On Infantile Internet Disorders and Real Questions of Revolutionary Strategy

By Kenny Lake

A Response to the "Debate" over the Universality of Protracted People's War

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For nearly three decades, people calling themselves Maoists in Europe and North America have been arguing that Mao's military doctrine of protracted people's war (PPW), which guided the Chinese revolution to victory and has been adopted and adapted in Vietnam, the Philippines, Peru, India, and Nepal, has universal applicability.

Briefly, the strategy of PPW relies on the fact that in semi-feudal countries, state power is concentrated in the cities and is weak in the countryside, and the main force of the revolution, the peasantry, resides in the countryside and is bitterly oppressed by landlords and local authorities. Thus revolutionaries can initiate guerrilla warfare and peasant struggles in the countryside without confronting the full force of the central state's military, and build local red political power leading to the establishment of bases areas. After substantial territory has been acquired so that red base areas encircle the cities and a powerful revolutionary army capable of positional warfare has been built, the revolutionary force descends on the cities and thus seizes nationwide power.

Although Mao theorized PPW as revolutionary military strategy for semi-feudal countries oppressed by imperialism, the PPW universalists argue that this military strategy also applies to revolution in the imperialist countries. Rather than develop theoretical grounding for their viewpoint, propose concrete strategic doctrine, and dare to put their claim into practice, the PPW universalists have vociferously argued on the Internet for the correctness of their position, often resorting to unprincipled attacks on real communist leaders to draw attention to their tantrums.

The authority they use to justify their arguments is Chairman Gonzalo, the leader of Sendero Luminoso (the Communist Party of Peru, or PCP-SL), which launched a people's war in 1980. Sendero Luminoso became a considerable threat to the Peruvian regime by the early 1990s, but suffered considerable setbacks after the capture of Gonzalo in 1992 from which it has never recovered. Since Gonzalo
has been held in a military prison for 27 years, we do not know his position on the universality of PPW (how convenient for the PPW universalists). Unlike Unitarian Universalism, perhaps the most open-minded and social justice-oriented church which welcomes diverse viewpoints in its congregation up to and including atheism, the church of PPW universalism is as rigid and dogmatic as can be. PPW universalists draw on the most dogmatic of Sendero Luminoso propaganda to make their case, while failing to carry out any serious study of the actual practice of the people’s war in Peru.

In the US, the growth of youth involvement in protest and radical politics since Occupy Wall Street and the recent wave of resistance to the police murder of Black people has led to some newly radicalized millennials taking an interest in revolution, communism, and Maoism. Out of this milieu has emerged an odd revival of the church of PPW universalism. While this revival is small in number and may well include some people who are well-intentioned but naive, it is loud online. The latest crop of Gonzalo-worshiping PPW universalists in the US seems to focus its activity on wearing ninja costumes to protests and political events, taking pictures of themselves in said ninja costumes, and posting these pictures online. The only mystery behind their masks is what they think this fronting on Facebook and stunting for the ‘gram has to do with the practice of the people’s war in Peru.

Jose Maria Sison, founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines and no stranger to protracted people’s war—he launched and led one until his 1977 capture and was forced into political exile in the late 1980s after his 1986 release from prison—recently published a critique of the PPW universalist position. Joma—as he is affectionately called—outlined the stark differences between imperialist countries, where the repressive state apparatus has a strong reach and revolutionaries do not have a geographic location or the social conditions necessary to carry out the PPW military strategy, and the semi-feudal countries in which PPW is possible. Joma’s two articles on this issue—“On the Question of People’s War in Industrial Capi-
talist Countries” and “Follow-up Note”\(^1\)—are crystal clear about the need for revolution in the imperialist countries, but provide nuanced analyses of when armed struggle is appropriate and when it is not. Subsequently, Joma’s articles were attacked by the PPW universalists with lots of internet invective and little substance. Andy Belisario provides a detailed response to these tantrums in his article “On the So-Called Universality of Protracted People’s War”\(^2\).

To call this a debate would be to overstate the claims of the PPW universalists. Debates require that both sides develop their positions and justify them with evidence, and one of the consequences of the internet is that any asshole with a keyboard and a connection can pretend to have great knowledge of revolutionary theory. But given that many millennials newly awakened to the horrors of capitalism-imperialism and looking into revolution, communism, and Maoism have encountered this “debate” online, it is worth taking this opportunity to address some real questions of revolutionary strategy that have come up along the way. These questions include:

- What can we learn from the experience of the people’s war in Peru?
- What demographic shifts have taken place in the world since the Chinese revolution and what are their implications for revolutionary strategy?
- What is Maoism? Why are most self-proclaimed Maoists so dogmatic?
- Why has there been so much disarray in the international communist movement since the 1976 counterrevolutionary coup in China?
- What is a correct military strategy for revolution in imperialist countries?

\(^1\) Published on DemocracyandClassStruggle.blogspot.com.
\(^2\) Published on Prismm.net.

“PPW UNIVERSALISTS DRAW ON THE MOST DOGMATIC OF SENDERO LUMINOSO PROPAGANDA TO MAKE THEIR CASE, WHILE FAILING TO CARRY OUT ANY SERIOUS STUDY OF THE ACTUAL PRACTICE OF THE PEOPLE’S WAR IN PERU.”
• What is the relationship between the subjective factor and objective conditions in the revolutionary process?
• What is the nature of bourgeois state power, and how can communists in imperialist countries build up a force that can overthrow it?

What follows will not focus on refuting the PPW universalists, as I think Joma and Belisario have already said what needs to be said on that. Nor will it be an attempt to present finished ideas on any of the above questions. Instead, I hope to call attention to what I think are real questions of revolutionary strategy (rather than internet posturing), and suggest lines of inquiry into studying these questions and doing the work of analysis and historical summation and developing theory and practice. If this results in further elaboration on these questions in future issues of *kites*—including submissions from comrades outside the ranks of OCR and RI—as well as in other publications, then this essay has served its purpose. As a more informal essay, this will not be thick with citations, but I have included a bibliography from which I have drawn in writing this essay in the hope that some will take seriously the need to study these questions.

**Summing up Sendero Luminoso and the People’s War in Peru**

One of the grand failures of the international communist movement (ICM) in recent decades has been its inability to or lack of interest in summing up recent waves of revolutionary struggle. As a consequence, there is no comprehensive history of the people’s war in Peru. This is despite Sendero Luminoso’s accomplishments organizing a mass base for revolutionary struggle first in the highland regions of Peru, expanding across the periphery and into the slums of Lima, and advancing people’s war to become a serious contender for power in the early 1990s. There was debate in the pages of *A World To Win* against the right-opportunist line within the Communist Party of Peru that argued for peace negotiations after the 1992 capture of Chairman Gonzalo. As important as that debate was in the mid-
1990s, it mainly addressed the “line” questions as statements of principles rather than concrete analysis of the history of the people’s war and its current state that could have helped chart a path forward. At the same time and especially in recent years, there has been a lot of recycling of old statements by Sendero Luminoso and Chairman Gonzalo by the church of PPW universalism.

The greatest weakness of Sendero Luminoso and Chairman Gonzalo is that many of its/his written statements are dogmatic as fuck. There, I said it. There is a strong religiosity emanating from many of these statements that projects a grand and godly faith in the impending victory of the revolution, even suggesting the strategic offensive of the world revolution (in the 1980s?!?), rather than a compelling, nuanced analysis of the state of the world and the prospects for and difficulties of revolution. We can understand why in the 1980s, with the revolutionary upsurge of the 1960s over and following the tremendous loss of proletarian state power in China in 1976, with a religious and spiritual population as their mass base, and with the real need for revolutionary sacrifice, Sendero may have felt this approach was necessary. Maybe we can even accept it in the Buddhist sense of the term, learning to embrace and move through the negatives that are part of our historical and present-day experiences as communists, rather than ignoring or fearing them. But we don’t need to repeat it; we can take the good and leave out the bad. The PPW universalists have instead decided to take the worst attribute of Sendero Luminoso, magnify it, and shout it from the rooftops (or more accurately, click it from their keyboards).

Unfortunately, this dogmatic style and the diatribes and deeds of those promoting it today have only served to obfuscate the valuable lessons that can be learned from the actual practices of the people’s war in Peru and the strategic leadership of Chairman Gonzalo. So let us now outline the key lessons we need to study and adapt to our own circumstances.
Conquering Combat Positions: Using Bourgeois Institutions to Accumulate Revolutionary Forces

Sendero Luminoso did not just come out of nowhere, guns blazing, and launch people’s war in 1980. They spent over a decade building up support and organization, principally among the rural population in the Ayacucho region, but also among other strata of society and in other areas. And the way they did so was an ingenious use of bourgeois institutions for the purpose of accumulating revolutionary forces. In 1962, a young Abimael Guzmán (AKA Chairman Gonzalo) was appointed professor of philosophy at the National University of San Cristóbal de Huamanga in the capital of the Ayacucho region. There, in rousing lectures that earned him the nickname “Champú,” Professor Guzmán and his comrades used their faculty positions to present students with a historical materialist understanding of society and the need for revolution. By the late 1960s, Sendero Luminoso had virtual control over the university, including administrative functions, and had a particularly strong position within the teacher’s college. They used these positions to recruit the cadre who would go on to form the backbone of the people’s war. Moreover, from the teacher’s college, they dispatched newly-minted university graduates to the surrounding peasant communities in the Ayacucho region as school teachers, where they in turn conducted social investigation and organized those peasant communities in preparation for launching the people’s war.

This strategic use of the University of Huamanga to recruit communist cadre was made possible by the fact that the nationalist Peruvian governments of the 1960s and ’70s put considerable government resources into education, resulting in extremely high rates of secondary school and college education, including among the proletariat and peasantry. This was done in part to bring the periphery—largely Indian and peasant—under the ideological hegemony of the Peruvian bourgeoisie, which was largely white and mestizo and centered in the cities. Students at the University of Huamanga were mostly from
Quechua Indian peasant backgrounds and the first in their family to receive higher education. But since the Peruvian economy had no future for all these educated basic masses, especially as it went into foreign debt crisis in the 1980s and was subjected to IMF-mandated SAPs (structural adjustment programs), the dashed expectations among young, educated proletarians and peasants created fertile ground for communist recruitment.

Gonzalo’s strategic genius was in taking advantage of the bourgeoisie’s rapid expansion of education to gain temporary footholds within the bourgeois ideological state apparatuses and use these positions to accumulate forces for revolution—in other words, in his correct reading of the conjuncture, not prophetic divination. These positions were always temporary, and Sendero lost its control over the University of Huamanga by the mid 1970s. But the damage was done, and Sendero cadre trained at the university were already organizing peasants all over Ayacucho—the region that would become the first stronghold of the people’s war in the early 1980s. Professor Guzmán took a position at La Cantuta teacher’s college on the outskirts of Lima in the mid-to-late 1970s, recruiting more teachers into Sendero’s ranks. Sendero would continue to employ this strategy in other places throughout the people’s war. For example, it deployed 100 teachers in schools in the slums of the Central Highway region east of Lima, helping the people’s war to advance towards the center of bourgeois power. Here there is a broader lesson: the bourgeoisie’s ideological hegemony over the masses is something that has to be forged and continually reforged, and at moments when the nature of this hegemony is in transition, as it was when the Peruvian bourgeoisie massively expanded education in part to bring more peripheral populations under its ideological hegemony, communists can seize opportunities. For more detail on Sendero’s use of bourgeois educational institutions, see my article “Gramsci and Gonzalo: Considerations on Conquering Combat Positions within the Inner Wall of Hegemony.”

3 Originally published in Uprising #5 at Revolutionary-Initiative.com, and to be republished in a future issue of kites.
**People’s War in the Slums of Lima**

Gonzalo’s second great strategic innovation was in bringing a number of the slums and shantytowns of Lima under revolutionary authority and making Lima, and thus the urban domain, a major theater of military operations. Peru, like most oppressed nations, went through a period of rapid urbanization following World War II, which was further spurned on by the SAPs of the 1980s. Lima’s population went from nearly 600 thousand in 1941 to 1.8 million in 1961 and from 3.3 million in 1972 to 6.5 million in 1993, giving the Lima metropolitan area nearly one-third of Peru’s total population. Alongside this dramatic urban population growth was the proletarianization of the peasants moving to the cities and the growth of slums, including improvised housing in new communities surrounding the cities, often called shantytowns. In Peru, this process dovetailed with the contradiction of Indian highland peasants from peripheral regions such as Ayacucho migrating to Lima and confronting their exclusion from official Peruvian society and culture. The children of these migrants, often called *cholos*, were thus culturally caught between the rural Andean world of their parents and the urban world of Lima. Their social and cultural dilemmas, expressed beautifully in songs by chicha singer Chacalón, also provided fertile ground for recruitment into the revolution.

In the 1980s, Sendero Luminoso entrenched itself among these urban migrants, who often had direct ties to peasants in Ayacucho embroiled in the first stages of the people’s war. Sendero even sent cadre into land invasions in which migrants built improvised housing on land they had no legal right to, and made some of these shantytowns, such as the infamous Racuana, into revolutionary neighborhoods. Its military operations and organization among the masses in the slums of Lima began to outstrip its work in rural Ayacucho by the mid-1980s. The 1988 PCP-SL Congress decided, after

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much internal debate that even pitted Gonzalo against his then wife, to make a strategic shift to Lima as a center of the people’s war, seeing the large newly proletarian population there and the strategic layout of slums surrounding the city center as ripe conditions for the rapid advance of people’s war. In the following years, armed strikes that temporarily shut down Lima, assassinations, attacks on police stations, bombings of government buildings and banks, and increasing revolutionary authority in Lima’s slums, especially those on the periphery, pushed Peru into a deepening political crisis, with the US and Peruvian bourgeoisie deeply concerned about the prospect of Sendero Luminoso coming to power. (All this is documented with citations in Part 3 of the Specter series, which will appear in kites #3 but is already online at revolutionary-initiative.com.)

Here I have to disagree with Belisario’s characterization of Sendero’s military operations in Lima as left opportunism based on an illusion of quick victory through urban insurrection. Belisario is correct that Sendero’s declaration of the people’s war reaching strategic equilibrium in the late 1980s was likely overblown rhetoric (consistent with Sendero’s tendency to make dogmatic declarations). But again, we shouldn’t let Sendero’s rhetoric and dogmatic style get in the way of the serious strategic questions raised by its practice. The fact is, as documented in Mike Davis’s excellent book Planet of Slums, as of ten years ago there were over one billion people living in slums worldwide (and that number has likely risen), and the global urban population now outstrips the rural. The oppressed nations don’t look so much like China in the 1930s and ’40s. Revolutionary strategy in such countries will have to deal with these new realities, or risk turning Mao’s tremendous contributions on military strategy into relics of the past.

During the 1980s, when SAPs wreaked havoc on the oppressed nations and spurred huge migrations of peasants who became proletarians in the urban slums, communists were largely absent from this process and thus failed to take advantage of a situation that could have resulted in major revolutionary advances. This had a lot
to do with the general disarray of the ICM at the time, but it also had something to do with stale and dogmatic thinking that could not adapt protracted people’s war to new circumstances. Sendero was an exception, and while its rhetoric was stale and dogmatic, its strategy and practice on slums, rural to urban migration, and the urban military domain were innovative and effective. We need further study of this experience rooted in historical research rather than repetition of rhetoric.

And while we’re at it, there needs to be serious debate among communists over the character of the oppressed nations today. To what extent are they still semi-feudal? What is the class composition and geographic demographics of these societies today? How do we understand countries that are still in some ways exploited by foreign capital and still have considerable peasant populations but are playing an expansionist or even imperialist role internationally? What are the implications of all this for revolutionary strategy? What can we learn from urban military conflicts from Algiers to Mogadishu to Sadr City? The point of this debate should not be to fit social formations into categories, but to really analyze the concrete conditions. Maybe here—and only here—we can unite with Tinder users on the principle of “I don’t like labels.”

A further point of consideration posed by the experience of people’s war in Peru and social formations in the oppressed nations today is how stable revolutionary base areas can be. The Peruvian military, with US backing, had substantial training, sophistication, and hardware. Its reach could easily extend into the Ayacucho highlands and coca-growing Upper Huallaga Valley, especially with a fleet of helicopters and DEA aerial surveillance at its disposal. Owing to these conditions, Sendero’s rural base areas were likely never as stable as Yenan, so rigidly sticking to the strategy of carving out red political power in a territorial domain, developing a large revolutionary army there capable of positional warfare, and then seizing the cities from the countryside would have likely been ineffective. This made urban operations all the more important, as “seizing the
cities” would have to come from the inside—a radical transformation of the strategy of protracted people’s war.

Before the now-no-longer “fierce one” (Prachanda, that is) took off his turtleneck sweater, settled into a slick suit, and sold out, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [CPN(M)] made the critical observation that base areas have too often been conceived as more stable then they ever were in reality (see “Experiences of the People’s War and Some Important Questions” in the now defunct CPN(M)’s The Worker no. 5). Indeed, Mao himself recognized the need to abandon base areas in the face of setbacks (that’s what the Long March was). Mao just knew how to navigate through this and lay the seeds for future advances within those setbacks (that’s what the Long March was). The CPN(M)’s more materialist (in the sense that no state of existence is permanent) understanding of base areas and the nonlinear development of PPW probably had something to do with the fact that the people’s war they led advanced more rapidly than any other ever has. And that rapid advance included armed shutdowns of Kathmandu, like in early-1990s Lima. Let’s not let the fact that Prachanda sold out stop us from learning from this experience and even from Prachanda’s strategic leadership (when he was still rocking that turtleneck sweater).

**The United Front...of Leftists, or of Popular Classes under the Leadership of the Proletariat?**

One final controversy needs to be addressed before moving this discussion of the experience of the people’s war in Peru to a conclusion: Sendero’s application of the united front under the leadership of the proletariat. Andy Belisario’s article criticizes Sendero for not applying the united front, implying they had a sectarian approach to other political forces. Online, the newer generation of self-proclaimed “Maoists” in the US have bickered over a supposed difference among them between those with an allegiance to the Com-
As Mao conceived it, the united front is an alliance of classes in the revolutionary process led by the proletariat and its vanguard. It’s a recognition that intermediate classes, such as myriad strata of petty-bourgeoisie and, in 1930s China, the peasantry and even the national bourgeoisie, could potentially be won to supporting (or in the case of the poor peasantry, being the main force in) communist revolution, even while the proletariat must play the leading role. The united front takes different shape in different social formations; in the US, for example, the solid core of the broader united front is the alliance between the multinational proletariat and the liberation

The funeral of Sendero Luminoso member Edith Lagos in 1982 drew over 30,000 people, demonstrating the wide base of support and effective united front maintained by the Party. Lagos, who was born in Ayacucho, abandoned law school to serve the people, was imprisoned, but then liberated in 1980 when her comrades blasted a hole through her jail cell wall. Lagos participated in the Party until she was killed by police and paramilitary forces in 1982.
struggles of the various oppressed nationalities and nations. But the key thing—and I think Belisario would agree with me here—is that it is an alliance of classes, not a question of “uniting the Left.” The former takes a broad view of society as a whole, while the latter gets stuck in narrow conceptions and small thinking on who can and will be part of the revolution and obsesses over ideological debates within small, stale circles.

By available accounts from scholars and journalists, Sendero Luminoso had substantial ties among different classes and drew perhaps half of its membership from the petty-bourgeoisie. As we learned above, university professors and school teachers were crucial to Sendero’s strategic accumulation of revolutionary forces from the late 1960s all the way through the early 1990s. Sendero acquired impressive support from lawyers, which resulted in many guerrilla fighters getting out of jail in the early years of the people's war before increasing emergency powers by the Peruvian government prevented such possibilities. The substantial number of Sendero-aligned lawyers also provided crucial support for the growing population of imprisoned Sendero cadre. Finally, let's not forget that “the dancer upstairs” was captured on that fateful day in September 1992 in the house of a ballerina in the wealthy Surquillo neighborhood of Lima. Given the aforementioned contradiction of the difficulties establishing stable base areas, support from upper sections of the petty-bourgeoisie was likely crucial to hiding Sendero leadership in the midst of intense efforts by the Peruvian state to capture them. And, despite Gonzalo’s eventual capture, these efforts succeeded for years. (Side-note: if you ever have to go underground, make sure to take out the trash. The empty tubes of the skin cream Gonzalo needed for his health condition that the authorities found in the curbside garbage were what alerted them to his location).

While this alliance of classes under Sendero’s leadership was possible and necessary, the people’s war also confronted a political situation quite different from China in the 1930s and ’40s. Peru had a highly developed organized Left that in many cases occupied gov-
ernment positions and a network of internationally-funded NGOs providing social services, especially in the slums. On the latter, it's no coincidence that bourgeois economist Hernando de Soto, advocate of land-titling and micro-entrepreneurship as the “solution” to poverty in the slums, hailed from Peru. NGO-sponsored projects among the slum masses of Lima were being praised internationally in the 1980s by neoliberal ideologues bent on preventing revolution through petty-bourgeoisifying slum residents. As Lenin constantly reminded us about small-scale production, these projects promoting entrepreneurship only resulted in class differentiation, with a few successful and the majority slipping into deeper poverty. As a consequence, class conflict within the slums of Lima could be considerable and the NGOs responsible for this were by and large acting as defenders of the 1980s neoliberal reordering of capitalism-imperialism. So Sendero’s targeting of NGOs and the petty-bourgeois elite within the slums as it advanced the people’s war in Lima needs to be evaluated in this context—which doesn’t mean Sendero was always correct in how it handled this antagonism, but it does mean the antagonism was real.

When it came to the organized Left, Sendero largely stayed out of the debates and turf wars among it in the 1960s and ‘70s, instead focusing its efforts on building a mass base and training communist cadre among the Quechua-speaking Indian peasants of Ayacucho. The organized Left, by contrast, was centered in Lima and had little interest in devoting attention and organization to peripheral Ayacucho, where they would have had to learn Quechua (which Sendero cadre did) and integrate with a culture and a way of life that was foreign to them. The new generation of “Maoists” in the US could take a hint from this example, turn off their computers, stop spending so much time among the same circles of Leftists, and instead go to the housing projects, get jobs alongside immigrants in the fields and meatpacking plants, or find whatever other appropriate ways to integrate with the masses.

When Sendero did start making strategic moves into Lima, it
confronted an organized Left that acted as an impediment to the advance of the people’s war. Union leaders sought to prevent strikes from turning into class struggle. The Izquierda Unida (IU, United Left) held considerable government positions, with its candidate Alfonso Barrantes elected mayor of Lima in 1984 and promising a glass of milk a day for every child. The IU also had considerable authority in some shantytowns established prior to the 1980s. A salient example is Villa El Salvador, a slum governed by the IU in the 1980s and celebrated as a model where slum residents were lifting themselves up through entrepreneurship. The IU program in Villa El Salvador resulted in some slum micro-entrepreneurs getting ahead while many others fell behind, with 46% underemployment by the mid-1980s. Many of the new migrants arriving after 1980 were left to fend for themselves without the benefits of IU clientelism. Consequently, Sendero’s popularity in the face of the failure of Leftist reforms grew, as did its organized strength in the neighborhood. The IU responded to Sendero’s advance and the justified complaints of the masses against IU failures by increasingly standing in the way of the revolution and even siding with the Peruvian military. IU district vice mayor María Elena Moyano openly called for the formation of rondas (anti-Sendero “neighborhood defense organizations” aligned with the Peruvian government) and led a fifty-person “peace” march in Villa El Salvador during Sendero’s February 1992 Lima armed strike. Moyano was subsequently assassinated by Sendero guerrillas. By March 1992, Sendero had the upper hand in CUA VES, the neighborhood-based governing body of Villa El Salvador, and was leading residents in protests demanding the IU municipal government step down, as it had failed to meet the needs of the people and had even allowed the recent establishment of a military base in the district. (Again, this is all documented with citations in Part 3 of the Specter series).

The point here, when looking at Sendero’s numerous assassinations of union leaders and IU officials and general campaigns to push Leftists out of power and replace them with revolutionary authority, is not that every assassination was necessarily correct. The point is
to recognize that Sendero faced an established Left and internationally-funded NGOs that actively worked to prevent the advance of the revolution and to keep the masses accepting paltry reforms that could not resolve the crisis facing the masses of Peru. The revolutionary process in any country with an established Left and NGOs/non-profits will not be so different. The leaders of these impediments to revolution, stuck in reformist, revisionist, and social-service ideologies, constitute part of what the (new) Italian Communist Party [(n)PCI] calls the “regime of preventive counterrevolution,” and will align themselves with the bourgeois state in the face of a revolutionary challenge. To put it bluntly, communist revolution today will be made against the established Left, just as it was in 1917 Russia. In a more recent example—the people’s war in Nepal—the communist revolution was fought in part against the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML), which for a time held the cabinet position directly responsible for suppressing the revolution and also governed in some districts where the people’s war was overthrowing local authorities.

In the Philippines, it seems as though the communist movement, to its credit, was able to achieve considerable hegemony over various movements of opposition in society before the regime of preventive counterrevolution was firmly established among them. But given that US imperialism has been actively exporting postmodernist academia, identity-politics activism, and NGO/non-profit social-service schemes, what Sendero confronted in Lima in the 1980s, other revolutionaries will also have to confront in new forms. So it is imperative we evaluate Sendero’s application of the united front when it expanded operations in Lima from the perspective of how to forge a revolutionary alliance of classes under the leadership of the proletariat and its vanguard, not based on making peace with established Left forces who stand in the way of revolution. To that end, I welcome Andy Belisario’s thoughtful article even while I disagree with some of his interpretation of Sendero’s strategy.

In contrast to the kind of discussion about united front strategy I
am advocating, the church of PPW universalism revivalists in the US have taken Sendero’s tactics as inspiration for focusing their energies on attacking Leftist organizations, mostly online but sometimes physically, and for the bizarre practice of leaving animal carcasses outside of reformist organizations’ events (?!!). So a reminder is in order: Sendero kept its distance—including literally by focusing on Ayacucho rather than Lima—from turf wars within the Left during its 1970s period of accumulation of forces for people’s war, focusing instead on sinking roots among the basic masses. It was only when Leftist organizations directly stood in the way of the development of red political power and the advance of the people’s war that Sendero mounted attacks on the organized Left. It is this experience, particularly the now-urgent task of sinking roots among the masses, that those attracted to Maoism should learn from rather than the dog carcasses labeled “Deng Xiaoping” that Sendero once hung from telephone poles as a statement against counterrevolutionary betrayal by top Chinese Communist Party leaders.

**Maoism, Dogmatism, and the Post-1976 Disarray of the International Communist Movement**

The church of PPW universalism is keen to argue that Maoism was first synthesized as a third, higher stage of communist theory in 1982 by Chairman Gonzalo, and that today revolutionaries must adhere to a “principally Maoism” version of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism (MLM) as well as apply the universal lessons of Gonzalo Thought. Since this is mostly a declaration of dogma it is not worth addressing in its own right, though philosopher J. Moufawad-Paul’s book *Continuity and Rupture* does present a more intellectually savvy version of the “1982 synthesis” view. Nevertheless, all this does raise the questions: What is Maoism? How did it come into being internationally? How has it been interpreted by different people and organizations? How has the disarray of the international communist
movement following the 1976 counterrevolutionary coup in China as well as attempts to come out of that disarray shaped the present state of the subjective forces for revolution?

I am not interested in religious attempts to declare a “one true Maoism” and enshrine the apostle who transmitted it to us. We already have Mao’s writings and speeches and the historical experience of the Chinese revolution and socialist rule from 1949 to 1976, and we can take from that what we want. While I uphold the hard-fought lessons of communist theory as it has been developed by Marx, Lenin, Mao, and others, I don’t treat communist theory as a closed system that can only develop further through establishing a fourth great teacher. Or to put it another way: yes, Gonzalo and other communist leaders developed some strategy and theoretical insights that we all should learn from, but that doesn’t mean we need to declare, let alone be obsessed with declaring, a new Thought, Ism, Synthesis, Path, etc. In any event, it does seem relevant today, especially with a new generation interested in Maoism, to explore some of the real issues that have come up in the real struggles around the world to uphold and apply Maoism in opposition to the revisionism of the Soviet Union in the 1960s and ’70s, and especially since the 1976 counterrevolutionary coup in China.

As a starting point, I agree with Andy Belisario that irrespective of appellation, Maoism was synthesized by Mao and the Communist Party of China (CPC), and this synthesis can be found, in written form, in the Selected Works of Mao Zedong and in the Red Book. Foreign Languages Press, probably the greatest translation operation and international publisher in human history, published these “classics” of communist theory in numerous languages and distributed them as cheaply as possible far and wide, thus disseminating this synthesis worldwide. Furthermore, the practice of the CPC—its leadership of the PPW to victory in China and, even more, its leadership of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR)—was equally a part of the synthesis of Maoism. To suggest that Maoism requires someone other than Mao, an entity other than the pre-1976 CPC, and an
Maoism, as a higher stage of communist theory, contributed the following:

- New Democratic Revolution as the strategic path for revolution in semi-feudal countries oppressed by foreign imperialism.
- Protracted People’s War as the military doctrine for revolution in semi-feudal countries oppressed by imperialism.
- The Mass Line as the communist method of leadership.
- The importance of and methods for continual ideological remolding of communists in order to stay on the revolutionary road.
- Two-line struggle within communist parties as a concentration of the class struggle in society and a method for keeping the communist party moving forward on the revolutionary road.
- Most importantly, the understanding that class struggle continues during and is the motive force within the socialist transition to communism. This class struggle is concentrated within the communist party and its leadership, where a new bourgeois class emerges. Successive cultural revolutions unleashing the masses in this class struggle will be necessary to further revolutionize the relations of production, social relations, culture, and ideas in socialist society in the direction of communism.

This, however, is nothing more than a list stating the main contributions of Maoism. There are many things Mao and the CPC contributed to the ICM, and some cannot be so easily boiled down to a sentence, such as the way the Chinese revolution moved communist ideology away from Eurocentrism and the dualistic and mechanistic ways of thinking so engrained over centuries in European modes of thought. Moreover, Maoism, like all theory, is something that has to be wrestled with your whole life. Learning the above list doesn’t
mean you have it down and can move forward as a revolutionary without ever hitting obstacles and finding your understanding to be thoroughly inadequate to solve them (and we’re not even talking about how easy it is to wind up outright betraying these principles, even without intending to). In this way, today’s would-be communists in the US need to thoroughly rupture with the postmodernist activist method of developing ideology by constructing a list of -isms and -obias they are against and declarative statements of what they are (“I’m an abolitionist”) lacking in substance. On a deeper level, we have to contend with the ways in which conceiving of accessing knowledge principally through internet searches and a public education system that emphasizes standardized tests and thus definition memorization and knowledge of discrete entities rather than their interconnections is warping the thinking capacity of entire generations.

Mao’s example is instructive, as he never rested content with the CPC’s achievements, even well after they had seized power, and continually struggled with his comrades to rectify their errors and ideologically remold themselves. And, like Mao, we need to constantly be struggling with the big questions of what it will take to advance to communism, including the often neglected aspect of the very real contradictions of socialist society.

In order to treat communist theory as something we have to continually struggle with rather than as a closed system of declared beliefs, we need to come to terms with the ways in which Maoism was taken up internationally with a considerable amount of dogmatism. Some of this dogmatism emanated from the GPCR itself, the negative aspect of the greatest revolutionary advance within the history of class society. As Robert Biel puts it in his book *Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement*, “the big weakness [in the GPCR] was a dogmatism that blocked precisely some of the creative developments which were required (always a risk when one defends purity of line, as the anti-revisionist struggle tended to do)” (150). We need to critically examine the dogmatism embedded in the GPCR—the
On Infantile Internet Disorders...

incessant repetition of the same slogans in propaganda and art, the (probably tactically necessary) use of Mao’s authority to bolster the revolutionary camp, and the often factionalist and cultish conduct of some Red Guard factions (especially those consisting of the children of capitalist roaders within the CPC)—and we certainly don’t need to emulate it.

Maoism and the rebel spirit of the GPCR became a tremendous inspiration and resource to revolutionaries in the 1960s, who were confronting the fact that capitalism, in a state-ownership form, had been restored in the Soviet Union and most, if not all, of the established communist parties from the Comintern period had given up on revolution, adopted reformist programs, and in the 1960s acted as impediments to a new generation of revolutionaries. As the (new) Communist Party of Italy [(n)PCI] points out, these revolutionaries often “only raised the banner of the restoration of M-L principles—that modern revisionists were repudiating—and denounced their betrayal of the socialist revolution.” Thus the Maoist movement emerging in the 1960s “veered into dogmatism” and took a “clerical,” purist approach to ideology and politics (see the (n)PCI’s Four Main Issues to be Debated in the International Communist Movement). Biel sums up that during this period, “There was a general feeling of wanting to restore some definition of a ‘pure,’ untainted Marxism-Leninism—some sense of returning to a golden age which had prevailed before some kind of ‘fall’” (164).

The task at hand, however, was not to return to a golden age but to develop new approaches in new conditions, using Maoism as a resource. Most Maoist organizations in the 1970s failed in this task, in Europe and the US at best “going to the workers” with an analysis of the proletariat that may have been accurate in the 1930s, but was outdated in a post-WWII order defined by a large labor aristocracy in the imperialist countries and increasing automation and offshoring of production. Here, the CPC did not provide much help, for as Biel summarizes, “all the Chinese positions—even at their most

4 Available at nuvopci.it > Editions in Foreign Languages.
correct—were weakened by a lack of creativity in dealing with the basic political economy side of imperialism” (159). Thus, the Maoist movement internationally was ill-equipped to forge revolutionary strategy in the context of SAPs and the growing urban slums in the oppressed nations or the increasing surplus populations caused by deindustrialization in the imperialist countries and the immigrant proletariat drawn to them.

Biel notes that “the CPC, to its credit, refused a hegemonic role... and constantly drummed into overseas Maoists the need to think independently about their own conditions” (162). This also explains why the CPC was hesitant to proclaim Maoism as a third, higher stage of communist theory, as doing so would only feed into the tendency, as exemplified by the heroic but dogmatic 1960s Naxalites in India, who attempted to mechanically apply the Chinese experience. We can respect Mao and the CPC's orientation towards the need for creative development, but it's also worth questioning whether the CPC could have done more to provide political and organizational leadership to the ICM. To the extent the CPC did not do so, this created something of a vacuum which the social-imperialist Soviet Union and its lackeys as well as bourgeois nationalists in oppressed nations were able to fill. To some degree, it seems that revolutionary China's at times questionable diplomatic maneuvers got in the way of taking responsibility for advancing the world revolution as a whole. For example, it seems fair to say that giving then-dictator President Marcos of the Philippines an enthusiastic public reception during his 1975 state visit to Beijing while he was busy brutally suppressing the communist-led people's war in his own country went beyond the tactical necessities of international diplomacy.5

Dogmatism left Maoists internationally unprepared for how to deal with the 1976 counterrevolutionary coup in China. Unable

5 For a fuller discussion and critique of the way socialist states have carried out internationalism, see Bob Avakian, “Advancing the World Revolution: Questions of Strategic Orientation,” Revolution no. 51 (1984) from when Avakian was still rocking that funky 1970s hat.
to make an analysis of this tremendous loss of a socialist state and afraid of losing their religion (as Maoism was—and still is—often treated like a religion, unfortunately), all too many welcomed the new Chinese regime and soon became all too similar to the pro-Soviet revisionists they had previously rebelled against. Bitter debates over how to assess the new Chinese regime—a decisive line question—engulfed many communist organizations and led to splits and sometimes violence. I’ve never independently verified this, but I heard from a reliable comrade from the Dominican Republic that some comrades in his country had their arms chopped off in the course of the split among Maoists over the coup in China. Overall, the international communist movement which emerged from the upheavals of the 1960s fell into considerable disarray.

Where Maoists were leading revolutionary struggles, “instinct and class ties” could “make up for their lack of understanding” (as the (n)PCI’s Four Main Issues document sums about a prior period). But failing to analyze the coup in China would eventually lead even these comrades to stray from the revolutionary road. This explains to a significant degree the difficulties the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) had in seizing the opportunities created by the fall of the Marcos regime in 1986—difficulties that could only be fully addressed by the CPP’s rectification movement initiated in 1992 that put Maoism back at the heart of its outlook and practice. The broader lesson here is that while the practical political struggle and the bigger ideological questions are not one and the same, and advances can be made in one domain by an organization simultaneously falling backward in the other, any antagonistic contradiction between the two will eventually assert itself and demand resolution.

Some Maoists did defend the GPCR, condemn the counterrevolutionary coup in China, and seek to forge ahead in revolutionary struggle. Gonzalo had spent time in China (where he learned how to make explosives, a skill that would later prove useful with all the dynamite available from the mines of highland Peru) during the GPCR and had no illusions about the new Chinese regime. His
main answer was to prove the correctness of Maoism in practice by launching people’s war, supplemented with a lot of dogmatic declarations and those dead dogs labeled “Deng Xiaoping” hung from Lima telephone poles in 1980. In the US, after a lengthy period of internal two-line struggle that led to an organizational split in the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP, USA), Bob Avakian put forward a substantive analysis of the twists and turns of the GPCR and the 1976 coup in speeches subsequently published as *The Loss in China and the Revolutionary Legacy of Mao Tsetung* (1978). While perhaps the best analysis of its kind at the time, Avakian’s overemphasis on line struggles within the top leadership of the CPC at the expense of attention to the role of the masses and the on-the-ground experience of revolutionary struggle, as well as his tendency to present those labeled “capitalist roaders” as without internal contradictions, were weaknesses that have had obvious ramifications on the RCP’s later development.

The RCP, USA set out to cause an international incident by denouncing Deng Xiaoping as a capitalist roader in a militant protest during Deng’s 1979 state visit to Washington, DC. The protest resulted in physical combat with riot police, dozens of arrests, and many felony charges. Important as this and other Deng denunciations were at the time, unfortunately communists largely failed to pursue further historical analysis of the GPCR, thus neglecting to mine our most advanced experience for its lessons and nuances. It is only recently that the work of several Chinese scholars, such as Mobo Gao, Dongping Han, Yawan Luddin, and Hongsheng Jiang, have enriched our understanding of the GPCR (that is, if we’re willing to do the necessary study).

Small and scattered as they were, several Maoist organizations came together to form the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement (RIM) in 1984 as an effort to regroup. RIM’s founding Declaration stands as an important distillation of the lessons of the revolutionary struggles, communist parties, and socialist states of the twentieth century, and a delineation of principles from communist revolu-
tionaries steeled in the struggles of the 1960s who stood firm in the face of the loss in China and the international ebb of revolutionary struggle. In an internet era in which it’s easy for many to mistake hyperbole from keyboard communists with little or no real experience for real lessons from real revolutionary struggle, it’s important to point out that members of participant organizations in RIM had been involved in significant student and mass struggles, had faced jail and torture, and in some cases led armed struggle.

While the RIM Declaration does carry with it some of the dogmatism associated with Maoism criticized above (in substance and especially in style), it also conveys an open-ended approach towards investigating the changing conditions created by the contradictions of capitalism-imperialism and their implications for revolutionary strategy, as well as a recognition of the need to more deeply and critically sum up the history of communist revolutions and proletarian dictatorships. This approach was carried forward to some degree in the pages of *A World To Win*, the journal inspired by RIM that was published into the early 2000s. The historical summations, contemporary analyses, and line struggle in *A World To Win* as well as RIM’s work to popularize and build international support for contemporary revolutionary struggles, especially Maoist-led people’s wars, are indeed something to learn from today. However, RIM fell apart in the 2000s with, unfortunately but as is too often the case, little public summation of the reasons for its collapse. Struggles within RIM between PPW universalists and advocates of the Avakian “New Synthesis,” Prachanda’s embrace of bourgeois-democracy and betrayal of the revolution in Nepal (the CPN(M) had been an important participant in RIM), longstanding confusion over the setback suffered in the Peruvian people’s war following Gonzalo’s capture, and the legacy of dogmatism are the likely reasons for RIM’s demise.

...Before we move on here, let’s take a moment to appreciate all the confusion and demoralization those who have dedicated their lives to communist revolution have felt when we have lost socialist states, vanguard parties, and the energy of mass revolutionary
upsurge. Let’s practice compassion towards them, even those who wound up in a bad place, and draw on their reservoir of experience, relinking our now largely broken lineage. And let’s get over whatever arrogance we have and learn from the wisdom of the all-too-few communist elders who remain with us in this realm, and maybe have a bit of a Yoruba attitude to those who no longer remain.

(Pause. Three Deep Breaths.)...

Returning to our narrative, the international communist movement, to the extent there is one today, is in a state of tremendous disarray that began with the 1976 counterrevolutionary coup in China and has only become more pronounced since then. There has been some motion out of that disarray over the last four decades, including advances in the people’s wars in Peru, India, the Philippines, and Nepal and the formation and activity of RIM, but also more confusion where and when this forward motion came to an end. On the bright side, the upsurges and rebellions of the last decade have generated a new cohort of radicals looking into revolution, communism, and Maoism. The question now is what comes out of that.

If we are to answer this question in the best way, we will have to embrace a necessary tension between upholding the lessons forged through revolutionary struggle and sacrifice that we have inherited as Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, ruthlessly critiquing our past, drawing from outside of the MLM canon, and forging ahead in new ways. Trying to escape this tension, whether by joining the church of PPW universalism or by recoiling from the need for “problematic” (to borrow a problematic term from postmodernism) entities such as proletarian dictatorships and vanguard parties, will only result in dead dogmatism or seemingly fresh but really rotting radical bourgeois-democracy. Either way, if we don’t embrace the tension, we will not be up to the most difficult but also the most necessary and exhilarating task in human history: communist revolution.
Military Strategy and Revolution in Imperialist Countries

There are profound limits on what can be said about military strategy for revolution in imperialist countries in a public document. Anyone who thinks otherwise is either naive, posturing, or worse. When I write about military strategy for revolution in imperialist countries, it is purely hypothetical.

In his articles criticizing the church of PPW universalism, Jose Maria Sison makes the correct observation that at present there doesn't appear to be any communist forces in imperialist countries with the adequate strength—including roots among the masses—and in favorable conditions to carry out military actions. Thus the principal task now, for anyone who wants to transform this situation, is to integrate with the masses, build organization among them, recruit communists and develop solid (and secure) communist orga-

Jose Maria Sison (“Joma”), who has been in forced exile in the Netherlands since the 1980s, sends his “Sison’s Greetings” to the Communist Party of the Philippines on its 50th Anniversary on December 26, 2018 (also Mao Zedong’s birthday), which he played a leading role in founding. Sison remains an active part of the national democratic movement as a writer and a consultant to the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP).
nization through this work, and develop theory and strategy in relation to this practice.

Joma does not entirely write off the question of revolutionaries and the masses they lead learning how to use hardware now. He gives examples of legally permitted shooting practice clubs and neighborhood defense organizations as instances where this might be appropriate. But Joma warns that connecting the use of hardware, including legally permitted practice with it, with public calls for revolution and revolutionary organization will only result in compromising the security of communist organization and in severe repression of revolutionary organization and the masses before either can be adequately defended. Listen to your elders.

Joma also suggests future hypothetical situations in the imperialist countries where the use of hardware could be appropriate. The Far Right, for example, is arming up and is increasingly responsible for mass shootings and vigilante attacks against non-whites, immigrants, Muslims, and LGBTQ people. Revolutionaries may have to lead people to defend themselves against such attacks. There are two other hypothetical future possibilities I can think of. One, if a geographic region was left devastated by climate change/natural disaster and the bourgeoisie decided to abandon that region, it might be appropriate for revolutionaries to develop active defense of neighborhoods in that region. Two, border regions with conflicts over migration and refugee settlements are increasingly sites of violence by bourgeois state security forces and Far Right vigilantes, and Robert F. Williams-style defense could become appropriate (again, speaking purely hypothetically, not advocating any course of action). But none of these hypothetical possibilities should be confused with the specific strategy of protracted people’s war.

What can communists do now to think about military strategy for revolution in imperialist countries? An immediate (and perfectly legal) task is to study the experience of organizations that used revolutionary violence in the imperialist countries. This means look-
ing at the theories and strategies that guided them, examining their practice, and evaluating how their actions correctly and incorrectly responded to and impacted the historical situations they confronted. J. Smith’s two-volume *The Red Army Faction: A Documentary History*, Ron Jacobs’ *The Way the Wind Blew: A History of the Weather Underground*, and Kersplebedeb’s recent publication *1978: A New Stage in the Class Struggle? Selected Documents from the Spring Campaign of the Red Brigades* as well as *Strike One to Educate One Hundred: The Rise of the Red Brigades, 1960s–1970s* are all good places to start. Robert F Williams’ *Negroes with Guns* provides a strategically rich account of his leadership of Black people in armed self-defense against white-supremacist terror in Monroe, North Carolina, resulting in his exile to Cuba in 1961 and later China, and Timothy Tyson’s *Radio Free Dixie* offers a detailed history of this experience and its impact on the Black liberation movement. While further historical summations are needed of subsequent attempts by sections of the Black liberation movement to use revolutionary violence, George Jackson’s *Blood In My Eye* is a crucial theoretical contribution to the question of military strategy in imperialist countries. It should be
required reading for all communists in imperialist countries, keep-
ing in mind that Jackson sided with Huey Newton in the split with
Eldridge Cleaver.

One thing seems certain (speaking hypothetically): the idea of a
revolutionary civil war suddenly breaking out and a communist van-
guard constituting a revolutionary army of the proletariat capable of
defeating bourgeois rule in an imperialist country without any rev-
olutionary violence and revolutionary military organization in the
run-up to such a civil war is an illusion promoted by revisionist or-
ganizations who are terrified of revolutionary civil war. The answer
to this illusion is not to posture or make premature calls for stupid
actions, but to study and debate (behind closed doors) hypothetical
future possibilities, and to build revolutionary organization so wise-
ly and so well that it has a chance of withstanding the violence and
repression the enemy will inevitably visit upon it.

**SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE FACTORS IN THE REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS**

This last point raises larger strategic (not just military) questions
concerning the role of what communists call the subjective factor
(forces for revolution) and objective conditions (the ruling system
and the conditions it creates) in the revolutionary process. Here, we
risk ceding ground to the church of PPW universalism if we stick to
what has often been conventional wisdom within the international
communist movement (and certainly among revisionists).

One inadequacy I find in Belisario's otherwise excellent article
is that he repeats much of this conventional wisdom as it has come
down to us via outstanding communist leaders. For example, Belis-
ario quotes the following from Sison's *Basic Principles of Marxism-Le-
ninism: A Primer* on the development of a revolutionary situation:

> The objective conditions are primary over the subjective factors. The
> former arise ahead of the latter and serve as the basis for the devel-
opment of the revolutionary forces. The Communist Party cannot be accused of inventing or causing the political and economic crisis of the bourgeois ruling system.

Sison is no advocate of deterministic conceptions of objective conditions, but the above quote from nearly forty years ago, which repeats conventional communist wisdom, does contain the theoretical seeds of deterministic conceptions, exemplified by the (typical among Marxists) temporal and spatial notion of one entity preceding another (objective > subjective, base > superstructure, etc.). Even when this notion of sequence is factually accurate, it can cut against understanding the back and forth dialectical relation between different aspects of a contradiction and feed into a dualistic conception that fails to recognize the interpenetration of subjective and objective factors.

I raise this not to nitpick with three sentences in a book Sison wrote forty years ago, but because the widespread conventional theoretical wisdom on the relation between subjective and objective factors has had dire consequences for communists, especially in the imperialist countries, where relative social stability already reinforces complacency on the part of communists. As the (n)PCI summarizes in their aforementioned *Four Main Issues* document, communist parties in imperialist countries have “held a mechanistic conception of the revolution (as something that happens due to external factors) rather than a dialectical materialist conception (as something that happens due to our subjective action when it conforms to the laws of reality).” They further argue that “one of the most important universal conclusions is that socialist revolution, by its nature, does not consist of a popular uprising that breaks out and where [the] CP, well prepared for the event, take the opportunity to seize power and establish socialism.”

I believe the experience of Maoist people’s wars over the last fifty years reinforces the (n)PCI’s conclusions. In the Philippines, for example, wasn’t President Marcos’ declaration of martial law and
arrogation of power in the hands of the executive in 1972 done in response to the advances of the CPP-led people’s war and revolutionary movement? Wasn’t it a case of “objective conditions” being created by (or, more precisely, a section of the ruling class reacting to) the subjective factor? And didn’t these objective conditions set the stage for increasing opposition from many different class forces to the Marcos regime, which the CPP was then able to seize on to exponentially expand the revolutionary united front? Didn’t this advance of the subjective factor, along with opposition to Marcos from various class forces, then provoke sections of the Filipino and US ruling classes to lose their faith in Marcos and allow for his ouster by popular revolt, thereby creating new opportunities for the CPP? This scenario spells out a dynamic back and forth between the subjective factor and objective conditions in which the latter cannot be said to have played the primary determining role in the revolutionary process.

And couldn’t the same be said for the people’s wars in Peru and Nepal? Didn’t the 1980 launching of PPW in Ayacucho transform the objective conditions in Peru, forcing the military to engage armed revolutionary masses and compelling established Leftist organizations to increasingly react against Sendero? And while the deepening economic crisis of the 1980s was not caused by Sendero—it was principally the result of foreign debt and the IMF and US imperialism enforcing an SAP on Peru—didn’t Sendero’s ingenious strategic shift to the slums of Lima turn that economic crisis into a deepening political crisis? Weren’t President Fujimori’s *autogolpe* (self-coup) and increasing military repression principally provoked by the advance of the subjective factor rather than the economic crisis?

In Nepal, wasn’t it the rapid advance of the PPW that led a section of the ruling class to presumably orchestrate (no one believes the official story) the 1 June 2001 palace massacre of King Birenda and his immediate family which in turn put King Gyanendra, who was willing to unleash the Royal Nepalese Army against the revolution, on the throne? Doesn’t this suggest that it was the subjective
factor that caused splits in the ruling class (one of Lenin's conditions of a revolutionary situation) to the point of a stranger than fiction royal massacre? And weren’t all the subsequent actions of the ruling class and of the major political forces in Nepal, from Gyanendra’s suspension of parliament on 22 May 2002 to the seven-party alliance that led a popular revolt to restore parliamentary democracy and oust monarchal authority, reactions to the advance of the subjective factor? Can't we conclude from these examples that revolutionary crises in the Philippines, Peru, and Nepal did not come about principally by the development of objective conditions separate from the actions of communists, but by the advances of the subjective factor in a dialectical back and forth with the structural contradictions of capitalism-imperialism, the conjunctural crises of bourgeois rule, and the attempts of the ruling classes to resolve the crises?

So what does all this mean for revolutionary strategy in imperialist countries? How can we advance the subjective factor to the point where it becomes an increasingly determining force on the objective situation? Here the church of PPW universalism has no answer.

The (n)PCI, in its *Four Main Issues* document, argues that

the socialist revolution is a PRPW [protracted revolutionary people’s war] led by the CP through multiple campaigns, during which time the CP strengthens and consolidates, gathers and trains the revolutionary forces by organizing the advanced elements of the working class and of the other classes of the popular masses in its own ranks, as well as in mass organizations clumped around the CP (Revolutionary Front), and step by step builds, extends, and strengthens a new direction on the broader popular masses. This new power is capable of opposing the bourgeoisie and tightening its grip on them, until they are supplanted, the entire country is taken over, and socialism established, as a rule through a civil war that the bourgeoisie initiates when their back is finally up against the wall.

Don’t let the (n)PCI’s use of the term PRPW fool you—they are not members of the church of PPW universalism. By PRPW, they
do not mean, in this instance, the initiation of military actions or the creation of base areas, but rather an accumulation of revolutionary forces that increasingly exerts its force against bourgeois power and demonstrates to the broader masses a way out of bourgeois rule. Though I disagree with using the term PRPW to describe a process that is not a war until its final stage, I appreciate the way the (n)PCI is taking lessons about the accumulation of revolutionary forces from Mao’s strategy and creatively applying them to imperialist countries and thinking about the revolutionary process “from civil war back.” I have two questions about this strategy as it is formulated above. One, could it be misinterpreted, especially given the pervasive dogmatism among communists today, as putting forward a unilinear conception of the advance of the subjective factor without taking into account the advances and setbacks that will be part of this rocky process or theorizing more adequately how the subjective factor will be built in relation to “objective” developments, as was the case in the Chinese revolution? (Though, to be clear, I don’t think the (n)PCI operates according to a unilinear view of revolutionary advance—they know the revolutionary process isn’t as smooth as a Puccini melody.) And two, can we really count on the bourgeoisie initiating a civil war against the subjective forces for revolution? Doesn’t the (n)PCI’s concept of “regime of preventive counterrevolution” point out the many tactics the bourgeoisie has developed to avoid such a necessity? Instructive in this regard is Joshua Bloom’s and Waldo Martin’s argument in Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party that the Nixon regime ultimately defeated the challenge posed by the Black Panthers and deflated the Black liberation movement not principally through repression, but by undercutting the revolutionary movement through increased social welfare and affirmative action.

Among the new generation of would-be communists in the US, the predominant inclination has been to focus on “base-building” and various conceptions of “mass work” principally through joining with tenant struggles against landlords and gentrification and by food distribution in proletarian neighborhoods (literal “serve
the people” programs). Hopefully, some valuable experience will be gained through these efforts, especially if those involved seek to deeply integrate with and learn from the masses in the way Mao advocated. But it seems there are many illusions and unanswered questions in most of these efforts, which is perfectly understandable coming from inexperience, but can only be resolved through rigorous critical summation.

These illusions fall into two main categories: idealizing the masses and failing to take seriously the bourgeoisie’s state power. On idealizing the masses, there is often a (rather anarchist) notion that the masses will spontaneously come forward as a revolutionary force without contradiction, without vanguard leadership, without a process of sorting through the many conflicts among the masses, and without communists struggling against the pervasive impact of bourgeois ideology in its myriad forms on the masses. (The mass line without What Is To Be Done? always winds up being a recipe for tailing the masses.)

On the bourgeoisie’s state power, too many would-be communists are quick to talk about creating dual power, autonomous zones, or even building base areas without reckoning with the ways the

“Hands up, don’t shoot” - the killing of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014 sparked the Ferguson Uprising and the beginning of a historical sequence of major uprisings and protests against police brutality across the US.
bourgeoisie can and has deploy(ed) its police and repressive apparatus if even the hint of a revolutionary opposition emerges among the basic masses. (Proletarian masses by and large have little illusions about this, which you will quickly discover if you take the time to really listen to them.) Here, the inexperience of a younger generation, coming mostly from the petty-bourgeoisie, that has never contended with serious political repression leads to naive assumptions. In the worst cases, proclamations of the ability to carve out bases areas or other forms of red political power are made by people who quickly back off anytime (and often before) they encounter police repression. Underlying these illusions about bourgeois state power and naive assumptions about the ability to carve out revolutionary power within the present ruling order is an anarcho-syndicalist conception of revolution as a “bottom-up,” local process in which bourgeois state power is gradually eroded through pulling neighborhoods and workplaces out of bourgeois rule. Comrades only need to study the Zapatista experience to understand where this leads.

The unanswered questions are numerous, but here are a few that can hopefully provoke greater critical thinking. How exactly are programs meeting the needs of the people with revolutionary slogans attached going to bring sections of masses to a class-conscious

With the Ferguson Uprising, a new generation of young people learned firsthand how America’s militarized police forces respond in the face of mass resistance.
understanding of society and into revolutionary organization? How are immediate struggles between tenants and landlords going to bring people to a class-conscious understanding, and how do communists divert such struggles towards revolutionary objectives? How can we, as Sendero did, turn struggles over labor and living conditions into increasingly intense confrontations with bourgeois power that call into question the legitimacy of bourgeois rule and push the masses in a revolutionary direction? Why aren't many would-be communists seeking to lead struggle against police brutality and murder when it has sparked rebellions of Black proletarians in recent years? How, within meeting the needs of the masses or tenant organizing, do we bring revolutionary ideology (in substance, not just in slogans) into the mix and struggle over the many backward ideas that even the most proletarian masses get inundated with? I do not intend any of these questions as disses on the comrades carrying out this practice, but as serious questions of how we are going to make this practice contribute to building the subjective forces for revolution. I am skeptical of well-worked out schemes based on little experience and devoid of any sense of contradiction.

Besides these base-building and (literal) serve the people efforts, there is the question of how communists can intervene in the many political crises we are presented with today in ways that divert the spontaneous resistance that emerges out of them towards revolutionary objectives and turns the most advanced that come forward through these crises into communist cadre. How do we relate to the hundreds of thousands of teenagers mobilizing against government inaction on climate change and school mass shootings? Aren’t these teenagers confronting the profound contradictions of contemporary capitalism-imperialism, even if they do not yet understand it in those terms and so are likely to look for solutions within the framework of bourgeois-democracy? How would we go about organizing a militant resistance to the caging of immigrants on the southern border that puts a wrench in the functioning of the repressive state apparatus? And how would we do so in a way that unites with and draws the best out of the suburban moms outraged by seeing chil-
dren in cages and the religious forces whose Godly convictions have led them to civil disobedience outside ICE facilities and to setting up support networks for undocumented immigrants? What do we have to say about the vituperative right-wing attacks and bigotry being heaped on the illest member of Congress, Ilhan Omar? Or do we have our heads so far up our dogmatic asses that all we know to do is pat ourselves on the back for knowing that electoral politics is a sham?

A strategy that doesn’t go beyond a narrow conception of bottom-up organizing among the proletariat will never be able to bring together the alignment of class forces necessary to bring down US imperialism. The miserable failure of any revolutionary force to step into all the widespread outrage among different classes and sections of the people following the election of Trump and lead a powerful united front resistance against resurgent fascism—a resistance that diverts millions of people away from coming under the wing of the liberal bourgeoisie and exponentially expands the communist pole at the core of such a united front—is indicative of the sorry state of the subjective factor in the US.

In this regard, Sison’s and Belisario’s articles are entirely correct to emphasize the importance of analyzing the objective situation and developing strategy based on this analysis. Too many of today’s would-be communists in the US are incapable of or, worse, not interested in doing so. Belisario’s article references a crucial work in the MLM canon—Lenin’s “Left-Wing” Communism: An Infantile Disorder—that provides excellent strategic guidance on how to navigate the twists and turns of the objective situation and how to lead not just the proletariat, but also other class forces whose interests both coincide and conflict with communist revolution. Some of the tactical advice in this work is wrong and has been seized on by revisionists to justify their reformism. For example, British parliament in the 1920s was not a particularly favorable vehicle for communists to utilize—Uncle Joe’s reminder that “in Russia, autocracy was everything, parliament was nothing” is apropos here. And if you simply
and dogmatically take from reading Lenin’s work that “we should make use of parliamentary struggle and work in reactionary trade unions” in the 2019 US, you’ve missed the point. But in order to get beyond immaturity, arrogance, and self-satisfied politics of proclamation (“I’m an abolitionist”) and become communists capable of contending for power, the lessons Lenin imparts in “Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder” are pivotal.

I do not claim to have it all figured out when it comes to developing the subjective forces for revolution to the point where they start exerting a transformative and even determining impact on the objective situation. My positions in relation to strategy and practice should be relatively clear based on the above discussion, and no one individual can figure this out for the revolutionary movement. But if we, collectively, are to figure this out, it will require not just practical efforts, but also theoretical work that digs at the epistemological roots in reflection theory of strategies based on waiting for the grand revolutionary crisis to come independently of our actions. To critique reflection theory’s insistence on an external objective reality that can be accurately reflected as objective truth by an observer detached from that objective reality, we will have to engage not just the canon of communist theory, but also science, philosophy, and even spiritual knowledge systems to transform the way we think about reality and consciousness.

Deeply relevant in this regard are cutting edge developments in science that are increasingly overturning previous conventional wisdom about matter and materialism. Here I’m just going to mention a few of the kinds of scientific developments that need much further consideration from communists in order to reinvigorate materialist dialectics; I’m holding off for now on definitive conclusions. In psychology and neuroscience, the constructed theory of emotion argues that our brains in fact construct the reality we perceive not mainly through sense input but through prediction and the application of learned concepts. Cutting edge research in epigenetics reveals that...

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6 See Lisa Feldman Barrett, How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain
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organisms have the ability to turn on and off genes based on their environmental and social needs and opportunities. For example, humans developed the ability to digest milk (beyond that of their mothers while they are babies) after they began domesticating milk-producing animals. This and other developments in biology suggest a greater role for consciousness (or at least subconsciousness) in the evolutionary process, thus challenging the Darwinian emphasis on accident. And over the last century, physics has increasingly revealed that reality is not as we perceive it; among other things, reality is simultaneously matter (particles) and waves (energy), and all of reality is connected by fields of energy. In the time you took to read this far into this essay, how many neutrinos have passed through the tip of your thumb? These scientific developments all point to a “reality” not of discrete entities, but of deep interconnectivity, and suggest that energetic forces and various forms of consciousness are principal over matter in determining our reality. The standard communist reflection theory of truth and reality, as enunciated in Lenin’s Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, is thus called into question (and in my mind over matter, is something that needs to be discarded).

Furthermore, these scientific developments, especially in quantum physics, are increasingly in relative correspondence with the spiritual belief systems of what Engels called “primitive communist” societies. What communists (Engels included) have been all too quick to write off as the idealism of spiritual wisdom is starting to look much more materialist (in its recognition of universal energy and the interconnectedness of all reality) than the materialism that emerged from Europe in the Renaissance and Enlightenment, and which Marxism took as its starting point for understanding reality. Postmodernist philosophy is also relevant here in how it rejects rigid categorizations, overarching proclamations, and metanarratives, recognizes the greater role of human agency, and challenges notions of pure objective truth. As much as we need to oppose the paltry political programs of postmodernism, if communists ignore or one-sidedly reject its philosophical insights, this will only rein-

force dogmatism.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully engage these questions of the relation between the objective and subjective factors in the revolutionary process, between truth and reality, and how new developments in science and philosophy and older spiritual wisdoms should inform and transform communist theory. In future issues of kites, I will be publishing a longer essay that gives my answers to these questions (and asks more questions). The poverty of philosophy in the international communist movement over the last four decades stems in part from our failure and refusal to do what Marx and Engels did: engage all the latest developments in science and different schools of philosophy, and incorporate the results of this rich engagement into communist ways of understanding and transforming the world. Instead, most of us have been under the delusion that communist theory can develop entirely out of the MLM canon and, perhaps better but still profoundly limited, directly and exclusively out of our own practice.

This is not to say we should throw out the importance of summing up and theorizing practice or being grounded in the MLM canon. Indeed, we have one particularly helpful place to turn within the MLM canon to make the ruptures needed today: Maoism. Mao’s greatness was in recognizing and giving leadership to the dynamic and determining role of the subjective factor in the revolutionary process as a force that could radically transform the “objective conditions” it confronted, and doing the same in regards to the role of the relations of production, social relations, culture, and ideas in pushing forward the socialist transition to communism. In other words, Mao’s theoretical contributions exemplify the principle that the masses are the makers of history. This was a break with dominant thinking in the Second and Third Internationals that viewed the productive forces and objective conditions as almost always principal in the revolutionary process. Such thinking put the breaks on revolutionary advance, as, for example, when Uncle Joe advised the CPC after WWII not to aim for seizing nationwide power and re-
sume civil war with the Guomindang. It is no coincidence that this rupture, led by Mao, occurred in China, where philosophical traditions (and healing practices like acupuncture) had not been entirely superseded by the mechanical, dualistic, and deterministic modes of thought that reigned in Europe for centuries.

Mao’s own writings, however, do carry forward some of the mechanical and deterministic thinking that had become ingrained in Marxism and was magnified by Stalin. Nevertheless, I believe the spirit and practice of Mao, and to a significant extent his writings, do offer a point of departure for communists to further rupture with dualism and mechanical determinism. Carrying out that intellectual work will have tremendous ramifications on practice, as we need a conception of the revolutionary process that does not mainly rely on just the right objective conditions for revolutionary advance.

**Conclusion**

The confusion, setbacks, betrayals, and defeats of and in the international communist movement from 1976 on have been nothing short of devastating for those of us still or newly committed to revolution, and for the billions of masses whose life conditions cry out for revolution. The valuable history we have to draw from and the advances against difficult odds in recent decades that shine a path forward, on the other hand, continue to offer hope and inspiration. Against this backdrop, it is disturbing to witness in 2019 what Mao described decades ago: “dogmatists can easily assume a Marxist guise to bluff, capture and make servitors of cadres of working-class and peasant origin who cannot easily see through them; they can also bluff and ensnare the naive youth” (this and subsequent quotes from *Rectify the Party’s Style of Work*, 1942).

But Mao didn’t let this problem disturb him. He fought for comrades to make ruptures with dogmatism: “I advise those who have only book-learning but as yet no contact with reality, and also those
with little practical experience, to realize their own shortcomings and become a little more modest.” And he developed a radically innovative path for revolutionary advance in contrast to those “who still regard old quotations from Marxist-Leninist works as a ready-made panacea which, once acquired, can easily cure all maladies.” So let’s learn from Mao’s example and discard the widespread dogmatism, of which the church of PPW universalism is but the most absurd example, that has infected and held back communist revolutionaries for far too long, while staying rooted in the valuable lessons of our past, in the masses, and in the revolutionary struggle.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

What follows is a bibliography that I have drawn from to write this essay, divided according to the sections of this essay. Particularly in regards to the people’s war in Peru, this list includes work by non-communist and anti-communist scholars and journalists whose writing provides crucial information and empirical data that is missing from the (often dogmatic) work of communists.

**INTRODUCTION**


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