Which way forward for Palestinian liberation?

Hussein Ibish and Joel Kovel with Richard Rubin

On February 23, Platypus hosted an event entitled Which Way Forward for Palestinian Liberation? *in which Joel Kovel, author of* Overcoming Zionism *and frequent commentator on the Israel-Palestine conflict, and Hussein Ibish, political analyst and senior fellow at The American Task Force on Palestine, answered questions posed by Richard Rubin of Platypus. An audience question and answer session followed. Below is an edited transcript of the event. The* Platypus Review *encourages readers to listen to the full audio of the event, available online at <platypus1917.org/2010/04/04/which-way-forward-for-palestinian-liberation>.*

Richard Rubin: *Many people would question whether a debate on the one-state versus the two-state "solution" for Israel-Palestine is worthwhile. They feel the focus should be on Israel's violation of human rights and that raising the question of whether one should strive for one state or two is at best a distraction and at worst divisive, since it highlights internal Palestinian divisions. Why then, from your different standpoints, is this an important discussion to have?*

Joel Kovel: We must keep in mind what is essential. Otherwise one gets caught up in symptoms and fails to address underlying processes. The Israeli occupation is not accidental. It has a law of motion that can be discerned if you take into account the history of Israel itself. So, clarifying aims is a matter of gaining perspective, really. You cannot gain any real perspective unless you are willing to commit yourself to certain ends and adopt the means consonant with those ends.

Hussein Ibish: If you are involved in Palestinian national liberation for decades, as I have been, then it is clear that to have an effective political program you need a clear and well-defined goal. Without it, you can have no coherent strategy, and, without a coherent strategy, you cannot be effective. Things will just be random and ad hoc, and whatever momentary victories take place end up getting lost in the ether. So the question, "What is our actual goal?" is crucial.

Of course, there are organizations that will not take a stand. For example, the US Campaign to End the Occupation claims to be agnostic, so as not to alienate any potential activists. But the effect of such agnosticism has to be recognized. It means that such organizations can have no serious policy role or direct political effect. At best, they will only have an indirect effect, because they limit their work to public education.

If you are interested in affecting the Obama administration's policy, rather than changing attitudes in the next 50 years among the general public in the United States, then one must be clear about goals. I am interested in policy now. There is a fierce urgency to ending the occupation as soon as possible. Let me delineate a scenario. You represent an organization that takes no position on the one-state/two-state question. You go to see a senior legislative aid in the office of your Congressman, and they ask, "You have two minutes. What do you want? What is your policy goal?" You will not get far if you begin a response with, "Well, umm...well you see..." So, honestly, if you are content with just raising awareness about the evils of Israeli policy, there is no problem with not taking a stance. But if you have a broader ambition, a *political* ambition, then it is simply inadequate.

Kovel: I think that there is a distinction between Ibish and myself that has to do with perspective. He is talking about work in Washington, work on policy. I think what he is saying is necessary, but very insufficient. I have a project which is longer range. For me the important thing is to consign Zionism to the dustbin of history, along with the divine right of kings. I do not think the world, certainly not that part of the world, can be made a better place unless Zionism is brought down.

So, the core of my opposition to two states is two-fold: First, it fails to provide Palestinians with genuine sovereignty and control over their own lives, producing instead a Bantustan. Second, it perpetuates Israel as a Zionist entity. If two states means the perpetuation of Israel as a Zionist state, then I oppose it.

Rubin: *Are you saying if a two-state solution were possible, you would oppose it on the grounds that it leaves Israel as a Zionist entity? If that is the case, then it seems to me that you are saying something very different than Hussein's work is necessary, because Hussein is working to end the occupation immediately.*

Kovel: Hussein and I have a substantive difference. I do not want the situation to reach the stage it reached in apartheid South Africa; we do not have a true apartheid situation yet, but that may be on the horizon. That will come when Palestine becomes a Bantustan. Striving to make Palestine into a Bantustan is not to me a worthy goal.

Ibish: I am not working to make anywhere like a Bantustan. There is no group of serious Palestinians who are interested in the trappings of sovereignty without sovereignty. They would never agree to anything like that as a permanent agreement. What exists now is a temporary agreement and Palestinians are not satisfied with it, which is why they are not signing it.

Rubin: *There are two anxieties about the two-state solution. On the Israeli side there is the oft-expressed fear that a Palestinian state would be a base for attacks against Israel. This fear is reinforced by a Palestinian discourse that speaks of liberation in stages. On the other side, Palestinians fear that a Palestinian state would be little more than a kleptocracy, one that would steal from its citizens, lack real sovereignty, and collaborate in the perpetuation of the occupation behind the mask of an internationally recognized pseudo-independence. Are either or both of these anxieties justified?*

Kovel: I do not think the first anxiety is justified. It is just paranoid Israeli propaganda. The second is obviously justified—just look at the people who signed on to the "roadmap." These people want a Palestinian authority to administer the police and the garbage disposal, not to exercise real power.

Rubin: *One of those was Yasser Arafat. Are you saying the Palestinian Liberation Organization [PLO] collaborates with the occupation?*

Kovel: Well I think the Oslo Accords were an experiment, one that has failed wretchedly. Now we need to start rethinking things.

Ibish: I think that is right. The people doing the most far-reaching rethinking are actually in the cabinet of the PA [Palestinian National Authority], particularly Salam Fayyad. The state- and institution-building program, in order to end the occupation, is the best idea anyone has had in at least 15 years. And the Israeli elite cannot decide if it is interesting or terrifying. They have no idea how to react.

As to the question, I do not think either fear is completely irrational. I agree with Professor Kovel that the second is more rooted in reality, given the asymmetries of power involved. There are genuine concerns, especially among Palestinians, that the state that they are being offered is not and will not become a Bantustan.

I would only add that there would be serious fears attached to any potential one-state arrangement, if such a thing were plausible—which it is not. That is to say, under such circumstances, Palestinians might hope to exercise political power through the ballot box. But they would face a much richer, better educated, and better organized Jewish plurality possessing much stronger national institutions. As for Jewish Israelis, again, I think that the anxiety would be reversed. So the question is whether there is a discourse or model that can prevent a single-state arrangement going the way of the two models that actually exist in practice. The mandate period under the British witnessed mounting communal violence leading to civil war and ethnic cleansing, and the occupation speaks for itself: It is nightmarish for Israelis and completely unacceptable for Palestinians. So, the track record of political unity between the Israelis and the Palestinians is not very reassuring, for either party.

Rubin: *Let's talk further about the fears surrounding a one-state solution. Israeli Jews would presumably be in the minority, although a very large minority. Would they not be oppressed by Palestinian Arabs? Is there no reason to fear the contrary as well, namely that Palestinians would be dominated by Israeli Jews, who would wield superior economic power?*

Kovel: The current situation is unsustainable. It has to change one way or another, probably in a direction that we cannot confidently predict. What we have to do is try to provide the best possible circumstances for such changes as are bound to occur, to try to ensure that they occur in a beneficial way. This is why the one-state solution is less a political program than it is a strategic goal. No outcome is worthwhile unless it is grounded in universal human rights. And these rights are incompatible with the logic and ideology of Zionism. It is going to be very challenging, but the momentum already exists for the abolition of Zionism. Obviously, it is a long way from being ushered off the stage of history, but Zionism is caught up in innumerable internal contradictions, particularly post-Gaza. People are panicking because of its loss of legitimacy and ostracizing effects. Israel is moving toward the condition of South Africa in the latter part of the 1980s. In this context, we have to uphold the hope of a genuine alternative, one grounded in universal human rights.

Ibish: Those are all noble sentiments, but I see matters a little differently. To me, the imperative of ending the occupation is in everybody's interests, especially the four million people who live under occupation in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. This cannot wait on the elimination of Zionism. It is unreasonable to put the liberation of the occupied territories on hold in favor of this much bigger project that speaks to humanity and serves some kind of cosmic interest. The occupation is too onerous, and too dangerous, to be subordinated to this other project.

It is also inaccurate that we have no foresight into the future. On the contrary, we can anticipate the most likely developments. Actually, treating this as a question of one state or two is misguided in the first place. It is not as if the Palestinians and Israelis have many options. Rather,

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Statement of Purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles in the *Platypus Review* range in length from 750–4,500 words. Submissions and inquiries may be sent to *review_editor@platypus1917.org*. Submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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they are faced with a fairly stark binary here: either have a two-state agreement to end the conflict and end the occupation, however imperfectly, or else perpetuate the conflict. A two-state agreement would certainly be an improvement, particularly for the people who live under occupation. Failing this, the likely scenario is certainly not a single state, but continued warfare.

Kovel: Very quickly, I want to emphasize that I by no means want to defer the ending of the occupation. I think of the one-state program not as a means of ending the occupation, but as a strategic goal that embodies universal human rights. Incidentally, this means opposition to the religious fundamentalisms thriving on both sides.

Rubin: *I find this confusing. Many people will say "of course we cannot defer ending the occupation," and yet they also say, "we favor a one-state approach." But it would seem that if one adopts the program of a one-state solution, then one must drop the program of ending the occupation as quickly as possible. Wouldn't ending the occupation necessarily entail the withdrawal of the Israeli military and the formation of a Palestinian state?*

Hussein, could you be more specific about what you mean by a two-state solution? Because the notion of a two-state solution is rather vague. People have very different notions of what it would look like.

Ibish: Yes, you are right about that. The question facing the Palestinians in terms of national strategy is this: Is it worth continuing the war and the occupation to try to secure something that cannot be achieved in the foreseeable future? The fact that one element of international law cannot now be realized is no argument for failing to achieve others that can be. And let me just say one thing about the refugees. People do not recognize the benefits that a Palestinian state would have for them. While it is true that the Geneva Initiative does not grant the right of return, the refugees would certainly have compensation as a result of this deal. They would also have a state in which they can find refuge. For the ones in Lebanon, this is potentially a matter of life and death. They will have an advocate on the international stage, a passport, and a nationality for the first time. None of this is a panacea. Nor does it correct all past injustices. But it is better than nothing, which is what Palestinian refugees have had since 1948.

Rubin: *How do you think a two-state solution would affect each of the three parts of the Palestinian community: refugees, people in the occupied territories, and Palestinian citizens of Israel?*

Ibish: The only plausibly achievable liberatory political objective for all of them is ending the occupation, creating a state, and going forward from there. All Palestinians would benefit from this to one extent or another—even prisoners.

Kovel: Regarding the Palestinian diaspora, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions for Palestine campaign [BDS] signals not just a way of delegitimating Israel and weakening the foundations of the Zionist entity, it is also a way to bring together people in the Palestinian diaspora and the occupied territories. I am very impressed with some of the people working on that.

Rubin: *Speaking of BDS, there seems to be a studied ambiguity in the way it is formulated. Some use BDS as a means of pressuring Israel to end the occupation, while others view it as a means by which to delegitimize Zionism and the Israeli state. It would seem to me that this ambiguity might weaken the campaign's effectiveness. How effective do you think BDS is as a strategy?*

Ibish: I am not against boycotts in theory, but they work best when targeted at the occupation and the structures of the occupation. So, for example, the Norwegian divestment from the company that makes the sensors installed all along the wall in the West Bank is great. It hits hard. The more amorphous stuff we have seen is less effective. Moreover, I am skeptical that a wide range of major American institutions will ever divest from Israel.

Rubin: *What about academic boycotts?*

Ibish: American academic institutions are not going to boycott Israel. And while boycotts can cause real economic pain, they are inadequate as the primary tactic in a national struggle between two ethno-national groups. Israel is not going to be brought to its knees by boycotts.

Kovel: Certainly, boycotts cannot bring down the state of Israel. But the divestment campaign can perform an essential function in the building of a broad movement against Zionism. And it is already happening. The last year has been very promising. Spurred by the debacle, the horror, of Gaza, we saw for the first time significant numbers of people, including Jewish people, take part.

There are groups, such as the Al Adala Society [aka, the National Justice Movement], which I work with in New York. There are groups of young people, neither Jewish nor Palestinian, who are coming together and they are fired up. They are doing remarkable things. The other day in Brooklyn, they did a marvelous thing against the Israeli ballet. They got dressed up in Israeli flag-colored tutus and pranced around the street. It appealed to the imagination and is moving in a good direction. Now we do not know how far that is going to go, but it is freaking Israel out. Any major social transformation goes through ups and downs and periods of stagnation and despair. If you keep the momentum going, gradually at first but with exponential growth, it takes on force.

Ibish: I think almost all of that is right. I would make only one addendum to it: Most, if not all, of the major success stories of the BDS campaign are not what they seem to be. The people who supposedly divested, almost to an entity, say they did not. So you have the attribution of a statement to a group that says, "We are not making that statement." Still, I agree that there is a momentum here which, if channeled in the right direction, could become powerful. And all branches of the Palestinian movement favor boycotts, though there is disagreement about what to target. Even the Palestinian Authority [PA] is leading a boycott of settlement goods and trying to get things like the wall-sensor company and other companies boycotted.

Rubin: *At the core of the one-state/two-state debate, there appears to be a dispute about the nature of Zionism. The one-state position seems to be that Zionism is an inherently racist, expansionist project with which no accommodation is possible. Those who uphold the two-state position (except, of course, for Zionist two-staters) tend to have a more nuanced attitude towards Zionism that distinguishes among its different forms. They hold that there are strains of Zionism with which accommodation is possible. How should those interested in Palestinian liberation understand and approach Zionism today? Joel's answer seemed to be that it is dying.*

Kovel: Oh, it is not dying—but it is wounded. The challenge is to kill it off. While there are any number of Zionisms, there is one crystalline truth: Zionism is neither coherent nor effective until it becomes linked with state power. Once this happens and it becomes joined with legitimated violence, then it can do its will, which is to eliminate everything non-Jewish from the land of historic Palestine. This cannot be accommodated.

Ibish: Zionism is a very interesting political problem. But ending the occupation and achieving peace with Israel are still the Palestinian national goal. What confronts the Palestinians is not an abstract political theory of Zionism, but the Israeli state. You can say the Israeli state is motivated, ultimately, by Zionism. But the fact is that Israel now exists independently of Zionism, as such, and has a momentum of its own.

Rubin: *In the debates during the French Revolution regarding the emancipation of the Jews, the liberal Conmte de Clermont-Tonnerre uttered the indelible phrase "To the Jews as individuals everything. To them as a nation, nothing." The notion that Jews should have full civil and religious rights but no national rights was long held, with few exceptions, as axiomatic among left-wing thinkers. Article 20 of the Palestinian National Charter also asserts that Judaism is a revealed religion but not a nation. For a long time this was the Palestinian attitude. But should this rejection of national rights for Jews be maintained? If one recognizes the Jews as a national community, how does this affect the question of one versus two states? If one regards them as a national community and one is for a one-state program, would it be a binational state and what would that mean? Or are you for just a secular democratic state?*

Ibish: There are two national movements, but one does not recognize the legitimacy of the other. The only way around that is to have two national projects side by side. Until such a time, the only ways I can imagine practically achieving a one-state outcome is through an almost unimaginably horrific mutual decimation and exhaustion, which I, for one, abhor. The other way is to have two states. Subsequently, these might voluntarily merge, over time, because it makes sense. There are real reasons for people who believe in one state, ultimately, to be sympathetic to the two-state agenda of ending the occupation now. There is no contradiction between a one-state aspiration for the far future and a two-state solution now.

Kovel: There is something fundamentally flawed about the very idea of a Jewish nationalism. From the very beginning, it lacked any integral relationship to a place. Its relationship to a place was always mythical. Because there was no Poland to go back to, the Zionists had to express their nationalism through expropriation of another's territory. Nationalism and settler colonialism, which inevitably bred racism, built the Israeli state. This is not a reasonable entity because, among other things, Israel's nationalism has in recent decades been nourished in a bizarre relationship to the US that guarantees it full impunity. This goes back to the destruction of the USS *Liberty*, which was never even investigated. Such impunity reinforces other violent, paranoid, and exterminatory impulses. Think of the nuclear arsenal. Think of how they want to make war with Iran, which does not have nuclear arms yet. Here is that very pathological kind of nationalism that has so infused the Zionist project and the Israeli state. The Israeli state started off socialist in orientation. Now it is virtually fascist.

Rubin: *If one accepts your dire portrayal of Israel, doesn't that make a one-state solution even more impossible? You are saying that these people are psychotic racists with nuclear weapons—but we are all going to live peacefully together?*

Kovel: I do not know how we can live with them, frankly, but what am I supposed to say? The best program is to mobilize the forces of human rights and delegitimate the Israeli state piece by piece, to gradually break it away through migration, etc., and to work in this country, ending the grip of the Israel lobby on U.S. policy.

Rubin: *The shift within the PLO toward the two-state project seems to have begun sometime in the mid-1970s, and by the 1990s it had become the virtual consensus. Since the outbreak of the Second Intifada we have seen some Palestinians return to earlier modes of speaking. What accounts for this in your view?*

Ibish: There are no Palestinian political factions that have taken up the one-state argument. It is not a factor in the internal Palestinian debate. What accounts for the rise of this is that the Second Intifada was quite vicious and caused a great deal of pain on both sides. In consequence, everyone reassessed of what kind of peace was possible and desirable. In Israel, this produced a swing to the right. Among Palestinians in the occupied territories, the main effect was the rise of Islamists, mainly Hamas. Even the secular nationalists during the Second Intifada, such as the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade (those were Fatah) began to employ religious rhetoric so as not to be outbid on religious legitimacy by the Islamists. The rise of one-state rhetoric among pro-Palestinian advocates in the West reflects the same kind of negative re-evaluation. I do not think it is a return exactly, though the rhetoric is very reminiscent of the 1960s and 1970s. Some people even call for a return to the "Three Nos": "No negotiations, no peace, no Israel." But the form is slightly different. Certainly there is a return to the strident nationalism that characterized the 1960s and 70s. But it comes from a place of pain, from the experience of the Second Intifada, and, more broadly, from 16 years of fruitless negotiation. Palestinians have seen a peace process that is all process and no peace, even as the number of settlers doubles every few years. Watching the occupied territories get eaten up, bit by bit, by the occupation has led many to conclude that diplomacy is pointless and a two-state agreement impossible.

Most pro-Palestinian one-state advocacy begins with the assertion that a two-state solution is impossible. This is rooted in perfectly truthful descriptions of a critical mass of settlements, settlers, and other topographical and administrative changes imposed on the territories by the occupation. The implication here is that those things are *fait accompli*, and can never be changed or reversed, whereas, in fact, they are of course the product of political will and can be reversed or adjusted through a redirection of political will. This is the best metric for assessing the viability of a two-state agreement, the question of political will. The overwhelming majorities of Palestinians and Israelis both want the same thing; they both want a two-state agreement. The problem is that they also do not think it will happen and they do not believe the other side can be worked with.

Rubin: *Joel, in your book on overcoming Zionism, I found it disturbing that you quote the Old Testament, the Talmud, and employ the phrase "Judaic being." You even include an anecdote about your own alienation from the synagogue in your youth. So there is a sense that you see many of the negative aspects of Zionism as arising from some deep Jewish history. The question is, if one adopts that attitude, which I would disagree with, isn't saying "overcoming Zionism" in some way a request for people to overcome Judaism?*

Kovel: There is an existential fissure, a rupture in Jewish history. Zionism is about Judaism. The Jewish people made a terrible decision to build that state in the first place. It was not theirs to begin with, and the decision has caused a lot of harm. I think the Jews have to give up the idea of Jewish exceptionalism and the notion that they are entitled to this land, which they are not. There is a striking political change in the new generation. Younger Jewish people are increasingly ill at ease with Zionism. The older the Jewish person, the more they are existentially tied to Zionism.

Ibish: This is in the United States. In Israel something similar may be happening, but Zionism is being supplanted by Israeli national identity. Though divorced from Zionism it is existential and no less difficult to deal with.

Kovel: And this national identity is tending towards fascism. The task of the Jewish people is to reflect and reassess. Thus far they have not measured up to it.

Ibish: Again, this argument about Zionism is one that Jews should have, but it is extraneous to the question of Palestinian national strategy.

Kovel: We disagree. What obstructs positive change *is* Zionism.

Rubin: *The question that I was raising concerned the way your argument implies that the negative aspects of Zionism come from deep Jewish history, as opposed to an understanding of Zionism as a modern political phenomenon that is not rooted in an ancient Jewish history or a Jewish way of being. But, let's leave that aside.*

In the United States, after the Second Intifada, we have seen the rise of various liberal and left Jewish groups focusing on Israel-Palestine and US policy. Some of these, like Brit Tzedek v'Shalom [aka, Jewish Alliance for Justice and Peace] and J Street chose to describe themselves as pro-Israel and pro-Peace, whereas others such as Not In My Name, Jewish Voice for Peace, and American Jews for a Just Peace, avoid the term pro-Israel. Some are even explicitly anti-Zionist. What is your attitude towards them and how do you distinguish among them?

Kovel: The more anti-Zionist, the better.

Ibish: I am ecumenical about this. I want to meet with, talk to, and work with anyone who wants to end the occupation. You want to end the occupation, I want to talk to you. I have nothing to say to an organization like the ZOA [Zionist Organization of America]. I have nothing to say to Hamas, either. If you want to end the occupation, let's do it. That is where I draw the line.

Rubin: *Dr. Kovel, you are an avowed Marxist. How do class divisions within both Israeli and Palestinian society affect the conflict? Also, you do not highlight any connection between overcoming Zionism and overcoming capitalism. Is there any real connection between capitalism and the struggle over Israel-Palestine? Or are questions of socialism and capitalism essentially irrelevant to this particular conflict, in your view?*

Kovel: My book takes this up, but in an understated way. It is not foregrounded for tactical reasons. The relevant example is South Africa. What happened there is simple: A deal was cut whereby the South African bourgeoisie was allowed to retain power in exchange for siding with Mandela's African National Congress [ANC]. In effect, the ANC said, "you give us the national political arena that we need and you can run the economy. We will integrate you with global capital." Forty percent of the people were thus immediately declared useless because they do not generate surplus value. So, there was hell to pay. Now, obviously there are big differences between Israeli capitalism and South African capitalism. South Africa is a powerhouse with huge reserves and an industrial base. Israel is a casino capitalist country with fancy high-tech military industries.

Ibish: Teasing out the element of class in the Palestinian struggle, the Palestinian reality, and the Palestinian future, is really very daunting and complicated. But there are a few things worth noting. First is that the case against global neoliberalism should not be deployed in relation to the question of the occupied territories. There is something much more urgent in the occupied territories than neoliberalism. The occupation supersedes that problem and is much more elemental. There are people with no passports, people with no country. There are people who live under different laws than the people of another ethnicity who live next door to them. There are checkpoints. The whole society is stifled. So, while neoliberalism is something to keep in mind, it is neither the cause nor the solution of the occupation.

That said, class divisions among Palestinians are a serious problem. A lot of the refugees and the ordinary people of the occupied territories come from the old peasant and working classes and, certainly, they get instrumentalized by the Palestinian elites. This is something that, unfortunately, has always been a hallmark of this struggle, but it has been superseded by something else. The PA order in the West Bank and the Hamas order in Gaza have produced new social classes and new ruling elites dependent upon themselves. Two things are happening simultaneously. One is what the PA government is doing with the state- and institution-building, structured around the prime minister's office under the president's protection. They are creating a new independent administrative structure which, eventually, will give rise to another new social class. This is a challenge to the existing new social class, that is, the cadres of Fatah that have control over patronage, money, contracts, etc. There is a lot of resistance to it from the upper cadres of Fatah, because it seeks to strip patronage and privilege from people ensconced in the party and to render institutions more meritocratic. That is in the West Bank. In Gaza, you have something completely different, the rise of a new social class centered around Hamas rule. One thing people now say in Gaza is, "If you want justice, you'd better have a beard." Hamas is constructing an authoritarian, drifting toward a totalitarian, structure. The lack of freedom is extraordinary. One of the striking things about the sex scandal that is going on in the West Bank is not that there is a sex scandal surrounding a politician. This is shocking to Palestinians, who are a very conservative people, but these things happen. But what the Arabic language press has noted is that such a scandal cannot happen in Gaza, because there is no free press there to put it out, discuss it, have a controversy, etc. So, there is a rise of a new deeply authoritarian and puritanical social class in Gaza that is really very troubling. It is something that Palestinians absolutely have to deal with. These are new social dynamics and they are potentially very dangerous.

Q & A

Before 1948 there was space for radical politics rooted in neither ethnic nor religious nationalism. Are there groups in Palestine today that we can look toward whose politics are not religiously or ethnically based?

Ibish: Yes, at least two different kinds, but they are both marginal. The first is that of traditional intellectual leaders. They lack political force and organization, but their politics are, if not radical, at least influenced by radicalism. People like Hanan Ashrawi and the Afda Shafi family and Mustafa Barghouti and people like that are certainly influenced by international Left discourse. They are a traditional quasi-radical leadership. What they do is more rhetorical and discursive. The other space where you find this is in the nonviolent protest movement in the West Bank. Admittedly, this is taking place in an environment shaped politically by the PA, with the approval and support of Salam Fayyad and Mahmoud Abbas. The nonviolent protesters have targeted the wall and some of these protests have been effective. They are clearly supported by the PA, but this movement also has a sort of Gramscian, decentralized, grassroots quality. It approaches politics. It has been very effective in the limited context of specific villages and has forced the Israelis to actually reroute the wall in one instance. This deserves support. They are nascent groups and one can only hope that they grow.

Kovel: There was a group called Matzpen, a group of Israeli Trotskyists, Fourth Internationalists. They mostly live in England now. The Alternative Information Center is also very good. They did a study on Israeli universities, showing how every major Israeli university actively takes part in the occupation. Opposing this has nothing to do with obstructing academic freedom. Every institution, every university in Israel is doing work for the IDF [Israel Defense Force] and it is good that there are people studying it.

There are also the military resisters in Israel. There is an ominous division within the military, the dominant institution in Israeli society. Increasingly, the lower echelons of the military are influenced by hard right-wing religious forces, while the refuseniks and others resist their government. They should be supported.

Kovel, if you do not want the Palestinians expelled, you want peace, and you are calling for a single state, doesn't that mean expelling the Jews?

Kovel: That is a big problem that has to be worked out. I want to underscore what I said earlier, that we should not minimize just how awful the situation has been. But nobody in this room made it that way, though we have to deal with it. According to polls, as many as 15 percent of Israeli Jews say they would emigrate if the Palestinians came to power. They would still have a very substantial minority, though the censuses overstate the number of Jews in Israel.

Ibish: Yes. There are about 700,000 or so Jewish Israelis who are citizens but who reside primarily somewhere else. They are all counted, whereas almost none of the Palestinians who live somewhere else are counted.

Kovel: A single state solution would probably require a kind of protectorate of interested powers guaranteeing the safety of the people there for an extended period of time, until they can work out their peace and reconciliation process, which will take a long time.

We are far from a solution to the Israel-Palestine issue. My question is historical: How do you understand how we have reached this point? Moreover, where can we look now to find actual political solutions? Where is the Left in all this?

Ibish: Which Left? There is the Arab Left, the Western Left. It is very complicated. But first, how we got here. Historically, the diplomatic process has been completely mismanaged by all the parties, particularly by the United States. It has not addressed, much less remedied, the asymmetry of power between the two parties. Without international pressure it is politically almost impossible for Israeli leaders to actually follow through on commitments made to Palestinians. They renege on them, because they have the power to do so.

One of the places I think you can really look for hope, at the moment, is the state- and institution-building agenda. It is the Palestinian answer to the settlements and is both unilateral and constructive. If sustained over a period of years with financial and technical support from around the world and political protection from the United States, it will change the strategic equation completely. It asserts and adopts the responsibilities of self-government without Israeli permission, simply by doing it unilaterally.

Kovel: I cannot urge strongly enough the importance of organizing in this country against the destructive relationship currently existing between the US and Israel and mediated by the so-called "lobby." If we change the balance of influence in this country, there will be very rapid and dramatic changes in Palestine. **| P**

Transcribed by Gabriel Gaster

Book Review: Robert Fitch, *Solidarity for Sale: How Corruption Destroyed the Labor Movement and Undermined America's Promise.*

New York: PublicAffairs, 2006.

Bhaskar Sunkara

ONE HAS TO ADMIRE THEIR PERSISTENCE. *Labor Notes*, the flagship journal of the domestic labor Left, professes itself to be "the voice of union activists who want to put the movement back into the labor movement."[1] Though stylistically about as riveting as the phonebook, for more than three difficult decades *Labor Notes* has critically observed and recorded organized labor's endemic corruption, democratic shortcomings, and gross ineptitude in organizing workers in the private sector, where today only 7.2 percent of Americans are unionized. In a typically journalistic manner, most of these problems are blamed on the perfidy of individuals: union staffers and leaders insufficiently committed to class solidarity and grassroots participation. Similarly, the striking decline in union strength is attributed to deindustrialization and the hypermobility of global capital in the neoliberal age. What is needed, according to this standard *Labor Notes* narrative, is new currents within the labor movement to bring to power more dynamic actors capable of meeting the challenges of the new century. In his new book *Solidarity for Sale* longtime labor activist Robert Fitch begs to differ.

"Corruption," Fitch argues, "flows from the retarded development of American unions, which still haven't broken out of nineteenth-century models of labor organization" (ix). Modern labor's rot began at its genesis, Fitch claims. It derives from the exclusionary craft unionism initiated by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). A century ago unskilled workers, minorities, and women were willfully neglected, while mainstream unions opposed even the most rudimentary social democratic legislation to benefit the wider working class. The famous AFL president Samuel Gompers even opposed eight-hour workday legislation on ideological grounds, differentiating the AFL from European unions that he saw as "espousing an effeminate social welfare philosophy as well as a primitive egalitarianism" (40). The AFL was concerned with wages. The mixture of this self-interested "business unionism" and the conditions in certain sectors of the economy like the textile industry, where craft unions predominated and employers were numerically small enough to be cajoled, facilitated the rise of job-control unionism. This rendered workers subservient to union officials doling out jobs, which in turn reinforced an insular culture of loyalty predicated upon fear rather than solidarity. Though defended by many progressives, Fitch sees this uniquely American development as noxious, making domestic unions highly susceptible to penetration by organized crime.

Stretches of Fitch's account read like a crime-noir novel. Questioning the founding narrative of big labor, a tale that conveniently begins with the struggle for the eight-hour day and ends with the New Deal, Fitch airs dirty laundry with the cheek of a muckraking journalist. While such tales of the corruption and mob-dealings of figures like Sam Parks, Cornelius "Con" Shea, Jimmy Hoffa, and Ron Carey are not entirely ignored by other members of the labor left, they are typically consigned to the realm of anecdotal gossip. In Fitch's narrative, these are not just the failings of unsavory individuals, but of structurally compromised institutions.

But "job control" is far from a universal feature of domestic unionism. A more fundamental flaw is the functioning of unions as *de facto* fiefdoms, a result principally of a system of exclusive jurisdictions. For instance, New York City District Council of Carpenters Local 608 is absolute in its rule over much of New York City; it claims the right not only to represent, but to tax everyone who seeks work in carpentry there. The union's sway is guaranteed by a corporatist pact with capital and the state. When a union makes an agreement with an employer, it is automatically validated by the government with a bargaining certificate, giving the union what amounts to an effective legal monopoly in the carpentry labor market. Fitch argues that "jurisdictional monopolies produce both the powerful and uncritical adhesion of the insiders to their union boss and the weak sense of union identity on the part of the remainder, who become purely nominal members" (329). Rank-and-file workers understandably do not see their unions as belonging to them and are cut off from other workers beyond their jurisdiction, stunting their potential politicization. Debate at the local level, a feature of any vibrant movement, is stifled, generating a top-down movement with grassroots pretensions.

Unlike the stronger European movement, American labor is built around a virtual closed shop, compulsory unionism unknown elsewhere in the world. Though unions cannot technically require membership as a condition of employment, in most states under "union shop" rules, workers are compelled to join the union within their first month on the job. Also uniquely American is the exclusive-bargaining clause in union contracts. This clause prevents workers from selecting the union of their choice. This more than anything else is what explains rapid expansion of the Teamsters in the 1930s: Rather than from their organizing acumen, it resulted from their willingness to offer substandard contracts to bosses threatened by more militant, less corrupt CIO organizers. For decades, men like Hoffa served as capital's accomplices, undermining militants who opposed the sellout of labor's rights.

But even in its death throes, the American labor left argues that labor's fate depends upon preserving the status quo. It refuses to ask the questions, Why then has the European labor movement been more effective without these idiosyncrasies? Is their bourgeoisie of a kinder deposition or their leaders less susceptible to the blandishments of management? The editors of *Labor Notes*, in the back cover copy of their well-circulated pamphlet *Democracy Is Power*, argue that a voluntary system, contrary to the automatic dues system of the United States that sustains our labor gentry, would promote an "individualist and consumeristic approach," where "people could decide whether to pay dues or not based on whether they personally received services they felt were worth the money."[2] This is utterly ludicrous and reprehensible in a book whose stated aim is to "show what member control really looks like, and why it is crucial to labor's future."[3] It demonstrates the fact that this breed of reformer operates within the same conservative paradigm as those they claim to oppose. The much-trumpeted Union Democracy movement is too narrowly focused to be of any long-term consequence. It is a symptom of the Left's dilapidated state that "radicals" do not have the confidence to believe that, under conditions of free discussion and debate, they would be able to sway workers towards the politics of solidarity and class consciousness. This lack of confidence cannot be understood without examining both developments within the capitalist mode of production and the disappearance of the Marxian left over the past decades.

The "golden age" of social democracy has become a figure of nostalgia on the labor left. The 1970s saw industrial nations face the intersection of weak growth and persistent inflation. Capitalism could not cope with low unemployment rates and the wage demands of militant unions. The neoliberal restructuring, far from an insidious Friedmanite plot, was rooted in real contradictions and succeeded on its own terms. The working class was restrained, inflation stabilized, and profit rates restored. Much of the labor Left seeks to re-wage those battles, futilely attempting to reverse the present historical trajectory. The complacent labor leadership, conforming their politics to "Third Way" centrist currents, understands the folly of this better than do many rank-and-file activists. The only way forward out of the present historical impasse is a recovery not only of labor movement dynamism, but, even more importantly, of anticapitalist politics. Without a political Left and its post-capitalist vision there is little to galvanize radicals, much less the wider working class.

Yet despite the social democratic trappings, Fitch's proposed solution is essentially radical:

> Well-rooted, venerable institutions rarely change much because of internal opposition. Martin Luther would have probably not have gotten far if he kept his protest within the Roman Catholic Church.
>
> Warlord systems are especially well adapted to resisting change. For centuries, ruling Afghan and Somalian clans have controlled the good bottomlands, trade routes, smuggling operations, and so on. The resources enable them to recruit selected fellow clan members as clients—chiefly as fighters. Those who aren't in the clan are deprived by the system. They don't vote. To include them would be an attack on the entire system. (328)

Fitch recommends a few piecemeal reforms to those fighting within the labor movement, such as the creation of a new and more democratic union press, cutting the number of union officials and transitioning to a model more reliant on volunteer labor, instituting term limits, and allowing union members, not leadership, to decide which politicians get their dues. But, beyond these concrete recommendations, Fitch argues that in order to truly rebuild American unions, radicals must begin at the beginning. "The periods of creativity and growth in the American labor movement," Fitch writes, "have always come when trade unions were challenged from outside—in the 1930s with the rise of the CIO, in the Progressive Era by the Wobblies, and, above all, during the era of the Knights of Labor in the mid-to-late nineteenth century" (337).

Some will question Fitch's emphasis. His provocative stories of union corruption contrast markedly with standard left-liberal accounts that downplay it, focusing instead on America's rich history of employer violence and legal obstructionism. More dubious is his closing call for a "historic compromise" between labor and capital in which the latter would give up resistance to worker representation in turn for unions giving up their right to monopoly representation. Though such an arrangement might be in the broad class interest of workers, the nature of the contemporary bourgeoisie and the entrenched labor institutions Fitch devotes the previous 338 pages to reproaching makes the prospect for any such compromise rather remote. The author also seems to reproduce some of his foes' romantic yearnings for the virtues of 19th century "republicanism" and lacks the global emphasis that not only the principle of revolutionary internationalism, but basic trade union struggle in the neoliberal age, demands.

Fitch's analysis of the structures of American unions is pitched at a sufficiently structural level as to strike activists currently embedded in the "union democracy" movement as either irrelevant or, if they are convinced by it, disillusioning. If the problem lies at the heart of labor and the task is to begin anew, where are the social forces on the contemporary left capable of such a transformation? Are they even on the horizon? Nevertheless, resistance to capital can only be bolstered by accounts like *Solidarity for Sale* that contest the reassuring bulletins we have come to expect from the "labor left." Demoralized by the apparent intractability of the impasse, today's radicals would do well to internalize the words of A. Philip Randolph, so often echoed by Bill Fletcher, Jr., "At the banquet table of nature there are no reserved seats. You get what you can take, and you keep what you can hold. If you can't take anything, you won't get anything; and if you can't hold anything, you won't keep anything. And you can't take anything without organization." Real solidarity will not come easy or without risk. Nor will it come without a renewed commitment to independent class organization. | **P**

1. <http://www.labornotes.org/about>.
2. Mike Parker and Martha Gruelle, *Democracy is Power* (Detroit: Labor Education and Research Project, 2005).
3. Ibid.

Hal Foster, continued from page 2

Thomas Hirschhorn's *Hotel Democarcy* installed at "Art Unlimited" in Art Basel in 2003.

culture to contest. If there was not a second industrial revolution to address, there was a post-industrial transformation to consider. And if there was not a socialist revolution to engage, there were struggles of other kinds to join somehow—postcolonial, racial, sexual. These forces persist, and the need to develop forms and institutions accordingly also persists. So, in principle, the avant-garde project should be alive and well. Why does it not seem so? Is it my myopia—or is it blocked by other forces? Probably both.

BS: You speak of a kind of historical trajectory, with the shift from the avant-garde to the neo-avant-garde marked by a shift in objects of reaction and resistance. How do you understand the contemporary moment in relationship to this trajectory? What are the "objects of resistance and reaction" for contemporary art? Are artists reacting to or cohesively resisting anything? Is an organized resistance or reaction still important for an art in the culture industry?

HF: In *The Anti-Aesthetic* I argued that there was a shift from the transgressive to a resistant model of the avant-garde. Maybe that language needs to be revised. For several years now there has been talk about the post-critical, but I do not buy it. The young artists and critics I know are very concerned with critical projects. They simply approach the critical in different ways.

On the one hand, it is a moment to insist again on the semi-autonomy of art as a basis of critique, and to find, in art making, models of subjectivity and sociality that are blotted out elsewhere in the culture. That seems crucial to me: There are sensuous and cognitive experiences that art still allows and that screen culture does not. On that score, then, art now and art forever. On the other hand, one might argue that all this does not matter anymore, that all that is left to art is to use art as a disguise or ruse with which to do other things—to be activists or educators or hackers or whatever. That argument makes sense to me too. And no doubt there are positions in-between. But unless young artists, critics, and curators develop the terms for these options, nothing much will be developed at either extreme or in the positions of mediation in-between.

OH: In reference to the two poles you have established—art as the sensual and cognitive, and art as disguise for activism and participation—does the latter endanger the former?

HF: Of course they challenge each other. That is part of the point! But they are the terms of a debate at least, if they could be made precise. It is not to decide one way or the other, it is to develop each position agonistically. That is a debate that is needed, it seems to me.

BS: What is suggested here is that maybe the current social climate is so changed that it cannot allow for the radical systemic rethinking for which avant-garde art was pivotal. But, conversely, I also get the impression that through your writing you would not be writing about Dada if you did not think that maybe this situation is not so much different...that maybe it is actually a lot less changed than we think it is? What are the possibilities for art to have a purchase on the present? How far removed are we from the historical possibilities presented by past avant-gardes?

HF: It is easy to make claims about the end of this, that, and the other thing. That kind nondialectical dialectic is very seductive because it is, weirdly, very triumphal in its defeatism. Certainly, innovative art, if not radical art, is not as central to the society as it once was, but that does not mean the project is kaput. The forces of amnesia have not won out altogether! I do not think this project is dead, by any means. I would not continue to do what I do if I did. There are art practices that do have effects beyond the art world. I think there are exhibitions that have effects that cannot be anticipated. It is what artists want to make of those historical episodes, if anything at all.

Another opposition we talked about that seems really crucial is, to what extent is it important for contemporary art to be reflexive historically, to draw on the past, and to transform the past. I think either position could be argued right now. It should be argued right now. And if these debates could be articulate enough, there will be effects. Not only in art, but elsewhere.

BS: Yet, in "This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse," you also characterize the contemporary moment as having a ghostly or spectral quality. What is your interest in this spectral aspect and why are past moments still "living on" and open to interpretation by today's artists?

HF: My interest in the spectral is not a melancholic lament about the end of art. It is to suggest that, rather than fixate on stories of rupture and death, we think about other narratives, ones of living on or after, of creative aftermath. For me the spectral has the force of the *revenant*, the figure that returns to surprise, even to haunt. I am very interested in the afterlives of the modern, as art historians like Aby Warburg were interested in the afterlives of the classical. That was what was at stake in the essay. It was not to say, "Oh, dead body, how sad." It was to say, "Wow, this dead body is not so dead. It is alive in ways we do not recognize."

BS: In response to what you characterize as "an allergy" to grand narratives, in "This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse," you suggest that maybe we should not simply dismiss grand narratives, that perhaps they contain something necessary. What is significant to you about grand narratives? What about this moment expresses a need to return to broader historical purview, or at least reevaluations?

HF: The polemic against grand narratives became a doxa of the postmodern. But I think Habermas was largely right in his debate with Lyotard: There are values in the project of modernity that should not be thrown out altogether. Certainly narratives are oppressive when they are only grand. But we all need stories to make sense of what we do. There is no project without a story that situates our actions. Finally, as Jameson argues, postmodernism is not the end of narrative: It is a new chapter in the grandest of all modern narratives, the history of capitalism.

BS: Has the project of replacing a paradigm of grand narratives with one of more local, specialized, micropolitics proved itself to be equally ineffective in dealing with the present as a failure of previous hopes in the history of capitalism?

HF: I do not know, but I do not think so. I think the micro-alternative is only problematic when it becomes so micro that it is atomistic in an identitarian way and lacks any articulate connection to other stories, other projects, other struggles. But I do not think that is necessarily

Hugo Ball reciting sound poetry in cubist costume at Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich in 1917.

the case. How that is made articulate in art criticism or history seems to be a really important project. To do that in the space of the contemporary, which is more and more vast every day, or so it seems, is very difficult to do. I think, to go back to form-discourse-institution connection—that would be an extraordinary project for a collective, or for a school to entertain, to really sit down and work through some of these questions seriously. | **P**

Transcribed by Omair Hussain

1. Hal Foster for the Editors, "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'" *October* 130 (Fall 2009), 3–124.
2. Hal Foster, "This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse," in *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London: Verso, 2003), 123–144.

Is the funeral for the wrong corpse?

An interview with Hal Foster

Omair Hussain and Bret Schneider

Hal Foster is a prominent critic and art historian who contributes regularly to Artforum, New Left Review, *and* The Nation. *He is also an editor of* October. *In the fall of 2009, he sent out a questionnaire to 70 critics and curators, asking them what "contemporary" means today. Foster notes that the term "contemporary" is not new, but that "What is new is the sense that, in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment."[1] Thirty-five critics and historians responded to the problem implied in this observation.*

Bret Schneider: About the *What Is Contemporary?* survey that appeared in the journal *October* this past fall—I am interested to learn your motives in surveying critics and curators in this way, i.e. by questionaire. It seems to imply some bewilderment, or maybe even discontent with the recent heterogeneity of contemporary art. What was at stake for you in this questionnaire?

Hal Foster: Perhaps it was fueled by discontent, but bewilderment also played a part. For my generation contemporary art seemed to have a special purchase on the present; the sense that art is an index of the moment appears lost in today's profusion of practices. That is a source of discontent for me. As for bewilderment, well, that could just be another name for ignorance.

Of course, any present is made up of many presents. One of the definitions of contemporary is not that we are all in the same time, but that many times coexist at once. We live in a plurality of moments, and I am ill at ease with the relativism that such a temporality implies. There used to be a way in which contemporary art was still connected to prior art as well as to its own moment. That, too, does not seem to be powerfully the case anymore. This is why I framed the questions in the survey around two models that appear dysfunctional now: modernism/postmodernism and avant-garde/neo-avant-garde. This framing was also an avowal of my relative distance from contemporary art, which is odd for a person who, for a long time, was active as a critic.

Omair Hussain: I am interested in the discussion of times when contemporary art was seemingly a more acute expression of its contemporary moment, but also understood itself as expressing and reflecting upon an entire history of art making. If, by contrast, contemporary art today can be characterized as both pluralistic and lacking in historical awareness, how do you perceive the relationship between these two attributes? Is contemporary plurality antithetical to historical consciousness?

HF: One excellent response to the survey speaks to this question. Kelly Baum, a young curator at Princeton, argues that the heterogeneity of art today actually performs the greater heterogeneity found in the social field at large. Rather than chaotic, then, it represents the dispersal that characterizes societal relations today. In this view plurality does not invalidate contemporary art as an index of the present but guarantees it. This take is interesting, but it is also a little sophistical—and it gives art too much of a pass.

What drew me to contemporary art originally was the way it seemed both to engage the historical field and to access the contemporary moment. Art history suggested that if you could follow a line, say, from the 19th century to the present, you might grasp the very trajectory of history. That was an illusion, of course, but a powerful one; it was an ego trip, too, to imagine you could surf the dialectic in this manner. Yet it made for a historical consciousness on the part of particular artists and critics that is not so evident today. The terms have changed, and the *October* questionnaire was a way to get at how the old terms no longer function, and to see what new terms might be taken up in their place.

BS: Why did you not ask any artists to participate in the "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'"? What was the significance of asking only critics and curators? Do you think that this domain is where the problems of contemporary art are best addressed, and if so, why, considering the current interest in decentralizing art discourse? What does the lack of response from curators express?

HF: I did not ask artists because I felt it was not their problem really—that it bore more heavily on critics, historians, and curators. At first I was puzzled as to why more curators did not respond. It is likely this silence speaks to an anxiety in institutions dedicated to contemporary art, but I can only guess. Certainly in the discipline of art history the contemporary is putting great pressure not just on the modern field but also on other fields. If you are trained in traditional Chinese or Indian art history, say, you might think that contemporary art, with the great pull of the market, has distorted your field.

BS: Could you clarify the ways in which art of the past had a purchase on its own historical moment? This implies that there was some sort of cohesive promise or at least some guiding principles. If there was once a promise of contemporary art, what was it?

HF: By the late 1930s, with Stalinism in particular, there was the sense that radical innovation in society was thwarted, but that it might be continued elsewhere, in the realm of culture—"to keep culture *moving*" is how Clement Greenberg put it in 1939. It's an idea that comes out of the disappointments of 1917, out of a long history of the failure of radical politics in the 20th century. In this way the Trotskyist notion of "permanent revolution" was displaced onto advanced art, and in large part it kept the idea of the avant-garde alive in the postwar period (Michael Fried argued this point in 1965). If the political seemed to be thwarted somehow, maybe the idea could be preserved within the sphere of the artistic. Yet even in that formulation there was already a reactive, or at least a conservative, displacement from politics to art.

BS: There has been a lot of theorization about the avant-garde being a project committed to breaking down the barriers between art and life. Do you see this characterization as valid, and if so, what have been effects of that project?

HF: That idea that the avant-garde aimed to break down the division between art and life was never my understanding, at least as far as most movements were concerned. That is an idea that critics like Peter Bürger supported, but it is just not specific enough.

BS: You called it a "romanticized" view somewhere.

HF: Yes. Nevertheless, it is not untrue for some avant-gardes. Certainly there was a desublimation of art in Dada, but its effects were very ambiguous. Did it produce a politicization of art or an aestheticization of much else? That is the old question, and I cannot answer definitively. Later, if a breakdown of the division between art and life did occur, it occurred in the interests of the culture industry, not of anything else. That recuperation, too, is an old story now, and for a long time artists have developed other projects in its wake.

OH: Yet I think the problem is raised anew by new social art practices and relational aesthetics, art practices that are still very much concerned with the breakdown of boundaries between art and the everyday. How do you understand the curious persistence of that mission within contemporary art today? If that project is continued, what do you foresee as the repercussions for art as a specific genre of production?

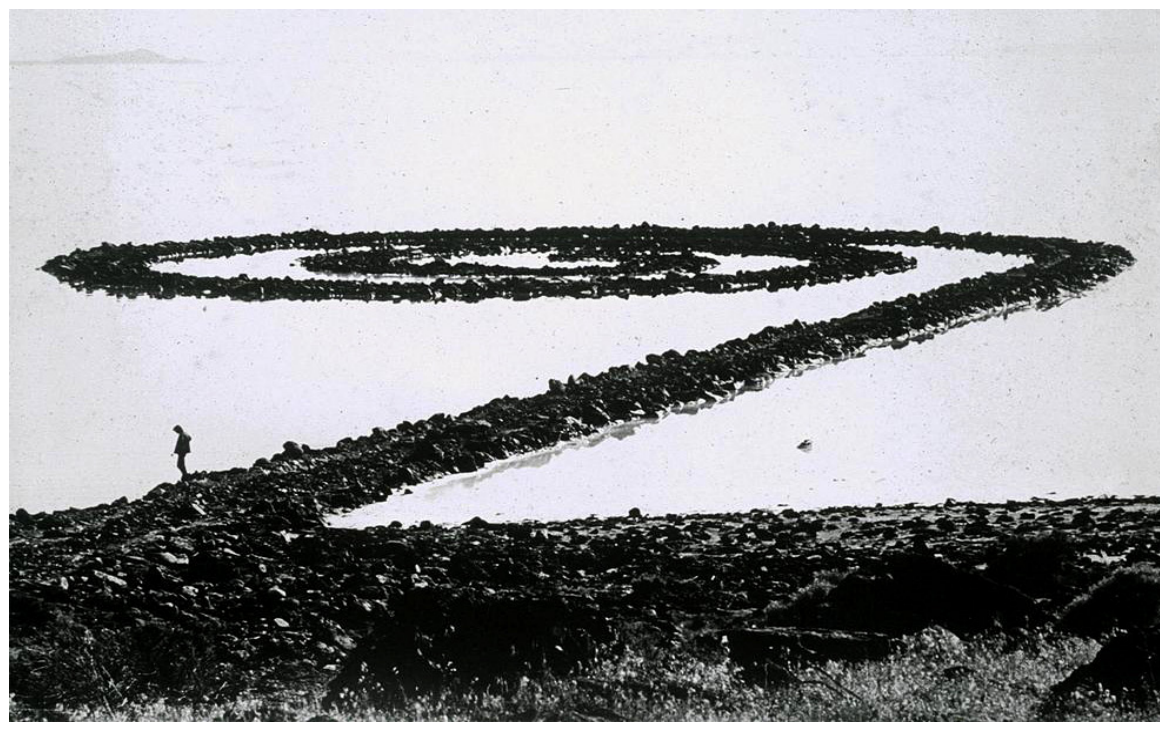
HF: My sense is that one cannot decide once and for all between artistic autonomy and social embeddedness. It is a tension that should persist. Sometimes I am on the side of Adorno, and sometimes I am opposed. It depends on the situation. To me that is not opportunistic, it is simply being responsive. Even if the autonomy of art is always only semi-autonomy, it is important to insist on. Otherwise art becomes instrumental, which is problematic even if that means it is an instrument in the hands of progressive artists.

One thing that strikes me about relational art is that it treats art spaces like a last refuge of the social—as if social interaction had become so difficult or so depleted elsewhere that it could only happen in the vacated spaces of art. It was such a sad take on the state of sociability at large. I also felt that, for all its worthy attempt to work against the spectacular basis of contemporary art, there was a way in which it posed participation as a spectacle of its own. I suppose I am more interested in practices that use art as a guise or ruse for other practices altogether, such as pedagogy, say, or politics.

BS: It seems like there has been a return to Adorno in your recent writing. For instance, in your essay "This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse,"[2] you begin with an Adorno quotation that posits the uncertainty of the existence of art, and continually recall Adorno throughout the essay, replacing "philosophy" with "art" when quoting his famous line from *Negative Dialectics,* "philosophy lives on because the moment of its realization has been missed." Have you made a return to Adorno in your recent writing? If so, what pressures of the contemporary moment is that a reaction or response to?

HF: My first edited book was *The Anti-Aesthetic* (1983), which was explicitly anti-Adornian. As it was concerned to posit a "postmodernism of resistance," it was mostly Gramscian in its view of cultural politics. That was right for its moment, but as the interdisciplinarity of postmodernism became routine, the attack on autonomy became counterproductive. Most of the relevant institutions, from the academy to the art museums, absorbed the blows and gave them back with redoubled force. At that point it was important to insist on disciplinary difference again. All these positions are time-sensitive and site-specific. Again, it is not opportunistic to move from position to position; it is often necessary—and sometimes dogmatic not to do so.

BS: To return to this non-art aspect of recent artist talks, and supplementary discourse—what you suggest in your book *The Return of the Real*, is this neo-avant-garde shift from addressing "intrinsic" concerns within art to confronting the "discursive" problems of art. In the absence of a cohesive avant-garde or neo-avant-garde, can this confrontation take place? If the neo-avant-garde has somehow "run into the ground" can there still be a persistence of this kind of shift from intrinsic concerns to discursive problems?



Robert Smithson's monumental earthwork *Spiral Jetty* (1970) is located on the Great Salt Lake, Utah. Built of black basalt rocks and earth from the site, the artist created a coil 1,500 feet long and 15 feet wide that stretches out counter-clockwise into the water.

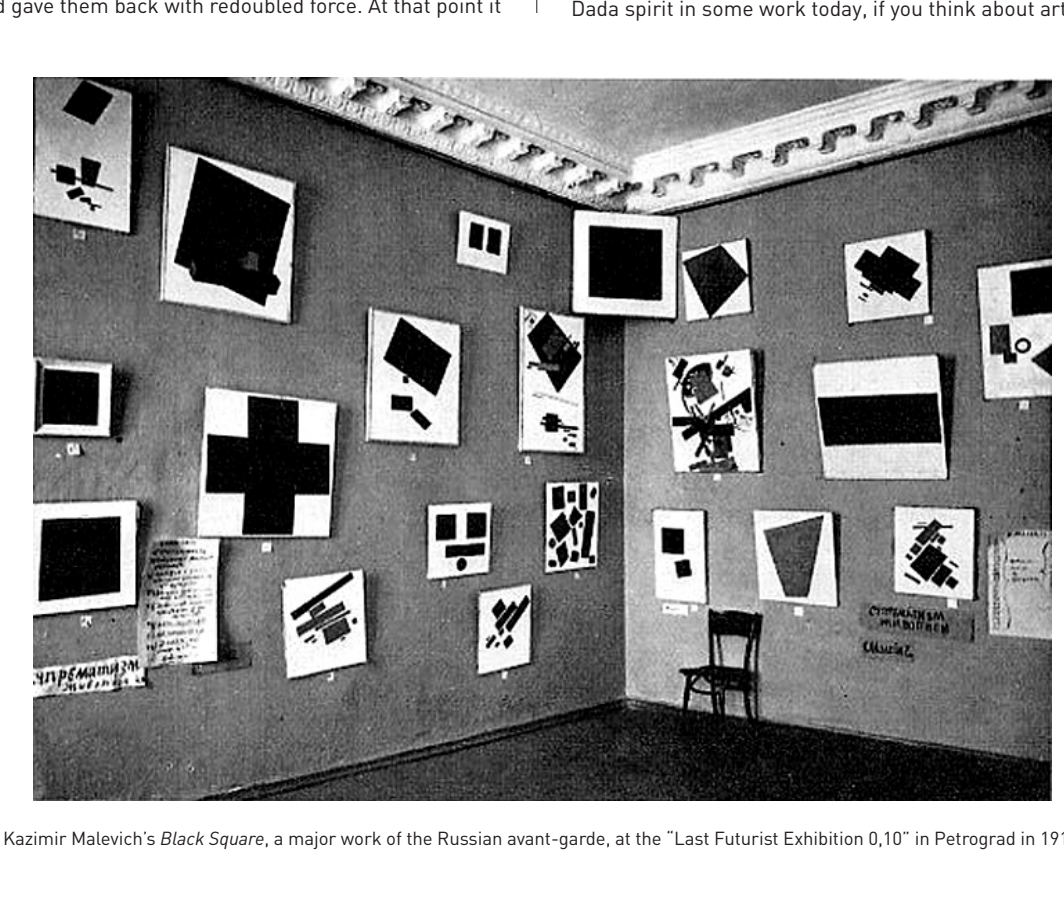
HF: I think there can be, but the connection to prior attempts to make these articulations has become attenuated, and that makes it all the more difficult. My concern here might be dismissed as merely territorial—that is, I care about these prior attempts because I am an art historian. It might have little or no bearing on contemporary practice; for the most part that is not how work is generated today. For a while in the 1990s and 2000s many artists returned to certain moments in the 1960s and the 1970s; there was an attempt to establish a further "neo" relation to that neo-avant-garde. But that seems faded now. Ultimately what concerns me is that if we do not have some terms in common for contemporary art, it is hard to determine what is at stake and of value in it. That is as directly as I can put the problem.

BS: If the contemporary moment is disconnected from the history of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, where do you locate the breaking point? Would you attribute it to the moment in the 1960s when Debord and the Situationists deliberately attempted to break with modernism?

HF: That was part of it. Obviously, Debord broke with the artistic side of the avant-garde project, but his moment could allow such a gesture. As the 1960s developed, there was an immense expansion in art, one that provoked Adorno's worry about the end of art. Think of the heterogeneity of an artist like Robert Smithson alone: It is only articulate against the foil of a rigid idea of what counts as art. Smithson had such a foil. Do artists now? Perhaps it might not matter anymore if work has a historical connection. Maybe that is just no longer the point. But, if so, consider what is lost. Not so long ago art not only "made it new" but also made things count, or made the attempt to count. Art was conceived as an intervention, one that might revalue other interventions too. The goal was to be radical in terms of history as well. If that ambition has faded, that to me is a loss.

BS: What is your interest in Dada? On the one hand, you acknowledge that the contemporary moment is both largely disconnected and uninterested in the history of modern art. Yet, in your writing, you seek to return particular modernist moments, like Dada.

HF: Maybe this contradicts what I just said. There is a Dada spirit in some work today, if you think about artists like Thomas Hirschhorn and Isa Genzken. In part, they have led me to look back again at Dada. But I do not see their work as "neo-Dada."



Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, a major work of the Russian avant-garde, at the "Last Futurist Exhibition 0,10" in Petrograd in 1915.

BS: Can this connection be characterized by recent styles of "the unmonumental" and is that problematic?

HF: Is it already a style? Too bad. Shows like "The Unmonumental" at the New Museum throw a lot of different work together. Some is indeed neo-Dada, but some is not. Again, some is Dadaist in spirit in this sense: it practices a mimesis, an exacerbation, of the awful conditions of capitalist society, as a form of critique. Historically, it has to do with Hugo Ball far more than Duchamp or Fluxus.

BS: I was curious about whether or not artists like Isa Genzken or Thomas Hirschhorn self-identify in this vein of "unmonumental" or neo-Dada. There is a general reception of this art today that frames the work as a polemic against the purported monumental qualities of modernism. This polemic seems to project sweeping and vague notions of a grand narrative onto modernism. But that projection seems to be in opposition to your view of modernism, a view that does not perceive modernism simply as a unified, cohesive movement.

HF: Yes. For me it is a mistake—an old postmodernist mistake—to monumentalize or to totalize modernism. And sometimes these artists do that. Genzken does it, for example, in her work on the Bauhaus. But as an artist she is not obliged to be historically precise. Hirschhorn, on the other hand, is clear about his commitments—not just his political commitments but also his artistic commitments.

BS: In "This Funeral is for the Wrong Corpse," you discuss Rosalind Krauss's idea that postmodern art incorporated modernist art and "trumped" it at the same time. You go on to suggest that today postmodern art is being trumped in turn. In what ways is postmodern art being trumped? By what?

HF: This is what I had in mind when I said postmodernism has become routine. In the first moment, postmodernism's attempt to reach out beyond given forms and disciplines was progressive in all kinds of ways, and in her essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" Krauss provided one map of these moves. (It was a particular map, a structuralist grid; it was unconcerned with historical process or social connection.) What happened is that over time those moves became routine. To move into the space of architecture, for example, became easy, almost automatic, even decorative. In short, the expanded field imploded, and artists had to reposition.

OH: I wonder if you perceive any relationship between a once-radical gesture become routine and the nature of the initial gesture itself. Was there something about the way in which these artists of the 1960s attempted to break with modernism that could be seen as consequential to the ineffectuality of postmodernism? Or does its failure lies outside of the control of artists?

HF: That is a good question and a difficult one. It is incumbent on artists to anticipate as much as possible how their work will be received and positioned. But, after a certain point, it is not in their control to do so. Could one have foreseen that interdisciplinarity would become routine? Maybe not. Did Daniel Buren have to become a decorator? No. And so on.

OH: Yet there seems to be a qualitatively different type of rupture in that moment than in previous modernist moments. With formal innovation serving as the primary project of the modernist avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde was often concerned with the institutions of art. Is there a relationship between the neo-avant-garde's rejection of modernism's formal concerns in favor of institutional concerns and the falling out of that project today? In retrospect, what have been the successes and failures of the neo-avant-garde project? When we look back on "Sculpture in The Expanded Field" from the culture industry which has absorbed and routinized it, did this ideology clarify previous "missed" moments like modernism, for example, or dismiss them?

HF: My distinction between an avant-garde focus on conventions and a neo-avant-garde focus on institutions was too neat. Conventions both imply and require institutions, and if you change forms radically enough, as the Russians did a century ago, you also change institutions. Of course, the avant-garde moment was one of revolutionary change at large, in a way that, arguably, the neo-avant-garde moment was not.

I still find helpful an old essay by the historian Perry Anderson that discusses the conditions of the historical avant-garde. First, there was a rigid academy to be resisted. Then there was a technological transformation to be addressed. Finally, there was a socialist revolution to be engaged. In his account—it is schematic—they drove the historical avant-garde, in its many varieties, in the moment of World War I. For the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s those conditions no longer obtained, but new ones provided an analogous context nonetheless. If there was not an art academy to resist, there was a mass-media

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