The Marxist view regarding the relationship of economy and politics has often been presented in a distorted manner in Western publications. This is presumably due to either ignorance or bias, even though the basic writings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin are extremely precise in this respect.

One of the latest examples of such distortion can be found in Henry A. Turner's extensive work, *German Big Business and the Rise of Hitler*.\(^1\)

Turner's comments regarding the "primacy of economy" or the "primacy of politics" reproduce the misleading usage of these terms within the framework of a controversy featured in the 1960s in the West Berlin journal *Das Argument*. The English historian Tim Mason there maintained that within the context of the entire history of bourgeois society the domestic and foreign policy of the Nazi state from 1936 onward was no longer determined by the primacy of economy but by the primacy of politics.\(^2\) Thereby Mason wanted to uphold the viewpoint that during the fascist dictatorship it was not the economic power-wielders, as is generally understood, who determined politics but the Nazi politicians who allowed themselves to be guided by ideological conceptions and prejudices instead of by economic interests.

Translated by Michael N. Dobkowski and Isidor Wallimann
The use of the pair of there "economy" and "politics" therefore had nothing in common with the relationship usually brought forward in this connection by Marxists. Opposing Mason, Eberhard Czichon advocated the thesis of the "primacy of industry with the cartel of National-Socialist power" in a bid to defend an assumed Marxist position. The facts he introduced to counter Mason were by and large excellently suited to contradict Mason's assertion that it was very difficult to prove even an indirect involvement of the economic leaders in state-political opinion-molding during the Third Reich. However, his usage of the term "primacy of industry" only served to complicate the terminological confusion because, first, he seemed to corroborate those who, like Mason, held and still hold the view that Marxism is characterized by its postulation of the primacy of economy and, second, because Czichon restricts the sphere of influence of the decisive economic circle to industry.

The main reason for the terminological confusion stems from the fact that within the scope of this controversy two different, albeit closely linked, questions have not been clearly differentiated: namely, the question pertaining to the foundation, that is to say, the basis of society, that sphere of the social organism which provides keynote stimuli for the sustained further development of society and, second, the consideration of which factors—economic or political—have priority in deciding practical politics.

A reply to the first question was strikingly given by Karl Marx in the famous sentences of his "Preface to a Critic of Political Economy":

In the social production of their existence men inevitably enter in definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political super-structure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life, conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.

Friedrich Engels in his late letters gave a number of additions and explanations concerning these fundamental stipulations in regard to the basis and superstructure of human society, directed against a simplified, undialectical interpretation. In his letter of July 14, 1893, to Franz Mehring, Engels explains why such additions became necessary:
That is to say we all laid, and were bound to lay, the main emphasis, in the first place, on the derivation of political, juridical and other ideological notions, and of actions arising through the medium of these notions, from basic economic facts. But in so doing we neglected the formal side—the ways and means by which these notions, etc., come about—for the sake of the content. This has given our adversaries a welcome opportunity for misunderstanding and distortions. 5

The briefest summary of Engels' expositions is found in a letter sent to W. Borgius on January 25, 1894: Noting that "economic conditions [are those] which ultimately condition historical development," Engels states:

political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc., development is based on economic development. But all these react upon one another and also upon the economic basis. It is not that economic situation is the cause, solely active, while everything else is only passive effect. There is, rather, interaction on the basis of economic necessity, which ultimately always asserts itself. 6

In 1920, the third year of young Soviet power, V. I. Lenin was confronted with the need to reply in a fundamental manner to the second question, namely, the primacy of economy or politics in solving burning practical political issues. In the context of an inner-party dispute regarding the role and tasks of the trade unions, Trotsky and others criticized Lenin for seeking to solve this question politically, maintaining the correct approach was an economic one. 7 They thus also advocated the primacy of economy.

Lenin, in rejecting such a viewpoint, responded with an extensive reply that might, at first glance, appear contradictory.

I said again in my speech, that politics is a concentrated expression of economics, because I had earlier heard my "political" approach rebuked in a manner which is inconsistent and inadmissible for a Marxist. Politics must take precedence over economics. To argue otherwise is to forget the ABC of Marxism. . . . Without a correct political approach to the matter the given class will be unable to stay on top, and consequently, will be incapable of solving its production problem either. 8

The apparent inconsistency of this assertion, when considered carefully in detail, turns out to be a precise description of a dialectical relationship. Classes with counteracting economic and political interests emerge from an economic basis characterized by the private ownership of the means of production. In a narrow sense economic interests relate to the distribution of the national product, in a wider
sense to the constellation of conditions of ownership of the means of production. Political interests are geared to attaining and holding such a share of political power for the fullest possible implementation of one's economic interests. This interrelationship is expressed in Lenin's formula: politics are concentrated economics.

The respectively ruling economic class requires political power in order to defend, to consolidate, and to extend its economic supremacy as on the other hand the nonpossessing, exploited class will have the means of freeing itself forever from its economic exploiters only by seizing political power and ensuring its consolidation. In the final analysis, for both classes political power and political struggle are the decisive means of implementing and ensuring their economic interests. This objectively given interrelationship was postulated by Lenin in his thesis on the primacy of politics. Indeed, from a Marxist-Leninist viewpoint, contrasting the economic with the political approach as completely counterposed, as done by Lenin's opponents, is impermissible because politics are the concentrated expression of the economy. However, by necessity, politics possesses primacy vis-à-vis the economy because all decisions, even those relating to "purely economic" questions, must be taken from a political standpoint, from the standpoint of attaining and legitimately preserving political power.

Thus, the facts hitherto presented clearly make plain that the struggle waged by Turner and others against an alleged Marxist thesis of primacy of economy is nothing other than a quixotic battle. (In order to rule out false interpretations, I should like to expressly indicate that this naturally does not signify that all political struggle pursued only economic goals. Needless to say, the political struggle comprehends the implementation of interests in respect to all other spheres of life.)

**Economy and Politics in the Creation of the Weimar Republic**

Following World War I, the economic situation facing German imperialism was catastrophic. Striking features included an economy dismembered and whittled down through the war costs. In addition, there were the inestimable costs stemming from the defeat, which in turn required a raising of the accumulation rate to a hitherto unknown level as a precondition for the economic survival of German capitalism, to a level leaving no freedom of movement whatsoever for social concessions to the wage earners.

Nonetheless, as the Weimar Republic dawned, an Arbeitgemeinschaft agreement was signed by Hugo Stinnes and Carl Legien, representing powerful capital interests, and the trade unions. Within
this framework the employers made concessions to the workers that, even during the economic boom years before the war, they had rigorously rejected as unacceptable and ruinous. However, now not only were the economic bases for perpetuating the capitalist mode of production endangered, but political power as a whole, the very continued existence of capitalism in Germany, was at stake.

The imperative of the primacy of politics was implemented because, otherwise, survival would not have been possible. In order to retain political power and thereby the preconditions for subsequently restoring the supremacy vis-à-vis the contracting party, the German big bourgeoisie found itself compelled to accede to economic concessions that wholly contradicted the prerequisites for reestablishing a properly functioning capitalist reproduction process under the given economic conditions.

The German upper bourgeoisie (Grossbourgeoisie), who, as Lenin wrote, had “learned from the Russian example,” implemented “an excellent strategy” as their power was being most seriously threatened. Abraham Frowein, a presidium member of the League of German Industry (RDI) strikingly characterized this approach when, reviewing the past, he declared on June 12, 1919: “Gentlemen, in Russia events took the wrong turn and, right from the start, industry found itself rejecting the revolution. If we—and this would have been feasible—had taken up a stance of non-cooperation, then I am sure that by today we would have the same conditions as prevail in Russia.”

However, such a strategy was assured success only because the German “economic leaders” found partners in the form of trade union and Social Democratic party (SPD) leaders who were willing to guarantee the survival of capitalism in Germany in return for making economic, social, and political concessions that, in 1913, were seen as sensational, whereas in November 1918 they could be likened to a reward for having renounced the programmatic goals of Social Democracy for a bowl of soup. Moreover, these leaders, when confronting the German upper bourgeoisie and the former Kaiser’s generals, behaved in the same manner as the liberal bourgeoisie had responded in 1848–49 when faced with the Prussian monarchy, and in the wake of Bismarck’s successful blood-and-iron politics. They established an alliance with the representatives of old power to combat the forces of revolution. This behavior, which in Germany’s past had brought about a complete counterrevolution for each semi-completed revolution, permitted the hitherto existing basis of German society to remain in almost unchanged form also during the Weimar Republic.

Indeed, not only were the most outspoken enemies of the German working-class movement, the coal and steel barons of the Ruhr, able to steer their empires undeterred by the turbulence of revolution, but
also the most anachronistic element of this modern industrial country, the powerful Junker landowners, remained unchallenged because of the alliance between the social-democratic leaders and the generals, who primarily came from Junkerdom.

Thus, from the outset the Weimar Republic was afflicted by a most striking contradiction—the anomaly of an economic structure that was only insignificantly modified in comparison to the Empire and that was characterized above all by its continuity and similarity to it as well as a state domination apparatus that remained virtually untouched except for the very top levels. On the other hand, there was a bourgeois-parliamentary state form that, due to pressure from the revolutionary masses, was able to leave far behind the rights and the Constitution inherited from Bismarck.

This contradiction was so acute that merely sticking to it unchangeably was bound to give rise to constant, severe conflicts as neither of the two poles in society was prepared to accept limitations imposed by the other. The conditions for the realization of capital necessitated a political order in postwar Germany permitting a still greater exploitation of labor power than had been the case in the Empire. However, ensuring and realizing the democratic rights for the popular masses, as embodied in the Constitution, required, as a minimum, the elimination of the economic and political positions of power of the most entrenched enemies of parliamentary democracy, namely, the Junkerdom and the mighty Ruhr industrialists, as well as the nationalization of the big banks.

This fundamental contradiction explains the great number of class clashes between 1919 and 1923, with the short-lived rightist conspiracy in Berlin known as the Kapp putsch as the most prominent. A further result and at the same time also a significant piece of evidence of this contradiction was the Stinnes Plan of Autumn 1923, a plan for subjugating the German workers to a dictatorship motivated by the needs of capital realization. It was drawn up by the same man who, four years earlier, had signed the agreement establishing the Arbeitsgemeinschaft.

Due to the unfavorable class-power relationship for the employers, between 1919 and 1923 high finance was not in a position to establish a political order in line with the realization needs of capital. Consequently, these needs had to be met in a different manner, namely, in a way that appeared to be independent of political conditions and not influenced by political bodies. Inflation proved just as brutal a means of fostering the exploitation of the wage recipients as would have been the case with an extensive increase of the work day—and that is precisely what happened.

The short phase of “normal” development between 1924 and 1929 is
no argument against the assertion regarding the absence of a foundation for a stable development of the Weimar Republic. For, whereas Social Democratic party and trade-union leaders hurriedly considered this phase a new beginning for a crisis-free economy that would subsequently grow into socialism along peaceful lines via "organized capitalism," in reality, as far as the big-capital opponents of the Weimar democracy were concerned, this period merely represented an armistice phase. Moreover, this phase had been accepted only after the SPD and the trade unions had actually renounced the eight-hour day, one of the principle revolutionary gains of the period, and only after the French waiver in respect to the priority rating of German reparation payments led to a situation in which other liabilities of American finance capital displayed an ostensible inclination to bolster up the capital-formation process in Germany by providing loans. The contradictions between capital and labor was therefore, during the normality phase, minutely less pronounced because of the partial abandonment of the revolutionary gains and particularly because of the external temporary capital inflow. That is why the stabilization of capitalism in Germany could be only very relative and had to be more fragile than was the case in the other developed capitalist industrial countries.

The Establishment of the Fascist Dictatorship: Economic Compulsion or the Implementation of Political Will?

The outbreak of the world economic crisis, coupled with its unexpected duration and severity and occurring at a time when many German economic leaders did not expect it, necessarily brought forth again the temporarily submerged contradiction. Big capital's need for an authoritarian (that is, a dictatorial) state and the need on the part of a broad section of the population, particularly organized labor, for expanded and secure democratic rights and social advances became again fully pronounced, although they had never totally disappeared.

One might conclude that the world economic crisis had been the development that triggered off the ever more resolute struggle of broader sections of the ruling class against the Weimar Republic. Attentive observers, however, have been quick to note a keynote feature, namely that the offensive against the Weimar Republic began toward the end of 1927 and early 1928, that is to say, the temporary armistice initiated by capital came to an end considerably before the outbreak of the world economic crisis. Singularly significant evidence in this context was the forming early in 1928 of the Association for the Renewal of the Reich, which, in rejecting the Weimar Republic,
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echoed the clarion call for establishing a Third Reich. Further symptoms along similar lines were the right-wing seizure of leadership posts both in the German National People’s party (DNVP) and the Center party, namely, Alfred Hugenberg and the Prelate Kaas; the lockout of some 250,000 metalworkers by the Ruhr trusts in November 1928, and the memorandum of the Reichsverband der Deutschen Industrie entitled “Ascent or Demise” in December 1929.

All these facts run counter to the viewpoint that the outbreak of the world economic crisis sparked the employers’ onslaught against the Weimar Republic. No doubt the said crisis clearly had a strengthening but by no means a causal effect. The real reasons lie deeper. In essence, they reside in a closely intermeshed combination of economic, domestic, and foreign policy forces. Moreover, it is by no means accidental that the end of the “armistice” coincides with the point at which Germany again regained its number-one position as an imperial power in Europe and number two in the capitalist world at large. Indeed, by 1927-28 the first stage was reached—namely, the restoration of prior economic power. Once this had been achieved, sights were set on further objectives. These included the liquidation of the political consequences of the defeat and the revolution, that is to say, the brushing aside of the Treaty of Versailles and parliamentary democracy, the “multiparty state” (Parteienstaat).

Coupled with the regained economic power there developed an avid interest in a “fair” participation in the appropriation of the world’s resources—in the urge to carve up the world once again in favor of German imperialism. As in 1914, German imperialism, feeling “left out in the cold,” again demanded a “place in the sun,” or—coining the rightist phraseology during the Weimar Republic—the “people without space” demanded “Lebensraum.” If one is anxious to peddle “power politics” abroad then—according to Wilhelm Groener—it is essential to remain “firm and unrelenting” at home. An orientation to external expansion requires an orientation toward repression at home.

The fate of the Weimar Republic was, however, by no means exclusively in the hands of hostile big-business interests. The counterforce was to be seen in the successful extension and defense of democracy, provided it took up a resolute and united stance in pursuit of these goals. This possibility had been demonstrated by the campaign for the expropriation of the princes waged in 1926, as well as by the Reichstag elections in spring 1928. Jointly the workers’ parties along with the left-bourgeois German Democratic party gained a total of 13.9 million votes while the rightist bloc ranging from the National Socialist German Workers party (NSDAP) to the German People’s party (DVP)
garnered just over 10.2 million votes. Between these two blocs was the Center and the Bavarian People’s party, which together drew 5.2 million votes. Of these, a considerable number, namely the Catholic workers, should in fact be included in the left-wing potential.¹⁸

The dreadfully fateful contradiction between the social structure of the Weimar Republic, with its semi-feudal residues, and the bourgeois-democratic state form needed to be overcome. Moreover, in order to beat back the offensive of high finance and the Junker enemies of the Weimar Republic, it was necessary to mobilize and bring fully into play this powerful left-potential for attainable goals.

As the expropriation campaign of the princes had shown, the first and the most politically urgent and popular agenda should have been the destruction of the East Elbe landed aristocracy in favor of a land reform that partitioned the Junker land among the land-impoverished peasants and agricultural workers. Naturally it was not sufficient to raise the issue in petitions brought to parliament; what was needed above all was backing by extraparliamentary forces, especially through trade-union actions, thereby spearheading mass pressure to the fullest possible extent. Indeed, such actions could safely have counted on sympathy and even support among elements of the powerful big bourgeoisie.¹⁹

Thus a program aimed at dividing up the Junker landed estates could have been a point of departure for creating a powerful, campaigning democratic front alongside it, thereby seriously weakening the most reactionary wing or the ruling elite.

The principal force of such a front could only be the working-class movement. A commensurate initiative along these lines would have had the chance to bring about a decisive shift in the balance of power in favor of bolstering up and consolidating the democratic content of the Weimar Republic. If the SPD and the allied Free Trade Unions had taken such an initiative following the overwhelming social-democratic electoral success in May 1928, this would most probably have resulted in a series of positive effects.

The first and most important commensurate outcome would have been the prevention of the disastrous further division of the working-class movement. The unity of action so aptly displayed during the expropriation campaign of the princes would have been given new impetus in the struggle for agrarian reform. As long as the Weimar Republic existed, even though its formation did not completely reflect the overall demands of the German Communist party (KPD), the party had backed every real move in defense of democracy notwithstanding the fact that the Communist party never once relinquished its goal, namely the aim of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg to establish a
socialist German republic. Moreover, the Communist party would never have hesitated to back to the hilt any initiative for the elimination of the hotbed of reaction, namely the East Elbe Junkerdom as, indeed, such action would have been fully consistent with the agrarian program of the KPD.\footnote{20}

Second, a united campaign of struggle of the two workers’ parties for such a popular goal would, undoubtedly, have drawn broad sections of the democratically minded bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie into the orbit of the overall working-class movement.

Third, by engaging in this struggle, the working-class movement would have proved itself the most resolute advocate of peasant interests and, thereby, real possibilities would have emerged for dismembering the grip of the most reactionary forces on the land.

Fourth, if such policies had been pursued, severe restrictions and obstacles would have been imposed, in particular, on the possibility of fascism’s developing into a mass movement. Fascism would have been denied one of its main arguments (namely, that Marxism in the guise of the SPD ruined the middle classes and the peasantry) and, moreover, would have faced a united working-class movement. As a result, fascism would not have found itself in a position of merely having to combat a powerless, divided working-class movement, engaged in constant bickering.

Fifth, such an attack on the Junkers would have brought out the differences within the big bourgeoisie and weakened—for both political and economic reasons—that element within the heavy-industry faction which tended to form coalitions with the Junkers and was the major enemy of the Weimar Republic. The political reasons include the still widespread and deeply entrenched “Kapp putsch trauma,” that is, the fear of provoking the regeneration of a united defense by the working class (as in 1920 against the Kapp putsch) which would have to be challenged and opposed by die-hard policies. Economically, large parts of the industrial and banking sections were interested in eliminating the Junkerdom and replacing it with a healthy peasant agriculture that would expand the domestic market, particularly for agricultural machinery and fertilizers. Thereby, subsidies to the parasitical, crisis-ridden, and semi-feudal Junker agriculture could have been avoided.

However, such considerations should not be taken to characterize the agrarian reform as the key issue for the survival of the Weimar Republic but are intended merely to rebuff the widespread concept that the Weimar Republic never had the slightest chance of escaping its subsequent fate. On the contrary, one should emphatically underline the following: a policy would have been possible that decidedly aimed at healing the recognized structural defects of German society. Fur-
thermore, a policy for fostering the union of the left forces would have made it possible for them not only to ward off the rightist onslaughts on the Weimar Republic but to extend democratic rights in both the state and the economy at large. The chances that such a policy could have succeeded were still considerable in 1928 and had not completely disappeared even as late as 1932.

However, as is known after its electoral gains and victory, German social democracy took no initiative whatsoever in implementing a program to promote and consolidate democracy. Moreover, the SPD did not even revert to its own agrarian program, the draft of which, adopted on January 12, 1927, proclaims that for reasons of both production and population politics the SPD advocates a fundamental change in basic property ownership conditions and, therefore, a "planned land reform." According to this program, in the eastern part of the country, agrarian units were not to exceed 750 hectares, with additional areas being returned to the Reich without compensation.

In reality, SPD policies were not geared to changes and reforms but solely to retaining what had been achieved through the alliance with that wing of the big bourgeoisie which had displayed a willingness to enter into an alliance with social democracy on conditions decreed by the big bourgeoisie. This had been succinctly expounded by Paul Silverberg, who, on September 4, 1926, when addressing the members' meeting of the RDI, declared that social democracy should "return to reality" and should "renounce radical doctrinarism along with the ever destructive never constructive policy of the streets and force" and cooperate in a responsible manner "with the employers and under their direction."

In practice this meant that the Hermann Müller government, in defiance of the SPD's electoral promises, had to follow (and indeed followed) the basic policies of the preceding bourgeois bloc parties, that is, to step up the struggle against the Communist party and to continue the armaments program of German imperialism. This led to the Bloody May of 1929 with the subsequent banning of the Red Front Union (while the fascist SA and SS terror groupings could legally continue to exist!) and to the decision to build the armored cruiser, a project that was clearly rejected prior to the elections. Basically, this was a suicidal policy. It even more profoundly widened the divisions within the working-class movement, weakened the reputation and standing of social democracy with large segments of the population, undermined the confidence SPD members had in their own party, and thereby decidedly weakened the entire left. The counterforces on the right, however, in particular the Nazi fascists, gained ground as a direct consequence. Adhering to a policy that renounced positive political
change was bound to pave the way for successive decline: from a policy that defended the status quo to a policy that tolerated the "lesser evil" to the final capitulation to the greatest evil without even a semblance of a fight. Weimar democracy could have been salvaged only by taking the initiative and inflicting ever new setbacks against its enemies, thereby deepening and consolidating it in every possible manner. Since the SPD as the left party with the greatest mass influence renounced such a policy, the shameful capitulation of the Prussian Braun-Severing government—facing the coup d'état initiated by Chancellor von Papen on July 20, 1932—was the unavoidable consequence.

The division of the left forces, coupled with the role of the social-democratic Hermann Müller government as executive organ in implementing a national policy dominated by big capital and hostile to the middle class, and an identical role of the Braun-Severing government in Prussia, created favorable preconditions for the successful development of a rightist offensive, although the electoral result of 1928 and the subsequent formation of the Grand Coalition compelled these forces to alter both tactics and timing.

The tactical goal, especially of Hugenberg's DNVP, was now to discredit the SPD in the eyes of the electorate by holding the party responsible for as many unpopular measures as possible. Even the signing of the Young Plan, which determined and regulated the size and mode of payment of reparations and which directly served the interests of German finance capital, was seized on by the German nationalists, along with the Nazis, to unleash an unrestrained hate campaign and to accuse the SPD of high treason.

The basic strategy for the attack on the Weimar Republic, as thought up inter alia by the Union for the Renewal of the Reich, sought the transformation of the Weimar Republic from a parliamentary democracy to a presidential dictatorship. Furthermore, this was to be undertaken in a legal manner by means of an extensive interpretation of all relevantly suitable articles of the Weimar Constitution.23 However, this approach alone could not ensure a lasting solution and a final break with the Constitution. For this to occur, an enabling act was required, for which, however, a two-thirds majority was necessary. This gave the illusion that the throttling of the Weimar Republic, outwardly at least, was to proceed nicely along constitutional lines.

The transformation of the Weimar Republic into a presidential dictatorship proved possible with relatively little friction not the least because of the social-democratic leadership's policy of tolerance toward the Brüning government, formed in the spring of 1930 following the dismantling of the Hermann Müller cabinet.24

The greatest difficulties arose in the attempt to obtain a parliamen-
tary two-thirds majority for abolishing the Weimar Constitution, that is, through the Enabling Act. Over a long period, bourgeois party politicians and their allies in industry sought to set up a single, large bourgeois coalition or even party as a counterweight to social democracy. Backed by a sizable bourgeois parliamentary majority, they thus hoped to govern without and against the SPD and to implement the desired constitutional changes. However, all these efforts were unsuccessful, indeed were destined to remain so. First, there was considerable rivalry and jealousy-motivated bickering among party politicians. Second, the opposing interests of the diverse factions of the dominant class backing the different bourgeois parties were too great to overcome. Finally, because all these parties, with the exception of the Center party, had been deserted by a majority of their voters on account of their support for the emergency decrees, they gradually wasted away. In this manner, they lost ever more significance with regard to the aspired parliamentary majority necessary for a “legal” transition to the desired dictatorship.

Hugenberg’s DNVP had been particularly outspoken against a fusion with the other bourgeois parties. The reasons for this stance were the substantial differences of interests that existed between decisive circles of heavy industry, especially in the Ruhr mining area, and the East Elbe landed aristocracy, represented by Hugenberg and his party on the one hand, and the export industry, certain sections of banking capital, and the wholesale sector (which partly backed the German People’s party [DVP], the Center party, and the German Democratic party [DDP]), on the other.

Instead of cooperating with the bourgeois middle-of-the-road parties, Hugenberg opted for an alliance with the NSDAP. Although it was still (in 1928) rather unimportant, the NSDAP was in Hugenberg’s sense at least radically antidemocratic. In this arrangement, analogous to the relationship between the Center party and the SPD, he hoped to gain an alliance partner that would provide the DNVP with the necessary mass basis for the unchallenged leadership of the bourgeois camp. For this reason he generously placed his extensive propaganda apparatus at the disposal of the NSDAP along with financial means from the heavy-industry-backed electoral fund he administered. This sponsorship of the NSDAP proved exceptionally fortunate for Hitler but not for Hugenberg. In September 1930, the NSDAP achieved a sensational electoral victory. Instead of weakening the workers’ parties by attracting its electors, as Hugenberg had hoped, this victory came almost exclusively at the expense of the bourgeois parties, above all Hugenberg’s own party. Its loss to the NSDAP amounted to 2 million voters.25

The September 1930 electoral result immediately created a hitherto
unprecedented situation. Both the leaders of the bourgeois parties and important “captains of the economy” were suddenly confronted with a party that had mushroomed from an 800,000 voter organization to a 6 million one, thus turning the NSDAP into a powerful political force and the second most powerful party. The NSDAP had thus become a force that could no longer be overlooked, but equally as important, a power that opened up quite new, surprising, and welcome possibilities for overcoming the parliamentary obstacles for the “legal” transition to a dictatorial form of domination.

All bourgeois parties, along with other groups and factions of the ruling class, quickly realized that the NSDAP would have to be directly involved in government. However, its possible role and the leadership under which this was to happen became a matter of contention, resurrecting old rivalries and competitive bickering. Hereby, as time passed and situations changed ever more, new considerations and combinations were brought into play. To simplify matters the following four major groups and strategies can be observed:

1. Alfred Hugenberg and his party, as well as the circles from heavy industry and the landed aristocracy behind this party, relying on Reich President Paul von Hindenberg, resolutely pressed for an alliance with the NSDAP, with the NSDAP in the role of junior partner, attracting the masses—in other words, an alliance that would assure the Hugenberg party of supremacy in the bourgeois camp and leadership in the desired “National Dictatorship,” the culmination of which should in due course be the restoration of the monarchy.

2. The Center party (Brüning) and those circles in heavy industry, chemicals, the electrical industry, the export sector, and the bankers behind it, wanted to win over the NSDAP for a government alliance. With the assistance of the NSDAP it thereby hoped to move from the Weimar democracy to an authoritarian regime that in the long run would similarly culminate in the restoration of the monarchy.

3. In contrast to these strategies, Hjalmar Schacht and Fritz Thyssen—both principal spokesmen of a group of industrialists and bankers particularly strongly linked to U.S. finance capital—were not anxious to subordinate the Hitler party to one of the old bourgeois parties. Instead, using Hermann Göring, whom they backed very generously as their go-between to the NSDAP, they pressed Adolf Hitler to stake a claim to the chancellorship as a precondition for the NSDAP’s joining the government. Moreover, they advised Hitler to make his bid with utmost persistence and without the slightest concessions. Thereby they hoped that a Hitler government would allow them to triumph over all contenders and to pursue a foreign policy bent on expansion solely in the East in alliance with the West.

4. General Kurt von Schleicher cooperated with NSDAP organiza-
tion head Gregor Strasser, the second most powerful NSDAP figure after Hitler, until his demise early in December 1932, in attempting to set up a military dictatorship. He sought to anchor this in the working class by means of his “trade union axis” project ranging from the Free Trade Unions (Theodor Leipart) to the Christian trade unions to the NSDAP.28

Schleicher tried to implement his project under the Papen government, but Chancellor Franz von Papen swung toward the Hugenberg line and tried to “soften Hitler” and to cause him to relent by dissolving the Reichstag during a period of deep crisis in the NSDAP. He thereby compelled the Nazi party to enter a further costly electoral campaign. This maneuver proved to be a serious mistake, ending in von Papen’s forced resignation.

By means of his September emergency decrees, von Papen brought about savage wage cuts and simultaneously put the tariff system out of order. Through this approach he gained for himself the enthusiastic support of large segments of the entrepreneurial community.29 However this enthusiasm soon waned as he proved incapable of handling the unexpected resistance by the working people, which was highlighted by the Berlin transport workers strike in early November 1932. Moreover, as von Papen had anticipated, Hitler’s popularity fell sharply in the elections, with the NSDAP losing some 2 million voters. The Nazis did not become more submissive as a consequence, and so he found himself being increasingly pressured by the industrial forces behind him, above all the leading figures of the “Langnamverein,” Paul Reusch and Fritz Springorum, who urged him ever more vehemently now to establish the new, strong state by changing the Constitution, thereby making short play of all resistance. In the face of this pressure, plans were concocted in the von Papen cabinet to attain a change in the Constitution by means of a coup d’état, namely, by imposing a new constitution making the parliament powerless. However, these plans quickly provoked alarm among virtually all bourgeois party leaders as well as the majority of “economic leaders” and, above all, the Reichswehr leadership. They all agreed that the legal path should not be shelved, so as not to provoke unforeseeable reactions by the working people.30

Under these circumstances, the Hugenberg–von Papen variant, which got its strongest support from Reich President Hindenburg, had to be given up together with von Papen’s chancellorship, and negotiations about the NSDAP participation in government had to be taken up again. The necessary breathing space and the domestic appeasement was achieved by bequeathing to General Schleicher the chancellorship and by revoking the most provocative stipulations of the emergency decrees enacted by von Papen in September.
Thus, one of two remaining possibilities for attaining the dictatorship had to be chosen: either the risky coup d' état backed solely by the army or the legal formation of a government for establishing a national dictatorship on the conditions demanded by the Nazi party, namely, Hitler's chancellorship. In this situation the key ruling-class circles opted for the path of (at least) formal legality, thereby revealing that Schacht and Thyssen were indeed the better strategists. They had foreseen that, provided Hitler remained steadfast and did not lose his nerve, all other variants would surely fail. For sound reasons, a coup d' état bid had to be avoided, yet the legal path was feasible only with the cooperation of the NSDAP, which now had more leverage and, being the most powerful government party, was in a position to insist on its claim to head the government. Both Schacht and Thyssen still feared that Hitler, given the signs of decline in his party, might be influenceable and agree to the compromise solutions as suggested, for example, by Schleicher and Strasser. Therefore, during these very weeks Schacht wrote several rallying letters to Hitler and in collusion with Hermann Göring, Schacht and Thyssen did everything possible to periodically prop up Hitler's confidence in the final, successful outcome. Ironically, it was von Papen's mediation that set into motion these complicated and intrigue-ridden negotiations held during the weeks of December and January and that brought forth on January 30, 1933, that very government which was destined to plunge Germany and the world at large into the worst catastrophe ever recorded.

However, the ruling class was not only confronted with having to select between two paths to a dictatorship. It also had the opportunity to choose between destroying the Weimar Republic and reverting to a properly functioning parliamentary system. Commensurate possibilities existed, for as prominent economists and politicians correctly pointed out in the autumn of 1932, the most profound depths of the crisis had been overcome. The November elections had demonstrated that the antiparliamentary NSDAP showed strong signs of decline, characteristics that were bound to manifest themselves still more sharply and rapidly the longer the NSDAP was kept out of the government. The elections had also revealed that sizable chunks of the Nazi voters had reverted to their old parties, the DNVP and the DVP, a process that certainly would have continued. Probably quite a sizable number of disillusioned proletarian Nazi electors would have found their way to the extreme left, the KPD, and the SPD would also have gained from an NSDAP collapse. It should be noted that the Communist party did not pose a danger to the bourgeois order. The party was still, as always, advocating the establishment of socialism in Germany but was not planning a putsch; indeed, the party hoped to win over the majority of the working class through the ripening of a revolutionary
situation in the future. The ruling class, as well as the KPD leadership, realized that the KDP—with the bulk of its supporters out of work—was not even in a position to spark a general strike without the SPD and the trade unions. The ruling circles were also convinced that the leading echelons of both the SPD and the trade unions would do everything in their power to avoid a general strike.

In a nutshell, if the ruling circles had renounced the establishment of the dictatorship, this would by no stretch of the imagination have denoted the demise of the bourgeois order in Germany but rather the possibility of a return to parliamentary democracy, albeit under conditions of a weakened right wing due to the collapse of the NSDAP and due to the larger KDP that would have spearheaded a struggle-imbued left. The rejuvenated left would have been in a position, given the next economic upsurge, to attain through sustained struggle far greater concessions than had been possible between 1924 and 1929—possibly even greater than those obtained in the Arbeitsgemeinschaft agreement. Moreover, under such conditions, an armaments and expansionist drive would never have become possible in the foreign policy arena.

This was exactly what the ruling circles feared most of all. A renunciation of the dictatorship would have denoted the loss to capital of all those valuable gains that resulted from the crisis, namely, the sacrifice of the low-wage policy so important for world market competition, the forfeiture of the benefits attained through the destruction of the tariff contract system, and the radical cutbacks exacted on social services. German big capital was not willing to accept such losses. Consequently it opted for Hitler and persistently pressed for the initiation of the next stage in the restoration of the old power structure and German predominance in Europe. To this end it needed the fascist dictatorship. Therefore, the worst nightmare that could have happened as far as German monopoly capital was concerned was the collapse of the Nazi party and a return to parliamentary conditions. Indeed, this apprehension accelerated the delegation of power to the Nazi party.

What does all this mean with respect to the relationship between economics and politics in the destruction of the Weimar Republic?

1. There was no economic compulsion for establishing a fascist dictatorship in Germany. A renunciation of the dictatorship would by no means have denoted the ultimate economic "death" of German capitalism, as Alfred Sohn-Rethel had purported. Opting for the dictatorship constituted a political decision that had also been economically motivated—it promised far higher profits than a return to parliamentarism.

2. This decision was taken above all by the top levels of the most
important German companies, the leaders of the landed aristocracy, and the Reichswehr generals. They were joined by most of the big bourgeoisie politicians—except where the latter had already been commensurately active—as evidenced by their approval of the Enabling Act.

3. Attempts by certain historians, above all Henry A. Turner, to absolve economic leaders from responsibility for this decision are in sharp contradiction to historical truth and have nothing whatsoever to do with scholarship. 35

4. The reason the Hitler variant succeeded in the face of other dictatorship possibilities lay in the commitment of the elites to rigorously retain the legislative course for fear that the “illegality from above” would give an inestimable impetus to “illegality from below.” 36

The reason was not primarily, as David Abraham argued, that “German capitalism could not surmount its own internal contradictions” and that fascism thereby came to power as “the outcome of the inability of fragmented dominant groups to organize and unify their interests.” 37 It was rather the inverse: the Hitler solution was accepted by most important representatives of the ruling class because they agreed, despite their internal conflicts, not to allow a return to the parliamentary system, and because they also agreed that transition to the dictatorial regime was to proceed “constitutionally.”

In sum, the motives of the ruling class for the destruction of the Weimar Republic and the establishment of the fascist dictatorship were, in the final analysis, economically substantiated but by no means economically determined. The decision to exclude the subjugated classes from a share in state power and concentrate this very state power in the hands of the executive, in effect handing over power to the fascists, was a political decision—indeed, an expression of the primacy of politics.

Notes

6. Ibid., p. 549.
8. Ibid., pp. 83–84. This same idea was formulated thirty years later by Friedrich Engels with the words: "Why are we struggling for the political dictatorship of the proletariat if political power is powerless in economic terms? The power (namely state power) is also an economic potential!" (Letter to Conrad Schmidt, 27.10.1890 in Marx Engels Weilse, Vol. 37 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1967), p. 493.
12. For more details refer to Gossweiler, Großbanken, pp. 143–55.
14. Dieter Fricke et al., eds., Lexikon zur Parteiengeschichte: Die bürgerlichen und kleinbürgerlichen Parteien und Verbände im Deutschland (1789–1945), Vol. 1 (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut Leipzig, 1983), article "Bund zur Erneuerung des Reiches (BER) 1928–1933, pp. 374–82. The call for the "Third Reich" was common to most rightist groups and circles. In their jargon the First Reich was the Holy Roman Empire and the Second Reich was the "Kaisereich" from 1871–1918. The Third Reich was to come after overcoming the weak, odious, and only provisional Weimar Republic.
16. From a secret memorandum of the Truppenamt des Reichswehrministeriums "Die Abrüstungsfrage nach real-politischen Gesichtspunkten betrachtet," March 1926: "The next goal of German policy must be the recovery of the full sovereignty pertaining to those territories remaining to Germany, the rigorous fusion into the German territories which had been taken away, areas essential for sound German economic life. In the coming stage the main political development will be only to regain her European position and only must later will the restoration of her position in the world find itself on the agenda" (Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945. Aus dem Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, series B, vol. I/1, [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht], pp. 343ff.) As David Abraham in Collapse leaves aside the expansionist goals as one of the keynote motives for establishing the fascist dictatorship in Germany, he is bound to attain an unsatisfactory result in his research work on the causes of the destruction of the Weimar Republic.
17. Only one example is given from a considerable number of evidential sources: in May 1919, addressing officers of the Supreme Command, Lieutenant-General Groener said: "If one wants to struggle for world supremacy this must be prepared looking well ahead and with unrelenting consequence. One cannot afford to move backwards and forwards whilst implementing a peace policy but must resolutely press ahead a power policy. This, however, presupposes that one's ground both at home and abroad


20. See the call of the KPD “Das Gesicht dem Dorfe zu,” which appeared in the Rote Fahne of February 2, 1926, equally the peasants aid program of the KPD (Bauernhilfeprogramm der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands), which appeared in the Rote Fahne on May 22, 1931.


23. As a consequence of the failure of all attempts to eliminate the Weimar Republic by force, the former royal-Prussian Minister of the Interior, F. W. v. Loebell, reached the conclusion in July 1924 that all this had demonstrated that power could only be attained through lengthy political activity. But, “and that is its only good side, the Weimar Constitution embodies parliamentary and constitutional modes of behavior which permit the restoration of a firm state structure without civil war, street battles, dictatorial force if one understands how to operate using to the full all existing constitutional possibilities” (taken from Gossweiler, Großbanken, pp. 262-3).

24. On October 4, 1931, an editorial in the haute bourgeois newspaper Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung reached the following conclusion regarding the role of the Brüning government: “Brüning’s political activity can only be summarized as constituting the advance thrust of national dictatorship, that is to say his policies accustom the people to the dictatorship making it possible for its successors to uphold their position by referring back to their predecessors.”


26. In the DAZ (25.12.1930) a variety of political voices of various hues such as Hjalmar Schacht, General v. Seeckt, and the arch-reactionary junker Oldenburg-Januschau could be heard advocating already at that time the involvement of the NSDAP in the government. See also Wolfgang Ruge, Weimar-Republik auf Zeit (Berlin: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1969), pp. 251-62.


30. Resistance to relinquishing the “constitutional path” also became very evident during the sixtieth members’ meeting of the so-called Langnamverein, the association for the preservation of common economic interests in the Rhineland and Westphalia, in remarks made by Carl Schmitt, the crown lawyer of German big business and leading constitutional expert who opposed demands by Fritz Springorum “to move from the stage of advance notifications and preliminaries” and to implement the necessary, basic reforms “without consideration,” whereby Spring-
orum perceived as particularly urgent changing the electoral law and introducing a second chamber. See *Mitteilungen des Vereins zur Wahrung der gemeinsamen wirtschaftlichen Interessen im Rheinland und Westfalen*, 1932 annual, no. 1, vol. 21.


32. The *Deutsche Führerbriefe* influenced above all by the industrial magnate Paul Silverberg in November 1932 carried an article in two parts headed “Jena or Sedan?” which expressed the fear that the “state wages system—after the ebbing of the crisis waters—will again operate with a plus omen” adding “as in May of the system period.” The journal continues: “Sedan or Jena? . . . Utilizing to the full the crisis for cleansing and reorientating or muddling along from one day to the next quite certain that the same trouble will, after a longer period, crop up all over again. This is the epochal question facing the economy.” See also Gossweiler, *Aufsätze*, pp. 140–41.

33. Kurt von Schröder, co-owner of the Cologne bank J. H. Stein and a close, influential friend of Himmler, declared during the Nürnberg Tribunal proceedings against IG-Farben in 1947: “After the NSDAP had incurred its first rebuff on November 6, 1932, and thereby surpassed its pinnacle of success, backing by the German economy became particularly urgent” (taken from Gossweiler, *Aufsätze*, p. 559).

34. See Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Ökonomie und Klassenstruktur des deutschen Faschismus: Aufzeichnungen und Analysen*; published and introduced by Johannes Agnoli, Bernhard Blanke, and Niels Kadritzke (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1973), pp. 126, 188. See also criticism of Sohn-Rethel in Gossweiler, *Aufsätze*, pp. 636–43. The objection against Sohn-Rethel is also valid against Knut Borchardt’s thesis that the Great Depression (and thus the collapse of the Weimar Republic) was due to the unbearably (for capital) high wages (see Knut Borchardt, *Wachstum, Krisen, Handlungsspielräume der Wirtschaftspolitik*. (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982). Among others, the economic development of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) does not substantiate this view. For the past forty years, the wage level in the FRG has (in real terms) far exceeded that of the Weimar Republic without any threat to the bourgeois parliamentary system. Rather, a comparison between the Weimar Republic and the FRG shows, monopoly capital in the FRG is no longer politically compelled to maintain a parasitic social segment like the Junkers. The FRG has been free of this financial burden, which so heavily bore on the entire Weimar society. This difference surely contributed significantly to the FRG’s steep economic upswing and to the much larger political stability vis-à-vis the Weimar Republic.

35. H. A. Turner, Jr. maintained that the above-cited work by D. Abraham possessed no proper scholarly relevance because of errors in the footnotes and sources of reference. Although it is of course appropriate to criticize such negligence, it is not appropriate to elevate such errors as the sole criterion of a sound scholarly approach. A scholarly treatment of a topic can be discerned first and foremost by examining whether the historical process had been examined in line with its true motivating forces or merely exploited for the sake of its examples in point—whether historical research hinges on a scientific conception (method) or solely on pure empiricism. A comparison along such lines between the works of Abraham and Turner would decisively favor the former. Abraham’s work can be justifiably regarded as a serious analysis of German society and the driving forces of its economic and political development during the years of the Weimar Republic. Moreover, Abraham uses sound methodological and theoretical techniques. Indeed, even if one cannot agree with his findings, the nature of his analyses must cause all impartial readers to treat them with commensurate respect. The thick volume by Turner, conversely, recalls to
mind—just like the earlier, smaller collection entitled *Faschismus und Kapitalismus in Deutschland*—the work of an attorney who delves into history for but one reason, namely to find exonerating arguments for his client. In Turner’s case the client is German big business. All facts considered suitable are unbelievably exaggerated; conversely, everything countering the client’s interests is either completely concealed or, at best, depicted by means of an intensely extreme presentation, as wholly insignificant or invalid in the final analysis.

36. Thus the substantiation of the Center leader Kaas in a letter to Schleicher, January 26, 1933. See also Gossweiler, *Aufsätze*, p. 59.