

Theorists and Thieves

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Dhruv Jain

Dhruv Jain holds a PhD in Social and Political Thought from York University, and has written widely on politics, philosophy, and social movements.

Gabriel Kuhn, ed., *Turning Money into Rebellion: The Unlikely Story of Denmark's Revolutionary Bank Robbers* (Montreal and Oakland: Kersplebedeb and PM, 2014), 240 pages, \$19.95, paperback.

In November 1969, *Le Monde*, France's leading newspaper, published an exchange between Arghiri Emmanuel and Charles Bettelheim, in which the two Marxian economists debated the possibility of international solidarity between the working classes of the imperialist countries and those of the semi- or neo-colonies. Emmanuel held deep reservations about such alliances, while Bettelheim maintained that they were both feasible and necessary. In the decades since, Bettelheim's position has become the majority opinion within many progressive and revolutionary movements. Recent years, however, have seen a renewed interest in Emmanuel's arguments. The collection *Turning Money into Rebellion* tells the dramatic and little-known story of a particularly committed contingent of Western European revolutionaries deeply influenced by Emmanuel's ideas.¹

As the debate was playing out in the pages of *Le Monde*, a small group of Danish Maoists took the unusual step of breaking relations with the Communist Party of China over these very questions. In 1970, they formed an underground organization of highly disciplined cadres who would implement what they saw as the political implications of Emmanuel's position: to forego the fight for socialism in the immediate future in Denmark, and turn instead toward the third world. From 1972 on, they devoted their efforts to political solidarity work through a legal charity that they founded, Clothes to Africa, and a criminal cell—unknown to most members of either the group or the charity—that carried out bank robberies to help fund progressive forces fighting for revolution in Palestine, South Africa, and elsewhere.

Over the next twenty years, the robbers, calling themselves the Manifest–Communist Working Group (M-KA), channeled millions of dollars to such movements around the world. They never tried to justify any given robbery in political terms, through statements or communiqués, preferring that police believe it was the work of ordinary thieves. This extreme expression of solidarity derived from the group's analysis of Danish society, and their belief that the Danish working class as a whole was too complacent to take any interest in international solidarity with the revolutionary proletariat in the neo- and semi-colonies, because they had been “bribed” by imperialist super-profits. Following their arrest in 1989, they became known as the Blekinge Street Gang, after the site of their hideout in Copenhagen.

Today it might seem that only specialist scholars and activists would take any interest in an organization like the M-KA, never mind read an anthology of essays, interviews, and documents detailing their ideology and activities. After all, such ultraleft groupuscules abounded in Europe and North America in the 1970s, and despite the sensational headlines they generated, their real influence was, in the main, negligible. The M-KA never had more than fifteen members; its predecessor, the Communist Working Circle (KAK), had twenty-five. What makes them historically noteworthy, and *Turning Money into Rebellion* a riveting read, is their unusual fusion of academic theories of unequal exchange with a revolutionary praxis of armed expropriations, used to fund revolutionary movements across the neo- and semi-colonies, especially the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

Delusions of Internationalism

Emmanuel argued that the objective situation in the imperialist countries precluded the kind of internationalism that should undergird communist practice. In the nations of Western Europe and North America, socialism seemed so far

in the future that the working class could hardly see it.² What caused this apparently unbridgeable gap? The history of trade union struggles had “led not only to an increase in the extent to which *external* profits were shared between the classes, but to the redistribution, as between different strata of the working class, of the share obtained by that class as a whole,” Emmanuel wrote, which resulted in the internationalization of the differentiation between classes that had previously existed only at the national level.³ Emmanuel explained that from “the moment when the sharing out of the product of international exploitation assumes an important, if not preponderant, place in what is at stake in the class struggle within the nation, this struggle ceases to be a genuine class struggle in the Marxist sense of the term, and becomes a settlement of accounts between partners around a jointly-owned cake.”⁴

Bettelheim vigorously disagreed. He argued that both theory “and concrete analysis show” that differences in living standards and class consciousness between the first and third world working classes were “rooted in the unequal development of capitalist production in different countries, and the effects of this inequality of development on the intensity and productivity of labor.”⁵ It was differences in the organic composition of capital that allowed workers in imperialist countries to produce more value in a given period of labor-time, which in turn accounted for international wage differentials. The rate of exploitation within imperialist countries, according to Bettelheim, was actually greater than in the colonized countries. This was not to suggest that their level of consumption was lower than the that of the third world; rather “that wages there are *relatively* lower, in comparison with productivity expressed in money terms.”⁶ At the heart of Emmanuel’s thesis of “unequal exchange,” Bettelheim argued, was “the unequal development of the productive forces under conditions of world domination by capitalist production relations that is the basic fact explaining the international economic inequality of wages.”⁷ This held important implications for international solidarity: it was “not possible” to speak of workers in the imperialist countries being part of the exploitation of workers in the colonized countries, which would have rendered solidarity impossible. Instead, there existed “objective bonds of solidarity between them, since they are all subjected, directly or indirectly, to capitalist exploitation, or are threatened by it.”⁸

From Appel to Arghiri

Meanwhile, in Denmark, a Marxist economist named Gottfred Appel had, quite independently of Emmanuel, developed in a series of articles in 1966–67 a similar “parasite state theory,” in response to the KAK’s failure to mobilize factory workers. Appel agreed that capitalism in the imperialist countries had been built on the exploitation of the domestic working class, but argued that “in the imperialist countries the whole of this development has mainly taken place on the basis of a vigorous exploitation, *not* of the workers of the imperialist countries themselves, but of the working people of the colonial and dependent countries” (185). Appel did not dispute that exploitation remained an aspect of the relationship between the bourgeoisie and first world workers, but argued that it was not the defining feature: “Today the factor of exploitation is present in Danish capitalist society, but it does not take up the dominant position. Today the factor of bribery is dominating the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This factor of bribery has had its imprint on the attitude of the working class *as a whole*” (185). In other words, the working class in the imperialist countries, despite their exploitation, had been bribed into complacency, in effect recognizing that gains could be won precisely through the further exploitation of the colonized countries, inasmuch as those gains were paid for by super-profits earned through imperialist exploitation.

While they embraced key tenets of his theory, Appel and the KAK nevertheless differed from Emmanuel in their use of moralistic terms like “parasite” and “bribe,” and in their belief that revolution remained possible in a country like Denmark, albeit under very different conditions. If third world nations could successfully delink economically and politically from imperialism and the capitalist world system, they would “inevitably” upend conditions in the imperialist countries themselves, which in turn would allow the working classes in those countries to regain their revolutionary potential (5). Appel’s analysis was not a form of political defeatism or quietism; rather, it was concerned with carrying out the political tasks necessary to create the conditions for revolutionary struggle in the imperialist countries.

By 1978, the KAK split into three factions, divided by Appel’s domineering leadership and a poorly handled “anti-

gender discrimination campaign” inside the organization. The M-KA faction would continue the efforts initiated by the KAK, including intellectual work, attempts at mass mobilization, and illicit activities. The M-KA felt the need to revise and amend the classical Marxist analysis of imperialism, as put forward by Lenin and uncritically adopted by Appel and the KAK:

For years we studied capital export to the Third World and profit rates. We studied the development of transnational corporations and the extraction of raw materials. Eventually, we had to conclude that Lenin’s analysis of imperialism was no longer appropriate. Foreign direct investments and profits could no longer explain the rising gap between the rich countries and the poor. However, KAK was not able to draw the necessary conclusions and revise its theory. (59)

Having broken with Appel and the KAK, the M-KA turned to Samir Amin’s theories of the relation between the global center and periphery, and to Immanuel Wallerstein’s studies of the historical development of capitalism. But it was Emmanuel’s theory of unequal exchange that became central to their analysis. Rather “than capital export and superprofits,” the hallmarks of Appel’s parasitic-class theory, “unequal exchange was the reason for the world being divided into rich and poor countries. Unequal exchange happens when goods are produced in Third World countries where wages are low and sold in rich countries where wages are high” (59). For the M-KA, the strategic import of this analysis was to continue to take part in the class struggle, but at an international level.

While the M-KA remained close to Appel’s “parasite state theory”—their differences were primarily organizational, not ideological—their encounter with Emmanuel’s work had a distinct and lasting influence. The KAK had first contacted Emmanuel in 1974, but after the formation of the M-KA, the connection became stronger, and over the years, members of the group would meet with him in Paris to discuss theoretical concerns. In 1983, Emmanuel even wrote the foreword to the M-KA’s most significant publication, *Imperialism Today: Unequal Exchange and the Prospects of Socialism*. He maintained contact after the members’ imprisonment, up until his death in 2001. Emmanuel admired the clarity of the M-KA’s vision, writing that the group’s call to “put oneself at the service of the classes which have had an interest in overthrowing imperialism, ‘... no matter where they are geographically,’” was “clearer and more distinct than anything I have been able to mumble in here and there to my various questioners” (60–61).

Throughout the 1970s, the KAK kept a low profile in Denmark, launching its Clothes for Africa project in 1972. Chapters sprang up throughout Denmark, and sent clothes, tents, medicine, and other supplies to camps administered by revolutionary movements. They also launched their “illegal practice,” using “robbery and fraud...to supplement the material support for Third World liberation movements provided by...legal fundraising efforts” (9). Over the years, the group sent more than a hundred tons of clothes to flea markets to raise money for groups including the MPLA in Angola, ZANU in Rhodesia, and FRELIMO in Mozambique. The KAK’s illegal activities included a 1972 burglary of a Danish Army weapons depot; the seizure of 500,000 Danish crowns in 1975 from a cash-in-transit truck; and the theft of 1.5 million crowns in 1976 through a sophisticated postal scam. The group stole millions more in the 1980s from banks, trucks, post offices, and shopping centers. In 1985, they hatched and ultimately abandoned plans to kidnap an heir to one of Sweden’s richest families. A 1987 bank robbery that resulted in the death of a police officer marked the beginning of the end, as the Copenhagen police and Danish security services began an unprecedented collaboration to apprehend the culprits. By 1989, all the group’s members had been arrested, and in 1991 they were convicted in a widely publicized trial.

While the KAK and M-KA had few contacts with the broader Danish left, they did not work in political isolation. Given the centrality of the success of third world revolutionary movements to their ultimate goal of revolution in Denmark, in 1970 Appel and the KAK traveled to Jordan to meet with representatives of the PFLP. In years that followed, the KAK and M-KA would work especially closely with the PFLP, as well as with FRELIMO, ZANU, MPLA, the IRA, and the Liberation Support Movement in Canada. The M-KA remained independent, however: the group had no

connections to other ultraleft sects in Europe, such as the Red Brigades in Italy or the Red Army Faction in Germany. Nor was it a mere PFLP cell, as it was often portrayed in the Danish media. Any relationship the KAK and M-KA established with outside groups was formed on the basis of their socialist perspective, broad popular support, and strategic significance.

Whatever the errors and excesses of their tactical approach, from 1972 to 1989, the KAK and its successor, the M-KA, developed a unique synthesis of orthodox Marxism-Leninism, contemporary theories of imperialism and unequal exchange, and legal and illegal practice that distinguishes it from any other group then active in Europe and North America. It is this intersection of theory and action that transforms *Turning Money into Rebellion* from a historical study of an obscure Danish cadre organization into a book that anyone interested in issues of international solidarity ought to read. Indeed, the questions that Emmanuel and Bettelheim debated, and which the KAK and M-KA sought to answer—of unequal relations between nations, of the revolutionary potential of working classes in imperialist countries, of the means by which international solidarity can be achieved—remain deeply unresolved.

Notes

1. ↪ In particular, this debate has surrounded the publication of Zak Cope's *Divided World, Divided Class* (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2012). See Timothy Kerswell, "[Labor Divided](#)," *Monthly Review* 65, no. 7 (December 2013); Matthijs Krul, "Book Review: Zak Cope, 'Divided World, Divided Class,'" Notes & Commentaries blog, January 3, 2013, <http://mccaine.org>; Charlie Post, "Workers in the Global North: A Labour Aristocracy?" *New Socialist*, December 23, 2012, <http://newsocialist.org>; and Bromma, *The Worker Elite* (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2014).
2. ↪ Arghiri Emmanuel, "[The Delusions of Internationalism](#)," *Monthly Review* 22, no. 2 (June 1970): 14–15.
3. ↪ Emmanuel, "Delusions of Internationalism," 16.
4. ↪ Emmanuel, "Delusions of Internationalism," 18.
5. ↪ Charles Bettelheim, "[Economic Inequalities between Nations and International Solidarity](#)," *Monthly Review* 22, no. 2 (June 1970): 20–21.
6. ↪ Bettelheim, "Economic Inequalities between Nations," 21–22.
7. ↪ Bettelheim, "Economic Inequalities between Nations," 22.
8. ↪ Bettelheim, "Economic Inequalities between Nations," 23.