That there is a crisis in Western Marxism is not news. The crisis is reflected in the organizational collapse of many of the 1970s far-left or “alternative-left” organizations (witness, in Canada, the demise of the Waffle, the Maoist Workers’ Communist Party, The Trotskyist Revolution...
ary Workers' League, etc.); in the inability of Eurocommunism to capture state power in any country in Europe; and in the inability of social democracy, in power in Europe, to galvanize a movement for social change. Amongst intellectuals, the crisis is visible in the rightward drift of ex-Marxists in France under the banner of the "Nouveaux Philosophes," the meteoric rise of an anti-materialist discourse theory, and the related debate launched by Eric Hobsbawm on "The Forward March of Labour Halted?" A generation of Marxists has begun to call into question fundamental tenets of the old orthodoxy.

An important contribution to the defence of "orthodox Marxism" in the face of this "new revisionism" has been provided by Ellen Meiksins Wood in her *Retreat From Class*. Wood has written a defence of materialism, and a welcome one, given the rampant idealism of the new revisionism—an idealism that has rejected the proletariat as the agent of social change and replaced it with vague nostrums of "discourse," notions of "equivalence," "democracy," and other such abstractions. The potential power of the proletariat is demonstrable theoretically and historically, and to have that defended in a book-length manuscript and distributed by the West's largest left publishing house is to be welcomed by anyone interested in building on the basic premises of Marxism and materialism.

Wood impressively demonstrates that the whole approach of the new revisionism effectively removes "class and class struggle from the socialist project"—that it cuts loose "ideology and politics from any social basis, and more specifically from any class foundation." She reveals the theoretical passage from arguments that rejected the economy's determining role in class formation to a further set of arguments that has rejected the working class's "privileged" position as a class with radical chains. The upshot of this is the claim that a socialist movement need not (in fact, cannot) be constructed from an intervention in the struggle of labour against capital, but rather, as Wood aptly characterizes the new revisionist strategic conclusions, by "ideological and political means which are relatively (absolutely?) autonomous from economic class conditions, motivated not by the crude material interests of class but by the rational appeal of 'universal human goods' and the reasonableness of the socialist order." Discourse at the level of ideology has replaced struggle at the level of class cleavages.
Wood's central argument is that this is in fact a revival of a very old theme. The new revisionism has retreated from Marx and Engels, who rooted their socialist project in a scientific analysis of capitalism, and has found refuge in a much older variety of socialism akin to the utopian socialism of the pre-Marxian era. Hence, she dubs this school "New True Socialism" or "NTS." The NTS motor force of history is appeal to moral good, appeal to reason, or some such quite non-materialist argument.6

Wood brings out clearly the central tenets and ideological pedigree of the new revisionism, and she effectively defends Marxism from the charge of economic determinism—a charge that has often been levelled against it. She argues that while Marxist orthodoxy does posit the forces of production and relations of production as being central to an analysis of society, it does not claim that these factors alone determine the line of march of history. She points out that for Marx and Marxist orthodoxy, class struggle and politics play a crucial role in historical development. At the same time, she traces the NTS theories back to the idealism of Althusser's Marxism (which is in turn related to the over-optimism of the Eurocommunist project)—the belief in the ability of a socialist strategy to capture or use a portion of the state in alliance with other classes. This over-optimism was actually the flip-side of an extreme pessimism about the powers and potentialities of the working class.7

Wood's general argument against the new NTS school is thorough and persuasive. That said, it is necessary to address an important weakness in the overall argument of the book. A questionable historical analysis underpins Wood's argument, making her defence of historical materialism much less convincing than her critique of the idealism of NTS. Wood's is an "abstract materialism." Nowhere is this clearer than in the puzzlement Wood consistently expresses as to why the new revisionism should have become so fashionable today. She can explain the rise of the New Right, but can only wonder at the rise of a new revisionist left:

There can be little doubt that the immediate impulse for the development of the New Right in Britain came from the outbreaks of labour militancy in the 1970s, following the period of radicalism
in Europe in 1968-69, particularly after the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974, and the defeat of the Heath government. . . . The "winter of discontent" in 1978-79 added fuel to the fire. The evolution of the NTS has also coincided with these episodes of militancy, and has reached fruition during yet another dramatic moment in the history of working class struggle, the miners' strike of 1984-85. . . . How, then, to explain the irony that the theoretical expulsion of the working class from the centre of the socialist project was being prepared at the very moment when workers in several European countries were exhibiting a new militancy, and that especially in Britain it has reached new heights whenever militant workers have dominated the political scene.8

She returns to this line of reasoning in her conclusion, again failing to come up with an answer. The NTS detachment from reality is seen as ironic and curious.9 Yet there is a relation between the material reality of the class struggle and the tendencies in ideas within the left. The drift away from the working class by the NTS is not ironic, inexplicable and curious; it is quite understandable if the period in which the left is striving to reconstruct its theory is properly understood.10

Wood marshalls quotes and concepts effectively, but stumbles badly during the few attempts she makes to analyze empirical and historical facts. Wood's assessment of the 1970s and 1980s is that a wider hearing for NTS ideas, which argue against a proletarian-centred Marxism, occurred simultaneously with the proletariat's move to centre stage in the class struggle and its display of a new militancy. If such an assessment were correct, then Wood's only recourse would have to be, not materialism, but idealism. The spread of ideas of the NTS would have no apparent relation to the material reality of the class struggle—only to the errors at the level of ideas of Althusserianism. But idealist, anti-materialist analysis of this sort is the very beast she is attempting to slay.

Wood's assessment of the 1970s and 1980s is, however, quite wrong. We can cite the British case which Wood uses in her introduction. By all gross statistical figures, the level of economic militancy in Britain is at an historic low in terms of working days lost due to strike action, the lowest since the 1930s. And any close examination of the reality of the strikes that do take place in the 1980s, as contrasted with the 1970s, would reveal a qualitative difference. Between the two episodes
of miners' militancy she cites lies a transformed environment inside the working class. From the mid-1970s on, the workers' movement found the terrain of struggle more demanding, and suffered a series of defeats that pushed it from struggles characterized by their "offensive" nature (struggles for an actual improvement in conditions), as in the early 1970s, to the type of struggle typified by the 1984-85 miners' strike—a "defensive" fight for, at best, the preservation of existing conditions against an employers' offensive. As a consequence, political generalizations on the left of the kind that arose in such profusion in Britain in the early 1970s became much more difficult in the 1980s. This passage from an upturn in struggle to a downturn was largely accomplished through the agency of the workers' own party, the Labour Party. The Callaghan government did what no Conservative government had been able to do: impose wage controls and actually lower the standard of living of the employed working class. (It is worth pointing out that even under Thatcher's draconian Tory regime, employed workers' living standards have risen.)

We need not look as far afield as Britain. In Canada, for a decade—opening in 1965 with the illegal strike of the postal workers—Canadian workers went on a strike offensive for improved working conditions, the like of which had not been seen since the period immediately after World War II. It provided the basis, I would argue, for the opening to the left that occurred simultaneously. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, Trotskyists, Maoists, the Waffle and other socialist currents found a hearing that the left had not had for a generation. This is not inexplicable. The shift to the left in ideas was rooted in a rise in confidence inside the working class.

In Canada, like Britain, it was also wage controls that signalled the shift to the defensive on the part of the workers' movement. Here, they were brought down, not by a labour party, but by the Liberal Party in the context of the first classical slump since the 1940s. In two provinces (Manitoba and Saskatchewan), however, they were administered by the workers' "own" party, the New Democratic Party (NDP). Further, just before the introduction of wage controls, the NDP government of British Columbia ended the strike of 60,000 workers in that province, creating tremendous confusion inside the workers' movement. Coinciding with the imposition of
wage controls, and in the context of this confusion inside the workers' movement, the Liberal government took on and defeated the most militant public sector union in Canada—the postal workers. A state and employers' offensive, aided and abetted by the workers' own mass organizations (in Britain, the Labour Party; in Canada, the NDP), confused and disoriented the working class, leading to demoralization, defeat and passivity.

Of course there have been strikes in the 1980s. But there are strikes and there are strikes. A serious Marxist analysis must not simply notice struggle, but analyze and understand its dynamics. In the 1970s the workers' movement was—at least in terms of its economic struggle—confident and on the offensive. For complex reasons, in the 1980s the opposite is true. There was a not inconsiderable downturn in the level of struggle of the working class—and especially an increasingly defensive character to those struggles that did exist—in the context of an overall state and employers' offensive against the gains of the 1960s and the 1970s.

Political consciousness in general begins by universalizing from the experience of the immediate past. If that experience is one of an upturn in struggle on the scale of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the climate is amenable to ideas that see the proletariat as central to a liberation strategy—that validate the claims of orthodox Marxism. But in periods of downturn, during which union struggles are sectionalized, then (as Robert Brenner has argued) “the minoritarian and restricted character of working-class activity appears to be its natural and permanent character.” Brenner clearly relates the drift to the right by sections of the left to changes in the level of struggle of the working class and the movements of the oppressed: “The decline of mass direct action movements over many years, and especially the collapse of rank and file working-class organizations, is...the overriding reason for the disarray of the left...and it has opened the way for massive confusion.”

It was in fact a downturn in the level of struggle that created the conditions under which a new revisionism or NTS could thrive; where discourse could seem to be a reasonable substitute for class struggle; and where the proletariat could be displaced from the centre of Marxist theory. “Social being determines social consciousness” was a favourite maxim of
Marx and Engels, and with the change in the social being of the class struggle, a change in the direction and tenor of social consciousness also took place. In the final analysis, this underlies the abandonment of the central role of material reality and the proletariat by theorists like Laclau and Mouffe and the whole school of the new revisionists, many of whom were originally schooled and raised in the Marxist tradition during the heady days of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Such a recognition does not mean that we need to defend Marxism and simultaneously retreat into despair because of the defensive nature of working class struggle in this period. A downturn is a relative concept—relative to a higher level of struggle both before and after. There have been downturns in the past, but given the right combination of objective circumstances and political intervention, such periods change into their opposite, during which socialist ideas once again find greater currency. In the 1930s, the American socialist Farrell Dobbs understood this perfectly:

Wiseacres of the day spoke pontifically about the "passivity" of the working class, never understanding that the seeming docility of the workers at a given time is a relative thing. If workers are more or less holding their own in daily life and expecting that they can get ahead slowly, they won't tend to radicalize. Things are different when they are losing ground and the future looks precarious to them. Then a change begins to occur in their attitude, which is not always immediately apparent. The tinder of discontent begins to pile up. Any spark can light it, and once lit, the fire can spread rapidly.\textsuperscript{12}

Wood has provided the best book-length defence of the key tenets of Marxism against its many, very trendy, revisionists. \textit{Retreat} should be seriously read by all on the left. But necessarily central to any argument in defence of the abstractions of the method of historical materialism and the political premises of orthodox Marxism is the situation of these abstractions and premises historically, concretely and empirically. That Wood does not do this (or at least not extensively and convincingly) considerably weakens her argument.
Notes

5. Ibid., pp. 1-2.
8. Ibid., p. 10.
9. Ibid., p. 186.
10. For more on this point, with reference to the British experience, see the interesting exchange between Wood and Alex Callinicos in the latter's "Looking for Alternatives to Reformism," Wood's "A reply to 'Looking for Alternatives to Reformism,'" and Callinicos's "A Rejoinder to Wood," in International Socialism 2:34 and 2:35 (Winter and Summer 1987).