

EDITORIAL

Revisiting the Old Dilemmas

Marcel van der Linden

International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Email: mvl@iisg.nl

Labor's rise and decline

Traditional labor and socialist movements are in trouble almost everywhere. The three main forms of organized labor movements all demonstrate this. In the first place, the consumer cooperatives. They date back to the eighteenth century, and they experienced their heyday during the interwar years and the first period thereafter. The challenges that followed (the arrival of supermarkets and chain stores, and shifts in consumer behavior) necessitated drastic changes that undermined the internal democracy of most enterprises. A recent analysis concludes

where co-operatives merged to gain standardization and economies of scale, the larger size of the co-operatives distanced members from the general management, ... thereby weakening their democratic appeal. By contrast movements that did maintain a strongly decentralized co-operative movement with local autonomy ... were unable to undertake the capitalization necessary to meet the competition from the large non-co-operative retail chains.¹

In Britain, according to many the motherland of modern consumer cooperatives, for example, the number of organizations has fallen in a century from over 1,400 to 18.² Similar trends can be seen in many other countries.

Second, the power of independent trade unions has declined in most countries, as is shown by the downturn of union density (union members as percentage of the total labor force). Trade unions organize only a small percentage of their target group worldwide, and the majority of them live in the relatively wealthy North Atlantic region. By far the most important global umbrella organization is the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), founded in 2006 as a merger of two older organizations, the secular reform-oriented International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the Christian World Confederation of Labor. In 2014, the ITUC estimated that about 200 million workers worldwide belong to trade unions (excluding those of China's), and that 176 million of these are organized in the ITUC. The ITUC also estimated that the total global workforce in 2014 was roughly 2.9 billion (of whom 1.2 billion worked in the informal economy). Therefore, global union density then amounted to no more

U.S. Union Density, 1880–2018

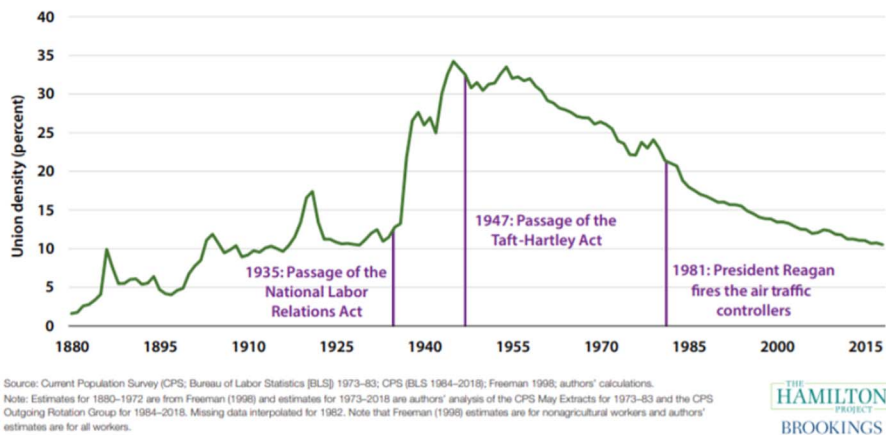


Figure 1. Union density in the United States, 1880–2018.

Source: Ryan Nunn, Jimmy O'Donnell, and Jay Shambaugh, "The Shift in Private Sector Union Participation: Explanation and Effects," The Hamilton Project Paper, Brookings, August 2019, p. 3: <UnionsEA_Web_8.19.pdf (hamiltonproject.org)>.

than 7% (200 million as a percentage of 2.9 billion) at that time. It may by now be down to a mere 6 percent. In the OECD countries union density dropped between 2000 and 2019 from 20.9 to 15.8 percent.³ In many countries, the long-term development of the trade union movement shows a "mountainous" pattern, as for example in the case of the United States (Figure 1).

The third important element of labor movements is, of course, political organizations. Anarchism among workers and small farmers thrived between roughly 1870 and 1940, reaching its heyday globally in the decades preceding the First World War. The significant life span of revolutionary syndicalism, viewed globally, was between 1900 and 1940. Social Democratic and Labor parties are not doing very well either; in terms of electoral popularity the large majority peaked between 1920 and 1989 (Table 1).⁴

Moreover, quite a few communist parties in noncommunist countries have been dissolved after electoral decline, splits, or financial bankruptcy. Most others are having a hard time. Here too, we often see a "mountain-like" pattern, as the electoral development of the French Communist Party illustrates (Figure 2).⁵

Another factor playing a role in all this is the ultimate failure of the "real socialist" attempts in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China, and Southeast Asia. The Soviet Empire collapsed, and China and Vietnam have taken the path to capitalism.

All in all, the foregoing seems to suggest three things: on a world scale, consumer cooperatives have either not been doing well, or they have morphed into retail industries without members democratically controlling the business. Trade unions are not only a weak force, but their power is also decreasing; and in many countries trade unions have lost their allies, the workers' parties, either because these parties have disappeared or because they have adopted a variant of neoliberalism. As a consequence, International Non-Governmental Organization (INGOs)

Table 1. Average parliamentary electoral results of Social Democratic and Labor Parties, 1920–2019

	1920–29	1930–39	1940–49	1950–59	1960–69	1970–79	1980–89	1990–99	2000–09	2010–19
Australia	45.2	32.4	46.5	46.3	45.1	45.4	47.0	40.8	39.2	34.9
Austria	39.3	41.1	41.7	43.3	50.0	45.4	47.6 ^b	37.3	33.7	25.0
Belgium	36.7	33.1	30.7	35.9	31.0	26.6	28.0	23.2	24.0	13.9
Brazil	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12.1	16.8	15.4
Canada	-	-	-	-	15.4	17.1	19.7	9.0	15.0	22.1
Denmark	34.5	43.9	39.1	40.2	39.1	33.6	30.9	36.0	26.8	25.7
France	19.1	20.2	20.9	15.1	15.9	21.0	35.3	34.6	38.8	18.4
Germany	29.3	21.2	29.2	30.3 ^d	39.4 ^d	44.2 ^d	39.4 ^d	36.9	31.9	23.1
Italy	24.7 ^b	-	[20.7]	13.5	13.8	9.7	12.9	7.9 ^b	33.1 ^{ac}	22.1 ^c
Netherlands	22.0	21.7	27.0	30.7	25.8	28.6	31.0	26.5	21.2	16.7
Norway	25.5	38.0	43.4	47.5	45.5	38.8	27.4	36.0	30.8	29.1
Portugal	-	-	-	-	-	35.2	27.6	39.0	39.8	32.7
Spain	-	23.1	-	-	-	30.4	44.1	38.2	40.2	25.4
Sweden	36.0	43.8	48.8	45.6	48.4	43.7	44.5	39.8	37.5	30.0
Switzerland	25.5	27.5	27.4	26.5	25.1	24.1	20.7	20.9	21.4	18.1
United Kingdom	37.7	34.4	49.7 ^a	46.3	46.1	39.1	29.2	38.7	38.0	32.9

^aOnly one election.^bParty disbanded in November 1994.^cResult of the “new” Democratic Party, founded in 2007.^dNumbers between 1950 and 1990 refer to West Germany.

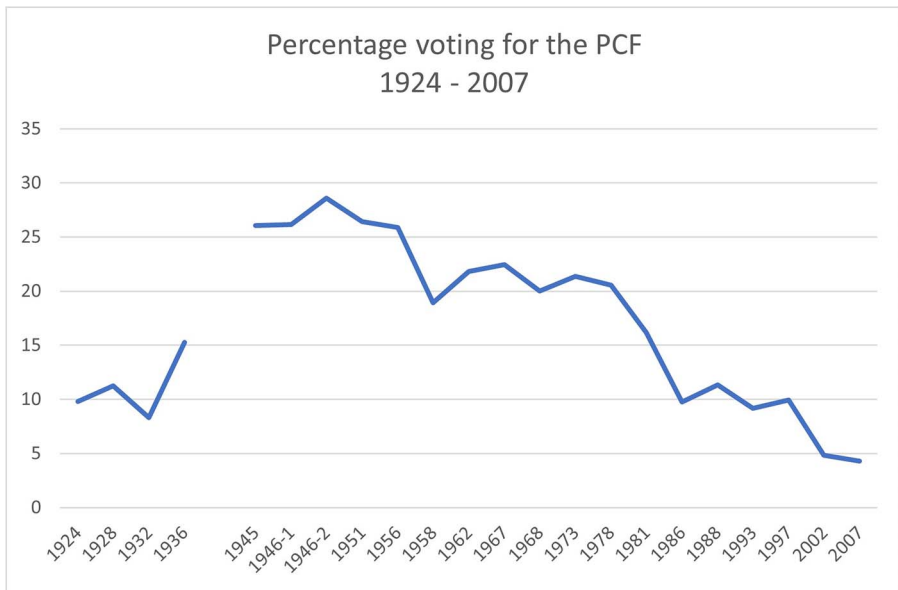


Figure 2. Electoral results of the French Communist Party, 1924–2007.

and Non-governmental Organization (NGOs) have partly shouldered activities that traditionally would have been the responsibility of the international trade union movement, such as the struggle to regulate and abolish child labor. The downturn of labor movements seems to be almost all-embracing.

This whole development is paradoxical.⁶ While many labor movements are experiencing a crisis, the world working class continues to grow. According to the International Labour Organization, the percentage of pure wage dependents (“employees”) of the global labor force rose between 1991 and 2022 from 44 to 53 percent. Ever greater numbers of workers worldwide maintain direct economic contacts with one another, even though many are probably unaware of this. And the proportion of international migrants in the world population increased from 2.8% to 3.5% between 2000 and 2020. The absolute and relative growth of the global working class and its increasing interconnectedness apparently did not (yet) result in increased organizational strength and power.

A long chain of strategic choices

One could suspect, that this generalized crisis marks the end of a long cycle, which roughly includes the period from the 1820s–1840s to the present. Building on a long egalitarian tradition, it began with “utopian” experiments. Influenced by the rapid emergence of capitalism and the changing nature of states, the movement gradually bifurcated after the revolutions of 1848, with one wing striving to build an alternative society without states in the here and now (anarchism/syndicalism), the other striving rather to transform the state so that it could be used to build

that alternative society (social democracy; communist movements; Arab socialism; African socialism; Indian socialism, etc.). Both tendencies did not succeed in achieving the original goal of replacing capitalism with a socially just and democratic society.

Countless efforts at self-organization and political articulation of labor interests have been observed from the eighteenth century, peaking *inter alia* with the revolutions in Haiti (1791), Russia (1917), and Bolivia (1952), and the rise of powerful labor organizations in parts of the Americas, Europe, Southern Africa, East Asia, and the western Pacific. Of course this advance has not consisted exclusively of successes, and the defeats may even have outnumbered the victories. For a long time, however, the general trend seemed to be improvement: “tomorrow the International will be the human race.”

Critical analysis of this great cycle—specifically in combination with the continuously growing global working class—is a challenge of enormous scholarly and political interest, especially because in many countries the decline coincides with a revival of the radical right, which presents itself as an alternative to the traditional workers’ organizations. The long cycle needs to be studied in depth to discover what the movements’ results and prospects are. Why could some results be achieved? Why did some failures and defeats happen? Obtaining such insights is not an antiquarian exercise. A second “great cycle” is by no means inconceivable and in fact already seems to cautiously announce itself. Class conflicts will not diminish, and workers all over the world will continue to feel the ever-present need for effective organizations and forms of struggle. If a second great cycle emerges, historical research might offer insights and help avert mistakes.

The following essays are intended as a first, very modest, attempt to reconstruct the development of socialist and labor movements in the period from the 1820s to the 2020s as a series of strategic choices. Looking back, which “bifurcation points” in the history of socialism and the labor movement have been of major political and theoretical importance? And how can we judge whether decisions were inevitable or could have turned out differently? The search for bifurcation moments is by no means new or original. I will give one example. In 1981, the philosopher Etienne Balibar was expelled from the French Communist Party after he had published an article emphasizing three bifurcation moments in the party’s history since the early 1960s that he believed had contributed significantly to its decline.⁷

We want to begin with the reconstruction of the development of socialist and labor movements in the period from the 1820s to the 2020s as a series of strategic choices. Far too often history is described as a succession of “inevitable” decisions. But was that really so? Three examples may help clarify the point.

- During the Fourth (Unity) Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party (RSDWP) in Stockholm in 1906 the Mensheviks (Plekhanov et al.) energetically opposed Lenin’s proposals for the nationalization of the land. They argued that Russian history was characterized by the hypertrophy of the state, and feared that nationalization would revive the old state monopoly over the land in Russia, a monopoly which had been the economic basis of the despotic state. In order to guard against restoration of the old order they thought that it was essential to decentralize initiative, and

to introduce the municipalization of the land. What would have been the long-term consequences if the RSDWP had accepted this point of view?

- If, at the end of the Weimar Republic, the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) and Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD) had acted together against National Socialism, the Third Reich would probably have been prevented. Only small left-wing groups advocated such cooperation even before Hitler's *Machtübernahme*. If their views had been adopted by the major workers' parties in time, what would have happened?

- If the social democratic parties in Britain, France, Belgium, and The Netherlands had vigorously supported the independence movements in the colonies instead of fighting them (sometimes violently), what would the political landscape in the Global South have been like after independence?

It is, of course, impossible to give definitive answers to such questions. But it makes sense to ask them nonetheless. They can clarify that there have been options in the past that are worth reconsidering. However, the analysis cannot suffice with the statement: "That would (or would not) have been better." We must of course also ask ourselves what economic, social, political, and cultural factors have prevented the realization of alternative options. The reconstruction of old choices is certainly complicated.

"Mistakes" and "errors"

There are several aspects that I believe now require special attention. First, there are the "mistakes" and "errors" made in the past. The question is to what extent these mistakes and errors could have been avoided, because I fear that even today we still make them regularly. Let me give some examples.

- The first issue concerns the *over-reliance on analogies*. Anyone who encounters a new phenomenon is initially inclined to approach that phenomenon with old concepts. Sometimes this works well, but not infrequently it turns out that the new issue cannot be solved with the old categories. In his *Essays on Language and Cognition*, Umberto Eco rightly noted: "Often, when faced with an unknown phenomenon, we react by approximation: we seek that scrap of content, already present in our encyclopedia, which for better or worse seems to account for the new fact."⁸ In 1291, on his journey from China back to Italy, Marco Polo was stuck on Sumatra for 5 months waiting for the monsoon winds to change course, so that he could sail westward. On Sumatra he saw enormous animals that were not familiar to him. They seemed like the mythical unicorns, except that whereas that unicorns were appealing and elegant, these animals were not:

They have the hair of a buffalo and feet like an elephant's. They have a single large, black horn in the middle of the forehead. ... They have a head like a wild boar's and always carry it stooped towards the ground. They spend their time by preference wallowing in mud and slime. They are very ugly brutes to look at. They are not at all such as we describe them when we relate that they let themselves be captured by virgins.⁹

Marco Polo uses several analogies here (“hair of a buffalo,” “feet like an elephant’s,” “head like a wild boar’s”), but because of the single horn in the middle of the forehead, he regarded the rhinoceroses mainly as unicorns, those animals he knew from myths and legends—except that they appeared as monsters here. Acknowledging what is truly new as such often takes us a long time. The platypus was another such case. Was it fake? A kind of duck? A kind of mole? Over 80 years passed after the animal was discovered, before science accepted that this was a previously unknown species.

- The second (and related) variant concerns our tendency to *overrate the importance of short-term trends*; these trends are easily seen as expressions of long-term development. The economic problems of the years following World War I led many socialists to assume that capitalism had entered its terminal phase. Stalin’s favorite economist Evgenii Varga spoke of the general downturn of capitalism as early as 1922; Trotsky referred to “the agony of capitalism” in the title of his 1938 Transitional Program; Fritz Sternberg believed that the “permanent crisis” had arrived, and so on. And it was not only Marxists who thought this way. Joseph Schumpeter too felt that in capitalist society there was a “tendency toward self-destruction” that inevitably must lead to its dissolution.¹⁰ Until the beginning of the 1950s, almost nobody believed a prolonged boom possible.

- A third problem concerns the *unintended consequences of our actions*. There is, for example, in the words of political scientist Bernhard Blanke, often a “functional ambivalence” of social reforms. This can be illustrated by the reduction of working time. Karl Marx called, as we all know, the English Ten Hours’ Bill “not only a great practical success; it was the victory of a principle; it was the first time that in broad daylight the political economy of the middle class succumbed to the political economy of the working class.”¹¹ But the law encouraged employers to intensify work during the shorter working hours. And that forced the unions to make additional regulations that served to prevent or at least weaken this intensification. These new regulations in turn promoted counter-actions by the entrepreneurs, and so on. In short: “Social struggles entail a *cumulative* product of *conflict regulations*. These cumulative regulations, for their part, require that the organizations of wage labor must continuously take care of their observance and not—abstractly speaking—leave it to “the state.” Otherwise, there would be the danger that the functional ambivalence of such regulations would work against them due to the prevailing power imbalance, *without* this becoming directly *visible* in social struggles.”¹² Thus, a seemingly simple measure (the introduction of the 10-hour bill) can have many consequences. Speaking of an analogous process Sanford Jacoby has argued that trade-union opposition to managerial discretionary power has furthered the bureaucratization of American industrial firms.¹³ Thus, the ongoing institutionalization of conflict settlements leads to a complementary growth of bureaucracy in labor movements.

- A final problem concerns *non-decisions*, that is the existence of blind spots causing important issues to be overlooked or even considered unacceptable for discussion in public forums. This is what Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz have called the “mobilization of bias” which tends “to limit the scope of actual decision-making to “safe”

issues.”¹⁴ Important examples are, of course, the long-lasting neglect of gender issues, of race and ethnicity, and of ecological and climatic aspects of industrialization.

Our analysis of this kind of difficulty is further complicated by the fact that we (and our predecessors) regularly also have a distorted view of past and present developments. For example, an important myth in the socialist movement—cherished by both supporters and opponents—is the Bolshevik party as an indivisible war machine, “intimately united by unity of purpose, unity of action and unity of discipline,” with “one party discipline for all, with at its head a leading organ,” etc.¹⁵ Historical research has shown that this self-created image is by no means consistent with reality. Orders from the top leadership were regularly ignored by lower echelons. In 1917, there were two parallel Bolshevik leaderships in several regions. Even the central committee was not very punctual and disciplined. A large number of members did not come to meetings. The historically vital meeting of 10 October 1917, which decided on rebellion, was held by 11 of the 21 members.¹⁶ The Bolshevik organization as a whole was never the disciplined, well-oiled party machine which many for a long time supposed it to be. Alexander Rabinowitch attributes the Bolshevik success in Petrograd 1917 “in no small measure” to the flexible nature of the party, emphasizing “the party’s internally relatively democratic, tolerant, and decentralised structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character – in striking contrast to the traditional Leninist model.”¹⁷

With all the caveats that thus accompany this, it is a matter of reconstructing as best as possible how successive choices from a limited number of possibilities have taken place. The choices that groups make are determined by all kinds of influences, in the sense that “to determine” means “setting limits, exerting pressures.”¹⁸ The range of influences comprises two subsets.

- On the one hand, there are the contextual influences, which are social factors that create or in fact eliminate opportunities, such as economic, political, legal relationships, cultural and religious traditions etc. They determine which types of organizations and activities are possible and conceivable for workers in a particular situation and limit the alternatives to some feasible set.

- On the other hand, this set of feasible alternatives is limited by the past of the collective action itself. From the outset, social groups devise a certain cultural and organizational “style” that acquires a weight of its own. This is what Arthur Stinchcombe has called “imprinting;” it leads to structural inertia.¹⁹ Moreover, the choices a group makes keep giving rise to habits and routines that later co-determine new decisions by rendering some options undesirable or inconceivable and others self-evident. This constraining and enabling process is also known as path dependence.²⁰

Thus, any group of workers must always choose from a more or less circumscribed set of feasible alternatives. The final choice of option may be the outcome of open discussion and democratic decision-making, but manipulation or misinformation may be factors as well. If a certain choice proves highly controversial, then part of the group may decide against it; these dissidents will then presumably organize another form of collective action, join another group, or concentrate on other causes.

Every choice leads to the exclusion of other possibilities; after a specific choice other possibilities become practically irrelevant. But every positive choice thus made eventually leads to new choices. And so on. As Pierre Watter has rightly observed:

There is no way at all of bringing back to life the clusters of possibilities from which a choice had to be made, every time it was a question of deciding what was the correct way to proceed. Looking backwards, what we produce as perceptible and intelligible is inevitably a simplification that gives a false appearance of more or less straightforward progress. And it is this false appearance that incites to the belief in an encompassing single necessity determining a process from start to end and so producing it as a development.²¹

Our ambitious aim is to start—within the outlined limitations—a critical analysis of the global labor project over the past two centuries. The beginnings of new labor movements are already visible in many places, and perhaps it is possible to learn something from the past that can contribute to successes in the future.

Notes

1. Silke Neunsinger and Gre Patmore, "Conclusion: Consumer Co-operatives Past, Present and Future," in *A Global History of Consumer Co-operation since 1850*, eds. Mary Hilson, Silke Neunsinger and Greg Patmore (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 729–51, at 748–49.
2. Andrew Bibby, "Why are co-operative societies on the decline?" *The Guardian*, 14 November 2013. Also see e.g., Peter Krampfer, "Why Cooperatives Fail: Case Studies from Europe, Japan, and the United States, 1950–2010," in *The Cooperative Business Movement, 1950 to the Present*, eds. Patrizia Battilani and Harm G. Schröter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 126–49.
3. <https://stats.oecd.org/viewhtml.aspx?datasetcode=TUD&lang=en>.
4. For a fuller analysis, see Marcel van der Linden ed., *The Cambridge History of Socialism*, 2 vols (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023).
5. After 2007, the PCF did not participate in elections independently, but in list associations with other parties.
6. Marcel van der Linden, "Why the Global Labor Movement is in Crisis," *Journal of Labor and Society* 24, no. 3 (2021), 375–400.
7. Etienne Balibar, "De Charonne à Vitry," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, no. 852 (March 9–15, 1981); republished in Balibar's *Les frontières de la démocratie* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1992).
8. Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus. Essays on Language and Cognition* trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 2000), 57. I borrowed the unicorn and platypus examples from this magisterial book.
9. Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, Translated and with an introduction by Ronald Latham (London: Penguin, 1958), 253.
10. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. Introduction by Richard Swedberg (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 56, 162.
11. Karl Marx, "Inaugural Address of the Working Men's International Association," (1864), *Marx Engels Collected Works*, ed. Soviet-team (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), vol. 20, 5–13, at 11.
12. Bernhard Blanke, "Sozialdemokratie und Gesellschaftskrise. Hypothesen zu einer sozialwissenschaftlichen Reformismustheorie," in *Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterbewegung und Weimarer Republik. Materialien zur gesellschaftlichen Entwicklung 1927–1933*, ed. Wolfgang Luthardt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), vol. II, 380–408, here 386ff.
13. Sanford M. Jacoby, *Employing Bureaucracy: Managers, Unions, and the Transformation of Work in American Industry, 1900–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
14. Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, "Two Faces of Power," *American Political Science Review* 56, no. 4 (1962), 947–52, at 952.

15. *Istoriya vsesoyuznoi kommunisticheskoi partii (bol'shevikov)*. *Kratkii kurs* (Moscow: np, 1938), 45 f.
16. These details and others may be found in chapter 8 of Tony Cliff, *Lenin*, vol. II: *All Power to the Soviets* (London: Pluto Press, 1976). Also see Paul LeBlanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (New Jersey and London: Humanities Press, 1990), 270–73.
17. Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power. The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 311. According to Rabinowitch, “Probably the clearest example of the importance and value of the party’s relatively free and flexible structure, and the responsiveness of its tactics to the prevailing mass mood, came during the second half of September [1917], when party leaders in Petrograd turned a deaf ear to the ill-timed appeals of Lenin, then still in hiding in Finland, for an immediate insurrection.” (p. 313).
18. Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory” (1973), in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, ed. Raymond Williams (London: New Left Books, 1980), 31–49, 32. See also Williams’ discussion of “determine” in his *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976), 87–91.
19. Arthur Stinchcombe, “Social Structure and Organizations,” in *Handbook of Organizations*, ed. James G. March (Chicago: Rand McNally, ⁴1972), 142–93, here 154.
20. Paul A. David, “Historical Economics in the Longrun: Some Implications of Path-Dependence,” in *Historical Analysis in Economics*, ed. Graeme Donald Snooks (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 29–40; id., “Why Are Institutions the ‘Carriers of History’? Path Dependence and the Evolution of Conventions, Organizations and Institutions,” *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics* 5 (1994), 205–20.
21. Pierre Watter, *A Critique of Production* (Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance, 1996), 22. A similar point was, of course, already made by the young Raymond Aron in his *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire. Essais sur les limites de l'objectivité historique*, Nouvelle édition revue et annotée par Sylvie Mesure (Paris: Gallimard, 1986 [1938]), 124.