Imagine that you are in Paris in early 1949. You sit in a café and hold in your hands a copy of the first issue of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. The cover is printed on heavy paper. It is white with a red horizontal band across the top. ‘*Socialisme*’ appears inside the red horizontal in a black font; ‘*ou Barbarie*’ is just below, smaller, in the white area. A thin red line makes the right lower quadrant of the white area a discrete space within which is arrayed the table of contents. Drawn by some curiosity, you open the journal and begin to read.

In the opening pages of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* no. 1, the group introduces itself. The ‘Presentation’ appears without an attributed author and is printed in italics. The italics give the piece a sense of unfolding in a meta-space just above the rest of the issue. The introduction tells you that Socialisme ou Barbarie is the name of the journal and the group of revolutionary militants who produced it. The group began within Trotskyism but was lead progressively to distance itself from it because of the latter’s reformist attitudes (in the deepest sense) with respect to Stalinism combined with an effort to maintain intact the Bolshevik politics from the heroic period in the face of a constantly evolving reality.\(^1\) It should not be of surprise that the group originated within Trotskyism: some kind of relationship with the movement is more or less inevitable for one who positions him or herself as a revolutionary and comes to understand the problems created by Stalinism. But *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was driven to break with Trotskyism following a logic that would be shared by any worker. Despite being the main organisational expression of anti-Stalinist revolutionary politics, Trotskyism provided no responses to basic questions: What is Russia? What is Stalinism? What are its social bases? What are its economic roots? How to understand the bureaucracy that has dominated Russia since the early 1930s and Eastern Europe since 1945?\(^2\)

The group understands the development and expansion of bureaucracy to be the defining characteristic of contemporary capitalism. Bureaucracy is the fundamental problem: analysing it is the thread they pull.\(^3\) What unifies bureaucracies is the division of intellectual labor that separates the *dirigeant*

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2 Socialisme ou Barbarie 1949a, pp. 1–2.
3 Singer, Brian 1979, p. 36.
from the *exécutant*, those who direct from those who carry out directions. Seen in this way, bureaucracy is a command system. The situations which it now occupies make of it a new configuration of power. Those who occupy places within these bureaucracies form a new social class. The actions of this new social class have transformed and will continue to transform both the relations of production and the potentials for revolutionary action.

The ‘Presentation’ then situates the group and its preoccupations with respect to Marxism. The way this is carried out indicates a combination of immersion in that tradition and iconoclasm with respect to it. The group rejects orthodox Marxism. Given the emphasis on the present, it makes little sense to adopt ‘a relationship to Marx like that which Catholic theologians adopt towards scripture’. Marxian analytical frameworks are only useful as long as they illuminate developments in the contemporary world. When they do not, they will be abandoned. The priority is not fidelity to Marx, but to provide a coherent orientation for a revolutionary politics adequate to the post-War world. ‘Without development of revolutionary theory, there can be no development of revolutionary action’. The article assumes the prerogative that subtends this relation to Marxism. But the relation is a process, as is the group itself. The journal will be its reflection, a forum for analysis, reflection and debate: ‘The discussion will be free within the context of our general conceptions, with the constant hope that they will not become an endless dialogue amongst a few individuals’.

The group addresses the reader and a broader working-class audience simultaneously. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* characterises its project as based on new forms of proletarian revolutionary action, which are linked to the specific nature of worker experience in both the Soviet and Western forms of contemporary capitalism. The project will require extensive analytical and political work. It is presented with a sense of urgency. In 1949, the logic of concentration that both explains and drives the confrontation between imperial blocs appears to be heading toward a third world war. Only a proletarian revolution can stop it. Whence the alternative: socialism or barbarism.

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4 Socialisme ou Barbarie 1949a, p. 2.
5 Socialisme ou Barbarie 1949a, p. 4.
6 Socialisme ou Barbarie 1949a, p. 6.
7 On the opposition as ‘a presently contending alternative’, see Curtis 1989.