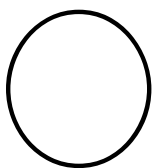


TEMPEST

How should socialists think about political tradition?

by **David Camfield**

Tempest's David Camfield reviews the trove of theoretical resources available to us as we think about what traditions should inform our work.



One way we can think about tradition is who inspires us. Traditions of struggle against exploitation and oppression go back thousands of years. Think of peasant revolts around the world; the resistance of Indigenous people on Turtle Island (a term for North America mainly used by some Indigenous nations) that's been going on since Europeans arrived; the resistance of enslaved Africans and their

descendants; anti-slavery fighters like John Brown; the Industrial Workers of the World early in the twentieth century (a high point in the history of the working-class movement in the U.S.); and so many more down to the present. Which of these inspires us most or resonates most strongly with us depends on our experiences, our ideas about who we are, and our politics. When, in [I Hope We Choose Love](https://arsenalpulp.com/Books/I/I-Hope-We-Choose-Love) (<https://arsenalpulp.com/Books/I/I-Hope-We-Choose-Love>), Kai Cheng Thom urges people on the Left to take the idea of honour seriously, she writes “Honour means acting in a way that your ancestors would be proud of, even if it requires personal sacrifices to do so.” Who we consider to be our ancestors can include people from these various traditions.

Another way of thinking about tradition is more specific: Where do we get our *politics* from? Where do we get our ideas about our *goals*, our *strategy*, and our *tactics*? That’s what this article is about.

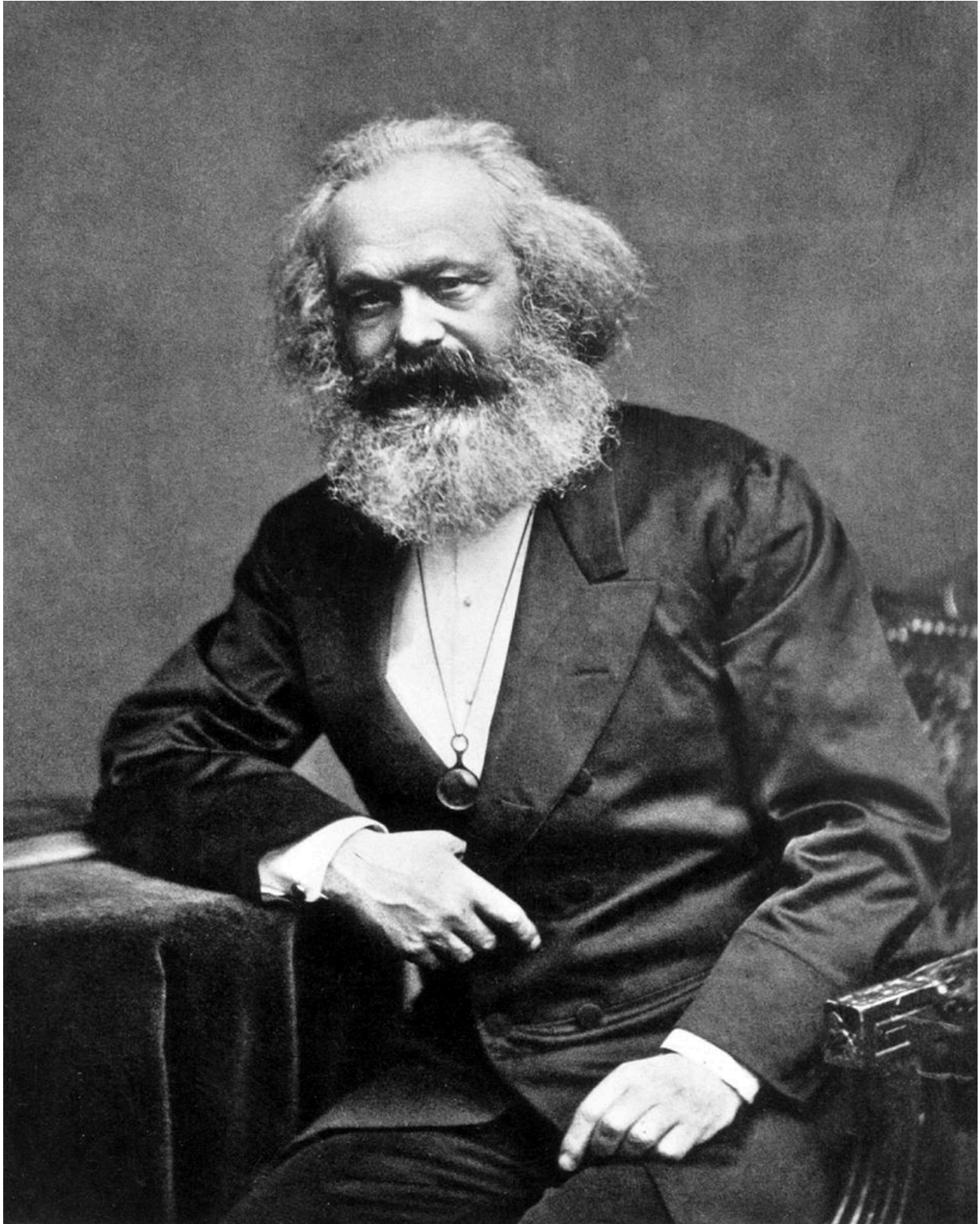
However, before tackling that question I want to make two initial points. First, for revolutionary victory, socialists need a developed and coherent strategy for how this can be achieved: in other words, a program. Second, it’s impossible for socialists to develop a genuine program unless we can synthesize the experiences of many socialist workplace and community organizers from across the range of sectors of the working class and oppressed people in our society and fuse them with the lessons of history distilled as theory. No socialist organization on Turtle Island is large and

rooted enough to be able to make such a synthesis. For that reason, none of the organizations as they exist today can develop anything worth calling a program. Tempest doesn't have a program; all we have is some ideas about goals, strategy, and tactics. This is true of all far-left groups in this part of the world, no matter what some of them claim.

We need ideas about goals, strategy, and tactics to help us answer the political questions we face. Our answers are provisional because they can change as the world changes and as we learn—they're not set in stone. We should have an attitude of revolutionary humility about our ideas. There *are* some things we can and should be certain about, since the lessons of some past victories, defeats, and other experiences are so clear. One of these is that to start a transition to a classless and stateless society of freedom, what's needed are social revolutions made by the working class that establish its democratic rule. But the history of the socialist left tells us that we're no doubt wrong about some things about which we feel certain today. Today, our outlook about what to do next in our society is limited by how we're mainly drawing on the experiences of a very small number of people in a time when social struggle is for the most part at a low level. (There are important exceptions, above all at present the Palestine solidarity movement.)

What questions do we face? Let's start with three big ones. First, what kind of society are we ultimately aiming for? In other words, what's our political horizon? Second, what would it take to break with capitalism and start a transition to that kind of society? And third, what kind of broad organizations of workers and oppressed people and what kind of socialist political organizations would be needed to make that happen?

Aren't those questions about far-off, long-term matters? Yes, *but they're still important*. Our answers serve as a compass that points toward where we want the working class to ultimately arrive, though we certainly don't claim to have a path mapped out. Our ideas about what it would take to break with capitalism and start a transition based on democratic planning towards socialism/communism have direct implications for the here and now (Marx used the terms socialism and communism interchangeably, and never thought of socialism as a stage before communism. That idea comes mainly from Stalinism. On this, see Peter Hudis, **[Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism](https://files.libcom.org/files/Peter%20Hudis%20-%20Marx%E2%80%99s%20Concept%20of%20the%20Alternative%20to%20Capitalism.pdf)** (<https://files.libcom.org/files/Peter%20Hudis%20-%20Marx%E2%80%99s%20Concept%20of%20the%20Alternative%20to%20Capitalism.pdf>).



Karl Marx. Image source: [Picryl \(https://garystockbridge617.getarchive.net/amp/media/karl-marx-12afda\)](https://garystockbridge617.getarchive.net/amp/media/karl-marx-12afda).

That's because our ideas about these long-term issues should inform how we answer more immediate questions. For example, is it important to build democratic member-run membership organizations of the Palestine solidarity movement? (Yes!) To change unions, should socialists prioritize getting elected into executive positions and hired into staff jobs? (**No** (<https://www.tempestmag.org/2023/07/unions-and-the-rank-and-file-strategy/>!)) Is there a wing of the capitalist class we should seek to include in alliances against the far right? (**No** (<https://jacobin.com/2017/10/popular-front-communist-party-democrats>)!))

So where should we go for our political ideas? In the twentieth century, three major political traditions that considered themselves anti-capitalist dominated the Left. They all still have influence today, though less than they used to. One is parliamentary socialism. This is the dominant politics of the **Democratic Socialists of America** (<https://www.tempestmag.org/2023/09/the-dsa-moment-is-over/>). The second is **Marxism-Leninism** (https://www.prairiered.ca/uploads/6/9/3/7/69371873/actually_existing_socialism_a_critique_of_stalinism_new_socialist.pdf).

This is the state ideology that took shape in the USSR in the 1920s and was spread globally through the Communist movement and by the rulers of China and other states modelled on the USSR. The last tradition is Third World nationalist socialism, of which the **United Socialist Party of Venezuela** (https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/state-bureaucracy-rentier-capital-maduro-venezuela-crisis/) founded under the leadership of Hugo Chavez is one example. All three of these traditions treat state ownership of the economy as the basis of socialism. All three act as if socialism could be achieved by a minority (a party or armed forces) acting on *behalf* of the masses, as a **substitute** (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/works/1960/xx/trosub.htm>) for them (substitutionism), either with or without some kind of revolution. (To be clear, mass socialist political organizations are necessary for revolution, as are new institutions of radically democratic popular power in workplaces and communities. The role of socialist political organizations is to provide direction in the struggle for the working class as a whole to take control of society through such new institutions.) These are three versions of **socialism from above** (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/>).

Social revolution and the transition to socialism would involve the self-emancipation of the working class. No party or other minority acting on behalf of the class can substitute for the rule of the working class itself. One label for this kind of politics is socialism from below.

Fortunately, there are other traditions. The one we should *start from*—which doesn't mean it's got all the answers to today's political questions—is a kind of revolutionary socialism with several core ideas that distinguish it. First, our goal is a classless and stateless society of freedom in which people democratically plan production to meet their needs and repair humanity's relationship with the rest of nature. Second, to start a transition towards that kind of society would take a revolutionary rupture that **[breaks the existing state](https://www.tempestmag.org/2023/01/revolution-means-smashing-the-state/)** (**<https://www.tempestmag.org/2023/01/revolution-means-smashing-the-state/>**) and establishes working-class rule in the form of new radically democratic institutions of popular power. Third, such a

transition would have to be a liberatory process carried out by ordinary people themselves. In other words, social revolution and the transition to socialism would involve the self-emancipation of the working class. No party or other minority acting on behalf of the class can substitute for the rule of the working class itself. One label for this kind of politics is socialism from below, but what matters is the political content, not the term.

It's because of these core ideas that we can [say](#).

(<https://www.marxists.org/archive/brinton/1967/04/as-we-see-it.htm>),

Meaningful action, for revolutionaries, is whatever increases the confidence, the autonomy, the initiative, the participation, the solidarity, the equalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of the masses and whatever assists in their demystification. Sterile and harmful action is whatever reinforces the passivity of the masses, their apathy, their cynicism, their differentiation through hierarchy, their alienation, their reliance on others to do things for them and the degree to which they can therefore be manipulated by others — even by those allegedly acting on their behalf.

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In the most generous interpretation, these were the politics of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels and, to name some important figures and forces from over a century ago, [Rosa Luxemburg](#) (<https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/are-any-of-rosa-luxemburgs-ideas-relevant-for-us-today>), the Bolsheviks, and others

on the left wing of the socialist movement before the Russian Revolution, like Eugene Debs in the U.S. After the Russian Revolution, most supporters of these politics united in the Communist International. Those who remained committed to these politics sooner or later came to recognize that, under Joseph Stalin and his successors, the USSR and other so-called “socialist” societies weren’t “building socialism” and their rulers needed to be overthrown. These included [Leon Trotsky](#) (<https://www.tempestmag.org/2020/08/80-years-on/>) and socialists for whom his ideas were important. Some of them then tried to go beyond some of the ideas of Trotsky and Trotskyism, like the idea that small socialist groups should try to organize themselves by applying a model developed for sizeable revolutionary parties—the [“micro-party” approach](#) (<https://socialistworker.org/2019/03/21/a-letter-from-canadian-comrades>) that Tempest rightly rejects.



Rosa Luxemburg. Source: [Picryl \(https://jenikirbyhistory.getarchive.net/media/rosa-luxemburg-34-43595e\)](https://jenikirbyhistory.getarchive.net/media/rosa-luxemburg-34-43595e).

There were also other anti-Stalinist Marxists, including a group in Russia called the Democratic Centralists and, in Spain, the Workers Party of Marxist Unification (Spanish initials: POUM). A minority of anarchists are part of this tradition too. Some of the people and groups mentioned were more consistent than others in applying a politics of working-class self-emancipation and rejecting substitutionism. And some strands of the tradition have been more insightful than others.

Supporters of these politics were nearly wiped out by fascism, Stalinism, and Cold War anti-communism between the 1930s and 1950s. The survivors were marginalized, which damaged their ability to act and think politically. In the 1960s and 1970s new forces took up these politics or were influenced by them—[Walter Rodney](https://www.tempestmag.org/2022/07/a-rebels-guide-to-walter-rodney-2/) (<https://www.tempestmag.org/2022/07/a-rebels-guide-to-walter-rodney-2/>), for instance. Unfortunately, in the decades that followed, these forces were then set back—as was the entire radical Left—by major defeats that capitalists and their states inflicted on unions, social movements, and the exploited and oppressed around the world.



Guyanese socialist Walter Rodney. Photo credit: National African–American Reparations **Commission**. (<https://reparationscomm.org/reparations-news/walter-rodney-a-case-for-reparative-justice/>)

We should think about this tradition as a trove of political resources, not an identity. (Capitalism today pushes us to obsess about identity in narrow and static ways.) It's an essential starting point. But its existing resources are far from perfect, and they aren't sufficient for the politics we need today. We also shouldn't be uncritical of this tradition: Its supporters' answers to political questions have sometimes been wrong. Sometimes its supporters' political practice left a lot to be desired—sectarianism has long been a problem for *many* political traditions. And sometimes they've been wrong about significant issues of analysis even when their politics were generally solid. A good example of this is Lenin's mistaken idea that reformism—politics

that seek only reforms within the existing social order² —is influential above all because of a “[labor aristocracy](https://web.archive.org/web/20190225112753/http://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5ed0/777f248114127997056169e8c87364ec9b23.pdf) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190225112753/http://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5ed0/777f248114127997056169e8c87364ec9b23.pdf>),” a minority of workers supposedly bribed by imperialist super-profits.

What’s more, the best answers of the past don’t necessarily answer the questions that face us today. For example, the [theory of permanent \(uninterrupted\) revolution](https://isj.org.uk/from-deflected-permanent-revolution-to-the-law-of-uneven-and-combined-development/) (<https://isj.org.uk/from-deflected-permanent-revolution-to-the-law-of-uneven-and-combined-development/>) developed by Trotsky in the early 20th century was an important guide to socialist revolution in countries where capitalism wasn’t yet dominant. But today every society in the world is capitalist, and the theory has been superseded.

What’s still important is rejecting the idea of dividing the struggle for socialism into separate stages: first, a national liberation (or “democratic”) stage where capitalism isn’t to be challenged, followed, at some far-off day, a socialist stage. This idea has done enormous damage to the Left globally. It leads to socialists supporting governments that, regardless of what they say they’re doing, are administering capitalism through capitalist states. Examples include the African National Congress government in South Africa (which includes members of the South African Communist Party) and the Movement Towards Socialism government in Bolivia.



Vietnamese Trotskyist Tà Thu Thâu. Source: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%E1%BA%A1_Thu_Th%C3%A2u)
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%E1%BA%A1_Thu_Th%C3%A2u).

There are no useful answers to be found in this tradition to some questions that face us today, after the passing of the [classical workers' movement](https://salvage.zone/what-happened-to-the-workers-movement/) (<https://salvage.zone/what-happened-to-the-workers-movement/>). Above all, we won't find answers about how to contribute to building unity, solidarity, democratic self-organization, and support for radical politics in a deeply divided and atomized working class in conditions shaped by contemporary capitalism, including the [social industry](https://www.haymarketbooks.org/blogs/232-the-twittering-machine-richard-seymour-and-wendy-liu-in-conversation) (<https://www.haymarketbooks.org/blogs/232-the-twittering-machine-richard-seymour-and-wendy-liu-in-conversation>) and the deepening ecological crisis. But there are ideas that can help us as we work on this in cooperation with people who are influenced by various political traditions. One of these is the strategic concept of the

united front (<https://socialistworker.org/2017/03/02/what-do-we-mean-by-a-united-front>). This theory was developed as a guide to action for revolutionary socialist parties that needed to relate to workers who supported larger and more influential reformist parties, and to the leaders of those parties. It can't simply be applied by much smaller socialist groups in very different circumstances. Still, it's valuable.

There are also valuable ideas from other traditions that supporters of this kind of socialism should draw on to help us develop our politics. For example, to take into account how racism confers advantages on white workers, we should build on the insights of W.E.B. DuBois and those socialists who most seriously grappled with **those insights** (<https://spectrejournal.com/the-limits-of-white-skin-privilege/>) in the 1960s and 1970s, like the **Sojourner Truth Organization** (<http://www.sojournertruth.net/uafws.html>). And there are valuable ideas to learn from today's abolitionist, anti-racist feminism, and trans liberation politics.

Finally, we should aspire to *develop* this kind of revolutionary socialism in ways that confront the challenges of our times. Our task isn't to guard a faith, a static tradition. We need to think for ourselves, collectively, using anti-racist, queer, feminist, and Marxist analyses of the society we're trying to change. Yet, let's

remember that real advances for socialist ideas about strategy and tactics can only come from participating in and learning from upsurges of mass struggle. It's those struggles that make real advances in political ideas possible.

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(<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Socialism.JPG>); modified by Tempest.

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