Marxist ideology

Joel says the following about the origins of Marxism, contrasting it to a utopian socialist methodology: “Scientific socialism, on the other hand, did not come ready-made. It had no blueprint. Nothing was really certain. It was going to be developed. There was much to study, much to learn, much to practice, many mistakes to be made, and many battles to be fought, in order to create it.”

This is a partial truth, and therefore it is false. In particular it is explicitly false in one respect: when Joel tells us that for Marx “nothing was really certain.” Marx, however, wrote three volumes of *Capital*, and numerous other works, to explain truths that were, for him, really certain. Let us see if Joel recognizes a few of these propositions:

- * All history is the history of class struggle.
- * Human society has evolved through a series of different modes of production (slavery, feudalism, capitalism) each of which advances, in its turn, the overall productivity of labor as compared to the previous condition of human society. In each of these modes a

different ruling class has lived off of the social surplus product produced by the laboring classes.

* Successful revolutions take place when the new ruling class, which has grown up in the context of the old mode of production, gains sufficient social/economic/political strength to destroy the state power which reflects and defends the interests of the old ruling class, and create a new state power.

* The state, boiled down to its most essential components, is a body of armed men.

* Violence is the midwife of the old society, pregnant with the new.

* The emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself.

* The exchange value of any commodity is based on the socially necessary labor time it takes to produce that commodity.

* Dialectical logic is a superior tool to formal logic.

This list could be extended at some length. However, I think the point should be clear enough. These things were certain for Marx. Although some have been challenged by people who still consider themselves Marxists, I would contend that each and every one of them ought to remain certain for us today.

The problem with Joel's presentation of the Marxist method is that it talks as if the *only* thing Marxism does is examine the world and thereby arrive at a list of empirical truths about the social reality it is examining. He fails completely to recognize that this process of examination must, if it is to be useful, also produce a series of understandings (truths, propositions) about the world which then lay the basis for the subsequent development of Marxism. In short, Marxism is *both* a method by which we examine the social world *and* an ideology (set of beliefs) or doctrine (set of truths) about that world. We cannot ignore either side of this duality and still remain true to the Marxism of Karl Marx. Our method informs, or creates, our ideology. Our ideology, in turn, provides the basic raw material that allows our method to do its work.

Joel properly polemicizes against dogmatism. But dogmatism is not inherent in a recognition that Marxism entails a set of truths, or doctrines. It is, rather, the elevation of these truths to a holy status, an application of them to the world *without regard to the Marxist method*—which requires that we constantly reexamine each and every one of our doctrines in light of new events, confirming them (in most cases) or else modifying or even overturning them if the world tells us that we must. In the name of avoiding dogmatism, however, Joel falls into the opposite error, denying that there is any such thing as a Marxist doctrine or ideology. That will simply cripple us in a different way.

Cuba, Marxism, and the art of the “impossible”

Joel challenges my contention that Marxist theory would declare a series of things to be impossible. It is worth going into this aspect of his article in some detail.

I assert the following: If there was no socialist revolution in Cuba, then “capitalism was overthrown by something other than a socialist revolution (which Marxist theory would say is impossible).” Joel objects: “Nowhere did Marx ever claim that capitalism could only be overthrown by a socialist revolution. To even suggest that ‘Marxist theory’ predicts such a thing is preposterous. I challenge Steve, or anyone else for that matter, to come up with a line of argument based on Marxist methodology that precludes the possibility of capitalism being overthrown by something other than the self-organized working class.”

OK, Joel has issued the challenge and he deserves a response. We will see how preposterous my statement is. But, of course, Joel will have to accept that the argument I give here will be based on my understanding of the Marxist method—as an investigative process that accepts certain propositions as established (while simultaneously open to their being challenged) and attempts to build, logically on those propositions based on subsequent experience. I therefore start with the following basic propositions. These are similar, and related, to the list enumerated above:

* Capitalism represents the highest and most advanced form of exploitive society—from the point of view of developing the means of production and the productivity of labor.

* Further social development requires a non-exploitive society where production will be based on use rather than profit.

* There is a class that has developed within capitalist society with both the power and the interest to create such a new, non-exploitive society—the working class.

* There is no other social class which has both the power and the interest to overthrow capitalism.

True, “nowhere did Marx ever claim” *explicitly* that capitalism could only be overthrown by a socialist revolution. It never occurred to him that anyone would think that a non-socialist overthrow of capitalism was a possibility. But is there any other conclusion that can be drawn from the four propositions enumerated here that Marx did believe, and explicitly stated? If the working class is the only social class with both the power and collective interest to overthrow capitalism, isn’t this saying basically the same thing—that no other class can overthrow capitalism, that such an eventuality is impossible?

One also has to ask: Does Joel reject the idea that subsequent generations of Marxists can and should draw logical conclusions based on things Marx said, modified by subsequent experience? Does “Marxist theory” include only statements made by Marx himself? If Joel does believe this then it would be in complete contradiction with his own idea that scientific socialism “was going to be developed.” Did that development stop with Marx’s death?

This same question arises later in Joel’s article when he says: “Steve writes, ‘It is, after all, the Marxist method itself that allows us to project the two possibilities: socialism or barbarism.’ This is not ‘Marxist theory.’ It is Leon Trotsky’s theory. The two should not be conflated.” We should first note that it was actually Rosa Luxemburg who originally posed the question of “socialism or barbarism.” But, OK, it still was not Marx himself. Does this fact mean that we, today, as practitioners of Marxism do not accept this proposition as part of our theory? Does Joel not agree that both Luxemburg and Trotsky (as well as others in subsequent generations) made a pretty good argument for this idea? Were their arguments not based on the Marxist method? If so, then my statement is completely valid: It is the Marxist method itself (*not* anything specific that Marx said) that allows us to project this stark alternative.

Joel objects to another statement by me: “Through our generalized experience with Stalinism we can easily prove that this ‘new ruling class’ has arrived on the historical scene, and taken power, while playing the role of retarding the development of the relations of production (which Marxist theory would say is impossible).” He states: “I have no idea what ‘Marxist theory’ speaks of ‘retarding the development of relations of production’ or what that really even means.”

We should, then, explain a bit more. This proposition is an extension/combination of two of the core statements of Marxism enumerated above: Human society has evolved through a series of different modes of production (slavery, feudalism, capitalism) each of which advances, in its turn, the overall productivity of labor. Successful revolutions take place when the new ruling class, which has grown up in the context of the old mode of production, gains sufficient social/economic/political strength to destroy the state power that defends the interests of the old ruling class, and create a new state power.

Joel’s theory of a new mode of production, ruled over by “a new class of bureaucrats,” violates these basic propositions of Marxism in several ways. First, this “new class of bureaucrats” did not grow up within the context of capitalism, but was only created after its overthrow. Second, it was not the new class of bureaucrats which overthrew capitalism, since it did not yet exist (with the exception of Eastern Europe), but some other social force (I would argue that it was the power of the working class and poor peasantry, just as Marxist theory predicts it must be). And third—the point I stressed in my comment quoted above—the new class of bureaucrats did not “advance, in its turn, the overall productivity of labor” but created social relations which retarded the

development of productivity, compared to what it would have been had the bureaucrats not exercised the power of the state over society.

Marxist theory would say that this is impossible, because in order to make a revolution and create a new state the new exploitive ruling class must gain sufficient social and economic power *through the advancement of the productive process and thereby the accumulation of greater wealth than the old ruling class*. Joel posits a new, historically unique, mode of production that comes onto the scene and makes an anti-capitalist revolution *without* this process of greater accumulation of wealth by the new exploitive ruling class.

Joel then takes up my third point of impossibility “The working class (and we have to add the peasantry in a country like Cuba) supported and coopertaed to an extent in the revolution, but the masses were not an active participant in this anticapitalist revolution. (Marxist theory would say this is impossible.)” Joel protests:

Such statements as these are totally anathema to Marx’s Marxism. I challenge Steve, or anyone else, to quote anything in ‘Marxist theory’ that says anything about this not being possible. Once again, this is a total misunderstanding of the work that Karl Marx performed, which was to describe the world he saw. He never attempted to declare that he had described everything that would ever occur. He never attempted to establish the laws by which every society in the history of the world would be created. He never detailed what was impossible.

I do not know what school of Marxism Joel attended. But I ask him, did he ever hear there the idea that it is impossible to make a socialist revolution by taking over the foundations of a bourgeois-democratic state (a conclusion Marx and Engels came to after the experience of the Paris Commune)? Does he deny that Marx and Engels postulated the *general historical law* that it is *impossible* to create a new mode of production without utterly destroying the old state power and constructing new bodies of armed men?

This is merely one of many laws of social change that Marx attempted to codify during his lifetime. His efforts were continued through the work of subsequent Marxists such as Luxemburg, Lenin, and Trotsky.

Joel tells us that Marx’s work was simply “to describe the world he saw,” full stop. Marx, however, specifically denied that this was his goal. For centuries philosophers had described the world, our task, Marx told us, is to change it. And in order to change the world we need to understand the laws of social change, the laws of the class struggle, and use our knowledge of those laws to assist the working class to take power. That is *precisely* what made Marxism “scientific,” and what distinguished Marx from the Utopian socialists. Marx did not simply describe the world, and he had more than just a

nice abstract vision of a different kind of society. He had a sense of what social forces and processes would make it possible to get from here to there.

By denying that laws of social change exist (statements about what is and what is not possible), by denying that Marx's goal was to discover and codify those laws as best he could, Joel cuts the heart out of Marxism. He is left with a nice description of socialism, but with no understanding of how to bring it into existence. In this his approach is not qualitatively different from the one followed by the utopian socialists of the 19th century.

And so we come to our fourth impossibility: "The law of value was overturned [in Cuba] and the material conditions of the masses became the driving force of economic decisions, rather than the enrichment of the 'new ruling class' by the expropriation of the social surplus. (Marxist theory would say this is impossible.)" Joel objects:

If Steve is suggesting that I claimed that "the law of value was overturned in Cuba" he must have misread something I wrote. The law of value fundamentally states that human labor creates all wealth. This is irrespective of the political economy. That is, it holds true whether production is for consumption or for the creation of commodities. It holds true in slavery as it does in feudalism as it does in capitalism. And it will still hold true in communism. Only human labor creates wealth.

There are several confusions here:

- 1) I do not believe Joel claimed that the law of value was overturned in Cuba. I am the one who claims that the law of value was overturned in Cuba, and I believe we can demonstrate this with even a cursory empirical observation.
- 2) Joel misunderstands the law of value. The law of value states that the exchange value of any commodity is determined by the socially necessary labor time it takes to produce that commodity. All class society is ruled by this law, because decisions regarding what and how much to produce are based on the need for personal enrichment (of the slaveholder, of the feudal lord, or of the capitalist). Socialist society is not, however, because production decisions can be made collectively, for the collective good, and values created in one economic sector, or one enterprise, can be transferred, through the distributive process, to other sectors and other enterprises. In Cuba, since 1959, production decisions have generally been made based on what will advance the collective good. Values created in one economic sector or enterprise are routinely transferred to other sectors or enterprises through the distributive process. Thus the law of value does not rule in Cuba. It was suspended after the revolution.
- 3) Labor does not create all wealth. Nature creates a great deal of wealth, which humans are free to expropriate. This was well understood by Marx. Labor does create all value (in the sense of exchange value).

For Marx, and for a truly consistent Marxist theory I would contend, it is impossible to postulate an exploitive society where productive decisions are not made based on the law of value. This, in my view, is one of the chief difficulties faced by theories of state capitalism or bureaucratic collectivism. I do not see how anyone can believe the law of value was the main driving force of economic decisions in the USSR, Eastern Europe, China (until recently) or Cuba.

Mistakes and necessities

Joel belittles my contention that the failure to create genuine institutions of workers' control and workers' democracy in Cuba was based on mistaken notions about socialism "derived from Stalinist theory (the only anti-capitalist theory the Cubans had access to at the time)." I further state that institutions like the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution "far exceeded the usual limits of genuinely Stalinist institutions, precisely because they were created with the goal of helping to advance mass participation in the revolution, not to stifle that participation."

"So what?" Joel asks. "This is an extension of the state's 'socialist idea' and does not make the Cuban revolution a socialist one." But Joel needs to think this problem through a bit more rigorously—based on the Marxist categories and Marxist ideology (set of beliefs, doctrine) that he so conveniently chooses to ignore.

Marxist ideology tells us that states are created to defend the interests of ruling classes. Does Joel agree with that proposition or not? In all exploitative forms of class society the state will intervene on the side of the ruling class to defend dominant property forms when they are challenged, thereby preserving the ability of the ruling class to expropriate values from the exploited classes. Does Joel agree with that statement or not? There can be disagreements within ruling class circles about *how* to best defend their collective interests (repression, concessions, cooptation of leaders, or an appropriate combination of these), but there is never any significant disagreement about the *need* to defend their collective interests. Does Joel agree with that statement or not?

Assuming Joel does agree, then the question of intent becomes key. The repression of the masses by a state, defending a ruling class, is *never* the result of a mistaken intent—that is, the desire to achieve something other than the repression of the masses and their movement. It is my contention that in Cuba, however, the leadership of the July 26th movement, and later the Cuban Communist Party, created certain forms which were less than fully democratic, with the intention of stimulating a greater participation by the masses of the Cuban people in the revolutionary process, not with the goal of suppressing that participation. Joel can, of course, disagree with this viewpoint. It is not by any means a core ideological premise of Marxism—as all of the propositions in the previous paragraph are. But he cannot claim that this question has no consequences for our analysis and assessment of the Cuban state.

If the repression of a ruling class against the masses is not a mistake, if it is a result of historical necessity and flows from the basic contradictions of class rule, and if Joel is also correct that the Cuban regime represents a new exploitive ruling class of Cuban bureaucrats, then the Castro leadership *could not possibly* have had the goal I attribute to it, of stimulating mass action and mass participation in the revolutionary process once the new ruling class was firmly in control. Its undemocratic practices would have been implemented with the specific intent to suppress any real mass mobilization or mass participation. And yet, I would contend, mass mobilization and mass participation has remained precisely the goal of the Cuban leadership to this day, some four decades and more after the revolution. It is, then, a very curious sort of new, exploitative class society which has been created.

Let us examine this problem from another angle. One of the mistakes often made by Marxists when looking at history is to see the past as inevitable, trying to explain why what happened had to happen the way that it did. Sometimes it is true that the basic outlines of events are predetermined, because social conditions are not yet ripe for a change that was attempted. But at other times (and far more frequently than we usually give history credit for, in my judgment) qualitatively different alternative outcomes were possible, and a series of contingent factors pushed events down one pathway rather than another. Things might have turned out differently.

With this in mind I would like to look, briefly, at the history of the world during the decade after the Cuban revolution. Let us suppose that one or two events had turned out differently less than a decade later, in the Spring of 1968—that either the French workers had succeeded in overturning capitalism and creating the kind of socialist revolution Joel would probably recognize, or the workers in Czechoslovakia had not had their attempt to shape “socialism with a human face” overturned by an invasion of Soviet tanks. In either of these two cases it is my belief that the subsequent development of the Cuban revolution would, in all likelihood, have been dramatically different. The leadership around Fidel, now able to see a qualitatively different kind of “socialism” from the one practiced in the USSR, a socialism that was *genuinely* based on mass mobilization and mass self-emancipation, would have welcomed these developments and borrowed heavily from the new state forms and the new ideology that were suddenly available. This belief flows directly from my contention that the *intent* of the Cuban leadership was to truly involve the Cuban masses in the revolutionary process.

OK, once again Joel may disagree with me about this. But, as before, he cannot contend that the matter is of no consequence. How could this be the reaction of a new, exploitive bureaucratic Cuban ruling class? It could not be, if the Cuban state represented the new bureaucratic ruling class and had the goal of repressing the masses. Even if the Cuban state were, in fact, simply another variant of the same thing we had seen previously in the USSR and Eastern Europe, as Joel insists, then the scenario I suggest here would be impossible. The Cuban regime, like the leadership in the Kremlin, would have been

compelled by historical necessity to do everything in its power to stop any democratic-revolutionary mass movement in its tracks (as the CP did in France and Soviet tanks did in Czechoslovakia). It could certainly have never adopted new and more democratic policies for Cuba in response to such world-changing events.

(I will accept, for the sake of argument here, Joel's contention that in the Soviet Union a new bureaucratic mode of production developed dominated by a new kind of ruling class. I disagree with that assertion, but to go into all the reasons why would require another article of at least the same length as this one. For our purposes, with regard to Cuba, we merely need to acknowledge that there was a *qualitative difference* between the regimes that existed in Havana and Moscow. The regime in Moscow had a *historical imperative* to crush the Czech workers and undermine the French uprising of May-June '68 because a self-mobilized working class regime anywhere in the world would have undermined the social interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. The regime in Havana, however, had no such imperative. Had either the Czech or French workers been successful there is every reason to believe that the victory would have been welcomed in Havana—after it became clear that the events were genuinely revolutionary. The support of the Cuban leadership to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was a mistake, not a logical development of its social position and outlook. *Understanding the difference between these two things is absolutely crucial.*)

Further, if we believe that the world might have unfolded in this way after 1968, would it not be correct to say that Cuba, like France or Czechoslovakia, was—at least from this point on—in the process of creating socialism? I think such a conclusion would be inescapable. If that is the case, then, what date would mark the beginning of a socialist revolution in Cuba? Would it be January 1959, when the old state power was overturned, or some time in 1968 or 1969 when the new, more democratic policies were adopted? I think, clearly, we would have to start the clock in 1959. Otherwise we would have a few more challenges to Marxist theory on our hands.

I suggest again, therefore, that conceptually, the best way to think about the Cuban revolution is as a socialist revolution, but one which ran up against certain objective and subjective limits and thus stopped short of its full potential. What was needed to renew and revive that potential was (and still is—consider the effect a revolution in Brazil would have on Cuba today) not a new insurrection to overthrow an exploitive bureaucratic ruling class, but some events in the world that might open up different pathways both ideologically and in a practical sense (trade, etc.).

Scientific method and Marxism

It is Joel's contention that Marxism represents "scientific socialism" only in the sense of "a subject of serious, scholarly investigation about which a body of knowledge is accumulated." It is not "a specific discipline of science." This point is so important to him that he repeats it one paragraph later: "Scientific socialism, therefore, should be

taken not as a science, in the sense of a strict application of the modern scientific method, but more as the subject of serious scholarly study.”

This formulation is a strange one. What is the subject of our “serious scholarly study”? Clearly, the subject of Marxism is history and society, in particular the processes of social change. What is the source of our information in this “serious scholarly study”? Our source is history itself, and the reality of particular social formations that have actually existed in the world, their relationships to one another, etc. What is the goal of our “serious scholarly study”? To better understand the world in order to change it. And how do we use our “serious scholarly study” as a tool to change the world? We can only do this if, in addition to describing the facts of history we attempt to formulate the laws of social change that dictate how and why these facts have unfolded in the ways that they have. If we do this we can use the same laws to assist us in engineering the transition from capitalism to socialism.

I would be curious for Joel to tell me where he believes I have gone astray in this description of the “serious scholarly study” of Marxism. If I have not gone astray, then I would ask him to explain how we are expected to study history and contemporary social processes, deriving from these a generalized appreciation of the laws of social change, and then apply that understanding back upon the world we are studying in an attempt to change it in the direction of socialist revolution, if we do not hold our conclusions and results up to the rigor and precision of modern scientific method? What other method does he propose to use as a test of whether the social laws we formulate are accurate, and the conclusions we come to about how to utilize those laws are valid?

Each and every scientific enterprise is unique, different in one or many respects from every other scientific enterprise. The scientific method we apply is, therefore, not identical in each case. But scientific method still has certain general features that apply to all disciplines. Joel can insist from now until the revolution that “scientific socialism” is different from other sciences and he will, of course, be correct, just as “scientific biology” is different from “scientific meteorology.” But unless he also understands the commonalities of method that link biology and meteorology (and astronomy, and sociology, and chemistry, and economics) he has only gotten it half right, which is to say once again that he has gotten it wrong.

I often cite medicine as the best scientific analog for Marxism. I believe it is almost perfect—except that medical knowledge has a much more extensive practical database to work from than we do, since there are far more patients to study than there are social revolutions. Nevertheless, the idea of a “serious scholarly study” through which we accumulate a body of knowledge, then use that knowledge to formulate basic laws about the process of disease, and design treatments based on those laws in order to counteract disease, is very close to what Marxists are attempting to do in society. Our method needs to be as scientific as the approach of a good physician—which includes understanding what we do know, as well as how much we do not..

How we should approach the question of “truth”

Joel writes:

Now, Steve attempts to argue that economics is a social science and yet has certain theories, such as the labor theory of value, which are true regardless of one’s point of view. Doesn’t this disprove my entire argument, he asks?

In a word, no. If a theory is “true,” it is no longer a theory, it is a known fact, and will be “true” from every frame of reference. In other words, it is indisputable, and those who try to are simply wasting their time. One need not even gather observations about it to test it as a theory. It is taken as axiomatic.

This is rather confused. To begin with there are many sciences which maintain “theories” that are generally accepted as true. We still refer to Darwin’s “theory of evolution by natural selection,” for example, or Einstein’s “theory of relativity.” The term “theory” does sometimes refer to a hypothesis or speculation that needs to be tested and proven. It also, however, refers to generalized statements about the world which have already become well established and which sum up overarching truths regarding things we cannot actually see and observe in daily life, things which are hidden from normal observation. The “labor theory of value” in economics is, in this sense, equivalent to the “theory of evolution by natural selection” and the “theory of relativity.”

Second, it is not correct to say that if such a theory becomes established as true that “one need not even gather observations about it to test it as a theory.” Since no theory, in the sense just described, is ever complete, scientists are constantly testing and retesting—to determine the limits, the fuzzy edges, the contradictions. They also still have many aspects of the truth to confirm, and the occasional surprise when they cannot confirm an expected result. There are experiments being done today, and observations being made, to test the validity of both evolution and relativity, decades after these theories became accepted. That process can be expected to continue indefinitely.

Third, it is not correct to say that an accepted theory must be “true from every frame of reference.” Sometimes, yes, but not inevitably. We accept the sun-centered model of the solar system as true. Galileo was correct. The earth does move. And yet that does not make the earth-centered viewpoint used for centuries before Galileo “false.” It is also true, from a different frame of reference. Astronomers who based themselves on an earth-centered viewpoint were still able to predict the motions of heavenly bodies with considerable accuracy. Galileo’s viewpoint was merely simpler, and therefore better, *more* true if you will.

Finally, I would argue that the labor theory of value is true in the very sense that Joel suggests: Those who try to dispute it are wasting their time. And yet that does not keep

many economists from attempting to dispute it, any more than the truth of evolution kept many scientists of Darwin's day from disputing natural selection. (And the reasons are even the same in both cases—ideological issues overwhelming science at times.)

This gets us, logically, into some of the differences between the social sciences and natural sciences, the kinds of tests that we can use to determine what is true, etc. Joel offers us a series of generalizations in his article, many of which suffer from the same one-sidedness we have seen in other aspects of his approach. I will not take the time or space to sort this all out here. I have, along with my father, written a more complete exposition on the subject of Marxism and scientific method, in particular how we determine what is true in the physical and social sciences. It is so far unpublished, but I will be happy to share it with anyone who is interested.

A final point on the Marxist method itself

Speaking of the regimes in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Cuba Joel states: “If one had never known of the Russian Revolution, one would not think to link these regimes to socialism in any way, for the very first thing they do is smash independent working class activity.”

Actually, the very first thing the Cuban regime did was to drive out Batista and destroy his state apparatus. That was a rather empowering experience for the Cuban masses. In the USSR the bureaucratic regime emerged gradually out of what I assume Joel will agree was a genuine process of socialist revolution. (This, too, presents a bit of a problem from the point of view of Marxist ideology, because we have to posit a new ruling class and a new mode of production which overturned a socialist revolution and a socialist state without a new insurrection of any kind. This is one more reason why I am not partial to the theory of the Soviet bureaucracy as a new ruling class based on a new mode of production, but I promised not to get into that.) Certainly the first act of the revolutionary regime in the USSR was not to smash independent working class activity. That activity was smashed somewhat later, in the process of civil war and invasion that the Soviet Union suffered during its first years. The Stalin regime, then, actually based itself on the smashing of independent working class activity which had already taken place before it came to power. It deepened and legally codified the demobilization of the working class, violently repressing any remaining resistance. But it was not the primary agent of demobilization.

I raise these points to illustrate how shallow and superficial Joel's summary is—not only in this respect but in all respects. It is, in fact, the antithesis of the Marxist method to even pose things in terms of: “if one had never known of the Russian revolution. . . .” Marxism is not based on a static picture of society at any particular moment in time. It is based on a *historical* understanding of the present moment (or the particular moment of study), because any particular moment is *inevitably* the result of certain historical processes and historical forces. It cannot be understood except by examining and

understanding those processes. Origins, and direction of motion, are everything. Nothing can be understood without appreciating that fact. Marxist theory tells us, with apologies to Joel, that it is impossible to do so.