Marco Torres

FROM THEIR CANONIZATION in the 1960s through their appropriation by postmodernism in the 1980s, the writings of the Frankfurt School have had their Marxian dimension minimized, vulgarized and ultimately ignored. Walter Benjamin Theodor Adorno Herbert Marcuse and Max Horkheimer, the only names of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Theory's roster that seem to be remembered today. have instead become characterized as anything from old-timey liberals to mystical eclectics; from Left Hegelian hippies to ivory tower elitists. According to this, the standard narrative, these thinkers abandoned Marxism in the 1940s, when the continued atrocities and political unviability of the Soviet Union turned them into Cold War liberals of varied stripes.

Such narratives, which tend to claim that the deepest insights of these thinkers were accomplished in spite of their Marxism or even in the process of overcoming it, are plain wrong. From the beginning of Horkheimer's directorship of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Theory in 1930 through to Adorno's death in 1969, the goal of the Frankfurt school was to maintain the critical purchase of a Marxian social critique as it was threatened by the accelerated process of decay that the Left began in the 1920s. A look at the Institute's early history allows us to see how the necessity of this approach came to be. In the early 1920s, the original members of the Frankfurt Institute—half forgotten names such as Carl Grünberg, Henryk Grossman and Karl August Wittfogel, were social scientists of an orthodox Marxist conviction. They understood their task as an advancement of the sciences that would prove useful in solving the problems of a Europewide transition into socialism, which they saw, if not as inevitable, at least as highly likely. But as fascism reared its head in Germany and throughout Europe, the younger members of the Institute saw the necessity for a different kind of Marxist Scholarship. Beyond accumulating knowledge relevant to an orthodox Marxist line, they felt the need to take the more critical and negative approach that is required for the maintenance of an integral and penetrating understanding of society during a moment of reaction. This could be described as the politically necessary transition from Marxist positive science to Critical Theory.

After the German worker's revolution of 1918–19 had been betrayed and crushed by the Social Democrats (SPD), the early 1920s saw a period of relative stability slowly settle upon Germany. Despite the fact that further attempts by the German Communist Party (KPD) to challenge the SPD's rule were weak and ineffective, the possibility of Europe-wide socialist revolution continued to be a topic of conversation among Leftist intelligentsia in postwar Germany. This sense of possibility seemed justified: the Soviet Union had succeeded in surviving its civil war and from a distance seemed to be on a path to successful stabilization; the KPD's membership continued to grow in the permissive atmosphere of the Weimar Republic; and, with the exception of Italy, Fascism did not yet appear to be an immediate threat. In spite of their deep conservatism, the Social Democrats continued to hold up Marxism as their ideology, legitimizing it and thus making it into an open, officially sanctioned field of discussion.

It was in this environment that Felix Weil, a young graduate of the Frankfurt University who, at age 20, had fought with the workers during the revolution of 1919, began to use his great inherited wealth to finance initiatives for Marxist theoretical discussion. Having written his dissertation on 'the essence and methods of socialization', financially supported Left wing artists such as George Grosz and taken part in the social circle around KPD members Klara Zetkin and Paul Frolich, his joking self description as a "Salon Bolshevik" was not far from the truth. One of the initiatives he financially supported was the "First Marxist Workweek," a retreat at a hotel on the edge of the Thuringian Forest in which more than two dozen Marxist intellectuals, most of them affiliated with the KPD, gathered to discuss the latest works by Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács, respectively "Marxism and Philosophy," and the seminal "History and Class Consciousness." Among the attendants were Korsch and Lukács themselves, Horkheimer, Zetkin, and economist Friedrich Pollock. As it turned out, thanks to Weil's efforts, this gathering could retrospectively be seen as the first "seminar" of what would become the Frankfurt Institute of Social Theory, since throughout the next decade most of its participants would become affiliated with the Institute in some function or another. After the "Workweek" the time seemed appropriate

to go forward with Weil's project for "an institutionalization of Marxist discussion beyond the confines of middle class academia or the narrow mindedness of the communist party." After successfully convincing the ministry of culture of the necessity of an institute for the study of sociology connected to the University of Frankfurt but independent from it, Weil's first instinct was to appoint the director position to either Lukács or Korsch. But this proved impossible. The largely conservative professorship and administration of the University of Frankfurt—already up in arms about the study of sociology, which was to them "mere socialism"—would have strongly opposed the admittance of such politically active communists as

faculty. Under these considerations, Weil was obliged to offer the directorship to Karl Grünberg, a senior Marxist economist from the University of Vienna. Grünberg had been affiliated with Austrian Social Democracy for more than a decade and had once made plans to create a social research institute with the notorious SPD theoretician Karl Kautsky at its head. At the end of 1923, once Grünberg was chosen as the director, construction of the Institute's building on the Frankfurt University campus began.

Grünberg's address at the inauguration of the Institute paints an optimistic picture of a world already in an inevitable transition to a freer society:

"There are pessimists who stand horrified and amazed in the midst of the ruins which the process of change brings with it...They see the ruins not just as the ruins of their own world, but of the world as such. . . . in contrast with the pessimists there are the optimists...Supported by historical experience, they see, instead of a decaying form of culture, another, more highly developed one approaching. . . . [These] people, whose numbers and influence are constantly growing, do not merely believe, wish and hope, but are firmly scientifically convinced that the emerging order will be a socialist one, that we are in the midst of the transition from capitalism to socialism and are advancing towards the latter with gathering speed." Grünberg's Marxism stemmed from precisely this

matter of time and "scientific" certainty: "It is found that the driving pressure of the material interests which are systematically at work in economic life, and their collision one with another, produce a regular progression from lesser to greater perfection. And just as, from the point of view of the materialist conception of history every single expression of the life of society is a reflection of the current form of economic life, so equally, all history—except in primitive conditions—appears to be a

worldview. For him, the transition to socialism was only a

series of class struggles. This kind of mechanistic view of history would be precisely the kind of Marxism that later members of the Frankfurt Institute such as Adorno, Benjamin and Marcuse would turn their backs on. For them, as well as for earlier Hegelian Marxists such as Lukács and Korsch, Dialectical Materialism was not the science that predicted the automatic transformation of society. It was instead a kind of critical consciousness that emanated from within the contradictory character of society that pointed to the possibility of overcoming those very contradictions. But to see Grünberg's traditional, mechanistic Marxism as mere wrong-headedness or as a quaint artifact of the times would be to not do it justice historically. The political situation at the time seemed to indicate that a transformation of the social order was coming. It was not necessary to be affiliated to a particular party to see the recent European revolutions and the formation of the Communist Third International as the harbingers of a new era of an all out battle between capitalism and socialism—a battle out of which socialism might very well emerge victorious. In this historical period, before the series of defeats the Left suffered throughout the majority of the 20th century, to think that the simply "more advanced" character of one social system would automatically replace the current, crisis ridden one might not have been as obviously over-optimistic as it appears today.

This worldview was the reason the research of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research during these years included little reference to the quintessential recurring themes of the Frankfurt School as we remember it today: aesthetic theory, German idealism, and Freudian psychoanalysis. This set of theoretical tools would have seemed, from the perspective of Grünberg's "optimism," irrelevant: his mechanistic Marxism, affirmed by history's concurrent unfolding, would have taken them as tools of bourgeois enlightenment made obsolete by Marxist theory, which needed only to be put in practice to render this kind of enlightenment wholly obsolete. This was an attitude that, at this point, only the Hegelian Marxists Lukács and Korsch had explicitly warned against. Quoting Marx's dictum, "Philosophy cannot be abolished without being realized," Korsch had criticized theoreticians of the Second International for their assumption that "scientific Marxism" had effectively superseded philosophy—a criticism that could have very well been applied to Grünberg.

It was in the spirit of this "optimistic" traditional mechanistic Marxism that the Institute began to output its large amount of research. A look at the titles of some of these projects shows a picture of the extent to which the Institute understood its task as the collection of empirical research within the framework of revolutionary politics: The Law of Accumulation and Collapse of the Capitalist System by Henryk Grossman; Experiments in the Planned Economy in the Soviet Union, 1917–1927 by Friedrich Pollock; The Economy and Society of China by Karl Wittfogel; The Theory of the Capitalist Agrarian Crisis: a Contribution to the Explanation of Structural Changes in American Agriculture by Julian Gumperz

By the late 20s, with such research underway, the Institute was in fact shaping up to become what Weil had wanted it to be from the very beginning: a "foundation similar to the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow—equipped with a staff of professors and students, with libraries and archives"—an institute which would be worthy of one day being "presented to a [soon to come] German Social republic." On the one hand, the Institute's endowment was large enough and on the other, its curriculum independent enough from the conservative Frankfurt University, that it could give ample and exclusive sponsorship to young Marxist graduate students, from mainstream Communist Party members to Trotskyists. Its facilities housed a library of more than 37,000 volumes and an archive of historical documents on the German labor movement and the Revolution of 1918–19, a collection whose focus and "Frankfurt School" continues on page 4

May-July 2008

05/31 SATURDAY 3PM Labor and Globalization in Europe and

Labor analyst Kim Scipes examines the consequences of neo-liberal globalization on union m Europe & the US Sponsor: Open University of the Left

• Lincoln Park Library 1150 W Fullerton www.openuniversityoftheleft.org

06/12 THURSDAY 7:30PM Work Against Work: Hobohemia

Potluck followed by discussion. Bring something to share This is a continuation in a series exploring the changing nature of work in our time and in history. All events approach work as a complex activity thre which we may be utterly debased or magnificently elevated; thru which we may destroy the world or revolutionize it. Texts to be discussed are available online at http://49underground. org/nextevents.php_. Attendees are not expected to read all the articles, but please come prepared to discuss what you are able to read. The series is co-organized by the 49th Street Underground (http://.49underground org), Finding Roots (http://mayfirst. wordpress.com) and members of the Industrial Workers of the World (http://iww.org) 6932 North Glenwood Avenue

• Experimental Station 6100 S. Blackstone Ave. http://experimentalstation.org

Join us for a lively, critical conversa-

ourselves to think, imagine, and act to

revitalize and reinvent a more partici

patory democracy. This program is a

"Looking for Democracy in '08 and

part of The Public Square at the IHC's

tion and an opportunity to challenge

04/12 THURSDAY APM Congress Strike

06/02 MONDAY 6:30PM

One Person, One Vote

Beyond" series.

and Students for a Democratic Society Congress Hotel Strike Fifth Anniver-• Meet at 4pm outside 1 E. Jackson to march to Congress Hotel, Congress and Michigan Ave.

Come join fellow progressive students

06/19-22 Socialism 2008 Conference Sponsored by the International Socialist Organization • Crowne Plaza Chicago O'Hare http://www.socialismconference.org/

06/26 THURSDAY 7PM Sex Workers, Criminalization and

Human Rights Organized by Open University of the Left Lincoln Park Public Library • 1150 W. Fullerton Ave, Chicago

06/7 SATURDAY 5:30PM Privatization, Charters, High-Stake Testing, and the Fight to Preserve Public Education

CORE-Chicago, The Pilsen Alliance Collaborative for Equity and Justice Jinny Sims, the former President of the British Columbia Teachers Federa tion will talk about how the BC union effectively fought these efforts • Casa Aztlan 1831 S. Racine, Chicago

Platypus Educational Conference For summer 2008, the Platypus Affiliated Society will host an intensive educational conference the weekend of July 19-20, comprised of a series of lecture-presentations and moderated discussion sessions on key issues for reconstituting a Left for today in light of history, including on: the historical origins of the Left, the Marxian critique of labor under capital, the disintegration of the Left in the 20th Century, and the philosophy of history for the Left, and concluding with a plenary preser tation and discussion of the Platypus attempt at a synthesis of the legacies of revolutionary Marxist politics and Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Please write for details to: platypus1917@comcast.net

07/19-20

The Platypus Review

('Morse' stop on the Redline)

Taking stock of the multifaceted universe of positions and goals that constitute Left politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that perhaps a deeper commonality under lies this apparent variety: what exists today is built on the desiccated remains of what was once felt to be possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accu mulation of positions on the Left, and to evaluate their saliency for an emancipatory politics of the present. Doing this work implies a reconsideration of what we mean by "the Left". This task necessarily begins from what we see as a prevalent feature of the Left today: a general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disen-

chantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed

and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us. The editorial board of *The Platypus Review* is motivated by a sense that the very concepts of the "political" and the "Left" have become so inclusive as to be meaningless. The Review seeks to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches to these categories of thought and action—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke productive disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past might be elevated

to an ongoing critique that seeks to clarify its object.

The editorial board wishes to provide an ongoing public forum wherein questioning and reconsidering one's own convictions is not seen as a weakness, but as part of the necessary work of building a revolutionary politics. We hope to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying the variety of positions and orientations currently represented on the political Left, in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that do not find a place within existing Left discourses, locally or Internationally. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commit ment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication

Senior Editors: Pam C. Nogales C.

Editors: Ben Blumberg Ashleigh Campi Tana Forrester

Marco Torres

Copy Editors: Ashleigh Campi

Designer: Dakota Brown Webzine Editor: Laurie Rojas

Submission guidelines Articles can range in length from 500-1.000 words. We will consider longer pieces but prefer that they be submitted as proposals. Please send articles, event calendar listing submissions, and any inquiries about this project to:

platypus1917webzine@yahoogroups.com

The Platypus Review

Issue #5 | May-July 2008

1 "Race" in social-historical and political context Aay Preston-Myint and Chris Cutrone

1 Catastrophe, historical memory and the Left 60 years of Israel-Palestine The Platypus Historians Group

2 The science that wasn't From orthodox Marxism to Marxist Critical Theory

2 Walter Benjamin Michael Löwy

2 Review: Persepolis Jeremy Cohan

3 Review: "Capitalism and the environment" Interview with James Speth in NPR Adony Melathopoulos

3 Requiem for the '60s Response to a boycott of dicussion of "40 years of 1968" The Platypus Historians Group

"Let the dead bury the dead!" Response to *Principia Dialectica* (UK) on May '68 Chris Cutrone

www.platypus1917.org/theplatypusreview

Walter Benjamin

Michael Löwy

WALTER BENJAMIN OCCUPIES a unique place in the history of modern revolutionary thought: he is the first Marxist to break radically with the ideology of progress. His thinking has therefore a distinct critical quality, which sets him apart from the dominant and "official" forms of historical materialism, and gives him a formidable methodological superiority.

This peculiarity has to do with his ability to incorporate into the body of Marxist revolutionary theory insights from the Romantic critique of civilization and from the Jewish messianic tradition. Both elements are present in his early writings, particularly in "The Life of the Students" (1915), where he already rejects "a conception of history, whose confidence in the infinity of time only distinguishes the speed by which men and epochs roll, quicker or slower, along the track of progress"—a conception characterized by the "inconsistency, the lack of precision and force of the demands it addresses at the present"—opposing it to utopian images such as the messianic Kingdom or the French Revolution.(1)

Benjamin's first reference to Communism appears in 1921, in his "Critique of Violence," where he celebrates the "devastating and on the whole justified" critique of the Parliament by the Bolsheviks and the Anarcho-syndicalists.(2) This link between Communism and Anarchism will be an important aspect of his political evolution: his Marxism will to a large extent take a libertarian colour.

But it is only after 1924, when he reads Lukács's

"History and Class Consciousness" (1923), and discovers practical Communism through the beautiful eyes of Asja Lacis—a Soviet artist and political activist he met in Capri—that Marxism will become a key component of his world-view. In 1929 Benjamin still refers to Lukacs's opus as one of the few books which remain lively and topical: "the most achieved philosophical work of the Marxist literature. Its uniqueness lies in the assurance with which it grasps in the critical situation of philosophy the critical situation of class struggle, and in the coming concrete revolution the absolute presupposition, and even the absolute implementation and the last word of theoretical knowledge. The polemic against it by the hierarchy of the Communist Party under the leadership of Deborin confirms, in its way, the scope of the book."(3) This commentary illustrates Benjamin's independence of mind towards the $\it official$ doctrine of Soviet Marxism—in spite of his sympathies for the USSR.

The first work where the influence of Marxism can be felt

1 W.Benjamin, "Das Leben der Studenten," 1915, in Gesammelte Schriften (GS), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974, vol. 1,1, p. 75. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine, ML

2 W.Benjamin, "Zur Kritik der Gewalt," 1921, GS, II, 1, p. 191.

is One-way Street, written from 1923 until 1925, published in 1928. Benjamin's former neo-romantic criticism of progress is now charged with a revolutionary Marxist tension: "if the abolition of the bourgeoisie is not completed before an almost calculable moment in economic and technical development (a moment signaled by inflation and poison-gas warfare) all is lost. Before the spark reaches the dynamite, the lighted fuse must be cut". Will the proletariat be able to fulfill this historical task? The survival or destruction of "three thousand years of cultural development" depends on the answer.(4) In opposition to the vulgar evolutionist brand of Marxism, Benjamin does not conceive the proletarian revolution as the *natural* or *inevitable* result of economic and technical progress, but as the critical interruption of an evolution leading to catastrophe.

This critical standpoint explains why his Marxism has a peculiarly *pessimistic* spirit—a revolutionary pessimism which has nothing to do with resigned fatalism. In his article on Surrealism from 1929—where he again tries to reconcile Anarchism and Marxism—he defines Communism as the organization of pessimism, adding ironically: "unlimited confidence only in the IG Farben and the peaceful perfectioning of the Luftwaffe."(5) Both institutions were soon (but after his death) to show, beyond his most pessimistic forecasts, the sinister usage which could be made of modern technology.

In 1933, as Adolf Hitler seized power, like many other Jews and antifascists, Benjamin had to leave Germany. Exiled in Paris, he survived precariously with a small stipendium from the Institute of Social Research in New York, where the Frankfurt School was exiled. During those years he worked on his unfinished project on the Parisian Arcades, while producing some remarkable Marxist essays on Baudelaire and on the "Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction" (1935).

Benjamin's Marxism was a new and original re-inter-

pretation of historical materialism (nourished by Romantic culture and Jewish theology) radically different from the orthodoxy of the 2nd and 3rd Internationals. It should be considered as an attempt to deepen and radicalize the opposition between Marxism and bourgeois ideology, to heighten its revolutionary potential and to sharpen its critical content. This was also the aim of the Arcades project (Passagenwerk): "One can perceive as one of the methodological aims of this work to demonstrate the possibility of a historical materialism, that has annihilated in itself the idea of progress. Here is precisely where historical materialism has to dissociate itself from the bourgeois habits of thought." (6) Such a program did not aim at some sort of "revision" but rather, as Korsch tried to do in his own book (Karl Marx [1936], one of Benjamin's major sources) a return to Marx himself.

"Benjamin" continues on page 4

4 W.Benjamin, One-Way Street in Reflections ed. Peter Demetz, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1978, p. 84.

W.Benjamin, GS, II, 1, p. 308. The chemical trust IG Farben employed forced labour from concentration camps during the Second World War. It also produced the Ziklotron gas used to exterminate the

3 W.Benjamin, "Bücher die Liebending geblieben sind," GS, III, p. 171. 6 W.Benjamin, Passsagenwerk, GS, V,1, p. 574.

Persepolis and the personal consequences of failure

PERSEPOLIS IS A FILM that does not take itself seriously enough. This is not a comment on the unadorned animation style. Nor am I referring to the narrative of the protagonist: a story of a girl raised in a left-wing milieu that succeeds in arousing quite a bit of empathy in the audience. It is the film's treatment of depoliticization as a fait accompli and its persistent retreat to the safety of the personal that make it a fascinating symptom of politics today. Read politically, Persepolis is a trenchant, if unreflective, look into the fate of contemporary political life.

Co-directed by the creator of the graphic novel on which the film was based, Marjane Satrapi, Persepolis is a wonderful combination of autobiography and political history. Marjane grows up in Iran and, as a young girl, seems to have the "heart of a radical." At first an innocent supporter of the Shah, little Marjane changes her tune after a lecture by her parents, left-wing intellectuals both and supporters of socialist revolution. The film tarries in the excitement of the revolutionary moment for a good while and introduces us to Marjane's grandmother, whose husband was a notorious communist, and her uncle, who had been jailed for 13 years under the Shah and released at this moment of change. The Iranian intellectuals are thrilled by a sense of the emancipatory possibilities of the Iranian Revolution, and as spectators we experience this excitement through the mind of the young girl, whose active imagination shapes the film stylistically.

As the revolution goes on, the film is forthright and quite affective in facing the intense sense of disappointment that arises among this group when the Revolution brings not emancipation, but perhaps worse enslavement. This is brought home in a number of ways: the constant atmosphere of fear created by bombs dropping from Iraq on one side and "morality police" on the other; the increased idiocy of the propagandistic school lessons Marjane receives; and the demand by the revolutionary authorities that women be veiled—an obligation so frustrating to the female protagonists of the film that whenever they can, they doff their headgear with satisfaction. Perhaps the most powerful is the final execution of Marjane's uncle, a communist who held out hope for the ability of the people to seize control of their destinies until

What does one do after one has renounced "the future"? What happens when emancipation becomes impossible? One drifts alone through history; one faces the anomie and depoliticization that marks the rest of the film. Marjane begins listening to banned music such as punk rock in school and then travels to Vienna and joins a young nihilist crowd. She finds this all trifling (at one point she yells at the nihilists that her uncle actually died for something real). She goes in and out of several love affairs, but cannot be satisfied with running to Europe. So she returns to Iran—to face depression, a bad marriage, and a gener-



ally self-absorbed life. When Mariane sics a policeman on an innocent as a joke, her grandmother remonstrates her in the name of her ancestors. Yet at the close of the film the grandmother has died, silencing the last voice that may still have believed in that radical future beyond a halfhearted compromise with the rotten present.

The loss of the sense of possibility that occurs after the hopes of the Revolution have been dashed is felt deeply on all levels of the film. The story slackens; the episodes become more interchangeable. The heroine seems to find herself more and more "pushed" in given directions—as if the failure of a revolutionary moment had condemned those with the highest hope for it to a downward spiral of neurosis. One can read *Persepolis* as a coming-of-age tale, wherein Marjane learns to temper the "revolutionary" enthusiasm of childhood and the "nihilistic" selfishness of adolescence with the "quietly resigned" wisdom of adulthood. Yet this reading treats the politics of the film as mere background. The great interest of the film lies in how it can relate failed moments of political possibility and a certain kind of subjectivity—Marjane becomes horribly banalized by the end of political hope.

Now, I began this review with the claim that *Persepolis* does not take itself seriously enough. What Persepolis lacks is an awareness of how well it shows, by its changes in personal and aesthetic registers, the way in which Marjane's possibilities as a person are denuded by the lost hope of political change. This may ultimately be due to the lack of any significant narration—the "presentday Marjane's" reflections are too much bound up in this failure to offer us an outside-point on which we can stand and survey the destruction wrought on her person. It is too easy to see the film as no more than a touching story about growing up under oppression and about one person's life and increasing acceptance of how much she can "actually" accomplish. The movie lends itself to sentimentalism because of the naïve reverence for Marjane and her family that its first-person perspective encourages

Yet the film deserves to be read more symptomatically. Marjane concretizes the "post-political" malaise of the person who cannot come to terms with political failure and uses self-absorption as an escape-route from facing this failure. She is the perfect child of the 80's and 90's. Persepolis manages to effectively traverse a moment of political possibility and the sorrier and sorrier state of its subject before, during, and after that moment and its failure. The film offers the Left a mirror to itself and the sources of its own immobility—its inability to admit that it failed. It is up to us to critique what this mirror shows. IP

se ",noitetoportation not deportation," as ciety brought college students Chicago Student for a Democratic edual access to education, and the Employee Free Choice Act, equal rights in the workplace, cluded; universal amnesty, together. Demands of the march sofifical and economic struggles 10 de Marzo, have articulate their ment, represented by Movimiento and the immigrant rights movelabor groups, progressive unions third year that community based Day. This year's march marks the ebration of International Workers' ments marched together in cel-



Chicago, 05.01.2008

Catastrophe continues on page 4

ON MAY 1ST, elements of the

the endless "peace process" nor Katyusha rockets shot a dead end in both its Fatah and Hamas variants. Neither But Palestinian nationalism has also clearly reached

world where Jews live in greater physical danger. 60 is a garrison state. There is probably no country in the Jews into the oppressors of another people, and Israel at and dignity but instead it has only resulted in turning the claimed to offer the oppressed Jews of Europe freedom alism. Zionism arose as a reaction to anti-Semitism and ism, Platypus upholds the ideals of socialist internationnationalist chauvinism, racism, and religious obscuranteven more important to understand. Against all forms of It is important to commemorate and to mourn, but it is man evil" but because of a series of defeats of the Left. have been foreseen. They happened not because of "hu-A hundred years ago, none of these catastrophes could

were in a sense the tertiary victims. the disaster that overtook European Jews, Mizrachi Jews world. If the Palestinians are the secondary victims of that Jews could not live in peace as minorities in the Arab demographic base; ideologically, by appearing to confirm and ideologically: materially, by greatly fortifying Israel's of Mizrachi Jews strengthened Zionism both materially Thirdly, the retaliatory expulsions and persecution the Yishuv in 1947–1949, led to the Nakba.

against Zionism and British Imperialism took on a commeant that just and necessary struggle of Palestinians develop an anti-Zionist politics on a progressive basis Secondly, the failure within Mandate Palestine, to victims of this failure. to stop Hitler. Palestinians have become the secondary

munalist character which in the face of military defeat by

tragically predicated on the failure of the European Left European Left. The triumph of Zionism is centrally and Europeans, European Jews played central roles in the of barbarism. On a per capita basis, more than any other of socialism and communism to beat back the rising tide who for the most part trusted to liberalism and varieties distinctly a minority movement among European Jews, rising anti-Semitism throughout most of Europe, was Before the Holocaust, Lionism, despite persistent and and paved the way for further defeats.

catastrophes was both a product of the failure of the Left tion there at the hands of Ashkenazi Jews. Each of these though frequently they encountered racial discriminathey strengthened the Zionist state in crucial ways even Arab countries, most of whom ended up in Israel where exodus of hundreds of thousands of Mizrachi Jews from does not have a commonly accepted name is the forced in 1947–1949, the "Nakba," and the third panel which panel is the ethnic cleansing of Palestine by the Zionists European Jewry by the Nazis in 1941–1945. The second the systematic murder of approximately two-thirds of "Holocaust" ("Shoah" in Hebrew, "Khurbn" in Yiddish) and ethnic cleansing. The first panel in this triptych is the been shaped by a mid -20^{th} century triptych of genocide THE CONTOURS of the present day Middle East have

The Platypus Historians Group

60 years of Israel-Palestine memory, and the Left: Catastrophe, historical

take the place of the proper recognition of the social adequate anticapitatist poutics to compat it, racism with ism. As long as this structural poverty exists without an that will not be overcome short of overcoming capitalism. Poverty is a structural problem of American society this does not mean that black poverty is caused by rac-Racism played a role in sanctioning such atrocity, but be helped, but must be left to sink or swim on their own. people for a generation but to no avail, they just cannot reference to the idea that society had tried to help poor were eliminated, while most recipients were white, by so defused as a social-political issue. Welfare programs ple has been successfully isolated—"ghettoized"—and black racist assumptions, and poverty among black peoplack people have been rationalized on the basis of antiwhite. Poverty and resulting social disempowerment of any more than white people are poor because they are Black people are not poor because they are black—

Chris Cutrone responds:

-Aay Preston-Myint, Chicago, IL, April 17, 2008

ize that our achievements are "not the victory for which again be forced look back in a few generations and realindividual power, prestige or wealth—or we will once aspirations for equality and justice with an amassing of in our struggle. We must remember not to confuse our especially with regards to analyzing capitalism's role We need to be open to radical and critical philosophy, across lines of gender, sexuality, nationality, and class. racial identity can be a useful tool, we must also act by racism must also realize that while organizing around often fail to build successful coalitions. Those affected phies that neglect race (and other facets of identity) so selves on why and how organizing tactics and philosorace and racism on their terms, while educating themprivilege must allow people of color the space to define to be hard to unlearn. Activists in positions of power and affects us deeply on a subconscious level, and it is going scare quotes around the issue. The problem of race just hope that it will be spirited away by sprinkling some that effect we all must do real work to eradicate it, not by the victims and perpetrators of racism is real, and to The anger, resentment and violence brought about beaten up for being poor.

up" because I am "brown," and I certainly haven't been cause I am brown, it is just that—I have not been "beaten beaten up by a gang of, say, working-class white kids beis not worth discussing. If I walk down the street and get disingenuous, and even irresponsible, to pretend that it constructed we may believe race to be, it would be sion, exploitation of labor, and imperialism. But however context, is often employed to justify class-based oppres-

Furthermore, it is a construct that, within a capitalist One can argue to an extent that race is a construct.

confinue to be) used as disposable labor? grants from around the world, many of whom were land another other in a country founded by waves of immiforeseen how concepts of race and class would affect one they didn't want to. Is it possible that they could not have such, held significant privilege not to think about race if more racially homogeneous societies than ours, and as ist philosophers were white and were products of much We must remember that many of the canonical Marx-

have anti-capitalist beliefs. versus organizing around racial identity, even when they race-neutral philosophies such as Marxism or Anarchism at the thought of organizing around race-ambivalent or lack of such discourse is why people of color often balk must also incorporate discourse on race. I believe that a cause* they are brown, any useful critique of capitalism a world) where so many of our citizens face poverty *below-income people are brown, but in a nation (and even non-whites are in poverty? It is certainly true that not all ment towards people of color, and the assumption that mothers," are they not pandering to fear and resentcriminals in the "inner city" and cutting off "welfare around as well? When politicians talk about pursuing is often just code for poverty, but is it not the other way

Cutrone mentions in his article that (non-white) race as counterproductive, and quite frankly, a bit lazy. further marginalize an already difficult subject strikes me resentments, outward hostility, and fear. However, to ductive, complicated by centuries of taboos, underlying I do agree that the language of race is often counterprowe can talk about the "real" meat of the issue, capitalism rest of us to somehow just wake up and get over race so tone of the article make it seem as if Cutrone wants the perhaps therein lies a desire to transcend racism, but the "distraction" and "inadequate category." I appreciate that spectfully frames in quotation marks and describes as a displace a discussion of race, a term which Cutrone disre disagree that a discussion of capitalism must necessarily However, one does not necessarily follow the other. I capitalism is pretty much absent from American politics. engage the problem of race, and that an honest critique o sentiment that we as a country have failed to productively March [2008] issue [#3]. I agree with Cutrone's general

> (PR 3: March, 2008) "Snappen apnedo saob woH" no arutoal siveD elagnA Response and rejoinder to the March 2008 review of

view: Angela Davis 'How does change happen?'" from the

I would like to respond to Chris Cutrone's article, "Re-

and political context Race" in social-historical

EXCHANGE:

լջջութ #5 / May—July 2008 The Platypus Review

Capitalism and the environment

Interview with James Speth in NPR Worldview's series "Critical Thinking on Capitalism," March 26, 2008

Andony Melathopoulos

A PARADOX CONFRONTS American environmentalists according to James Gustave Speth, the Dean of Yale's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies: "We now have a flourishing environmental movement, a proliferating number of organisations, more and more money going into this, decades now of environmental legislation and programs, at all levels of government, and the environment keeps going downhill.

The contradiction, according to Speth, results from the U.S. environmental movement focusing too narrowly on working "within the system." They lobby, litigate and educate the public to the neglect of an "equally powerful effort to change the system itself." "We haven't challenged corporate power and the domination of wealth in our political process, we haven't... challenged the deep subsidisation of environmental destruction... we haven't challenged growth itself, we certainly haven't challenged our own hyperventilating lifestyles

The environmental movement, he continues, must move beyond the victories of the 1970s that led to technocratic environmental regulation. It needs to go from being "basically... an inside the Beltway business" towards an "environmental movement that is far more committed to building grassroots political power. We need a real movement and we need to get real political about it.

A major task of this grassroots political movement is to exert the pressure necessary to transform capitalism towards an ecologically sustainable end. Capitalism, according to Speth, presently cannot reproduce itself without concurrently increasing the level of economic activity. This activity, he maintains, can be "less or more environmentally destructive," but ultimately undermines sustainable development. "This is the core of the problem. We have a system that is very successful at creating economic growth and this economic growth is inherently destructive and is overwhelming our efforts at environmental cleanup and environmental management

The crushing current of capitalist production, however is one that Speth suggests can be mitigated. Prices can be adjusted to be "environmentally honest" through market-oriented instruments such as emission cap and trade permits. Growth can be tempered by shifting the focus away from traditional statistics that exclusively measure growth, such as Gross Domestic Product, towards ones that measure progress towards sustainability, such as the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare. Finally, the legal structure of large trans-national firms can be recast to make them responsive to environmental and social imperatives. "The corporations should be governed with

the participation of all of the stakeholders in the corporation and not just the people elected by... the shareholders... this would change the dynamics of the corporations fundamentally. It would make the corporation a lot more open to protecting local communities where they live and work, it would make them a lot more responsible and responsive to environmental concerns... it would not be a constant war to maximize profits." He even briefly situates his programme within an earlier revolutionary tradition: "We must dramatically change the publicly traded, limited liability global corporation just as previous generations set out to eliminate or control the monarchy"

Ironically it was the Nineteenth Century European

revolutions to "eliminate or control the monarchy" that primarily enabled the age of industrial capitalism. These capitalist social relations were far more productive and dynamic than the feudal relations that were overthrown. This dynamism and productivity, however, is interwoven with contradictions. The current environmental crisis highlights this contradictory character. Capitalism is not only generative of the blind runaway development that causes the damage, but also of a science which can quantify the damage and model scenarios for its mitigation, cultural currents that redefine use-values to include environmental parameters and even price mechanisms that warn capitalists of ecological constraints on productivity. Ultimately, our ability to both cause and recognise the problem is a product of capital

Dr. Speth's renewed call to "eliminate or control the monarchy" arises from a growing gap between "how things are" (worsening environmental conditions) and "how things ought to be" (awareness of the possibility of solutions). This gap not only results in crisis, it also provides the revolutionary germ for transcending capitalism and, as such, the possibility of directly dealing with environmental problems. Crises, however, have been historically averted not by revolution, but by policies of reform. The ultimate goal of these reformisms is not the overcoming of capitalism, but rather, to make the necessary changes for it to persist. Unwittingly, by not confronting the fundamental logic of capitalism, reformism provides the basis for renewed contradictions and crisis.

Dr. Speth's programme, in this sense, is not revolutionary, but reformist. Instead of fundamentally trying to reshape society in an ecologically sustainable way, as he frames his goal at the beginning of the interview, he brackets this transformation within the confines of capitalist production. Like the reformers of the past, he searches for the steps necessary to renew capitalist accumulation in the face of this latest looming crisis.

There are already a number of mechanisms to renew profitability in the face of environmental degradation. Speth provides an example of such a mechanism in his interview. Previous to the 1970s acid emissions grew in-step with economic activity in industrialised countries. Using a combination of stringent regulations (1970s) and a sulphur dioxide cap and trade emission trading system (1990s) the ratio of sulphur dioxide/GDP fell among U.S. firms by an average rate of 9% per year (1970-2000). The environmental crisis of acid rain, consequently, had the effect of encouraging capitalists to adapt and determine new ways of accumulating capital. These new ways increased profitability in spite of mitigation costs. The reproduction of capitalism in this non-polluting form, consequently, acted to restore profitability

Harriett Friedmann points out "Just as a "coalition of enlightened capitalists, middle-class reformers and militant labor movements brought us not socialism but welfare capitalism" so the coalition of environmental, consumer and fair-trade movements promised not a reorganization of society around the central value of enhancing ecosystem integrity, but green capitalism." Speth's reformed capitalism is still capitalism and, as such, it is subjected to the contradictions inherent in all historic forms of capitalism. These contradictions invariably sew the seeds for new and varied crises. A good illustration of the self-perpetuating nature of reformism, and one that is of pressing relevance to the environmental movement, is the string of crises that have plagued agricultural production from the outset of industrial capitalism(1).

The rapid urbanisation of Britain during the Industrial Revolution resulted in a disastrous rise in food prices. Instead of confronting capitalist production directly, British liberals resolved the crisis indirectly by eliminating agricultural tariffs. The European Diaspora in the Americas and Oceania responded to the opened market and increased their production of food. European capital tied these distant agricultural areas together in a network of railways and shipping fleets. By 1873 this network caused regional wheat prices to converge into a world market. This market expanded considerably and by 1929 its production had increased almost six-fold.

I am indebted to Harriet Friedmann's essay 'From Colonialism to Green capitalism: Social movements and emergence of food regimes', New Directions in the Sociology of Global Development (eds. Buttel, F. and McMichael, P.). (2005) Oxford: Elsevier

While the reforms of the first food crisis achieved the goal of reducing food costs in the urban industrialised core, it also created the basis for a renewed crisis. This new crisis had a different appearance. Perhaps the most devastating manifestation was the sudden drop in prices that resulted from overproduction coupled with intense international competition. Between 1925 and 1935 prices dropped steeply by two thirds and this undermined the profitability of most farmers.

The more well-known symbol of this crisis, however, was the ecological catastrophe of the "Dust Bowl". Unlike the scientific focus on long-term soil fertility of the earlier English High Farming, the new era of Diasporic-Colonial farmers ploughed perennial grasslands down without an understanding of how to prevent chronic soil erosion. Within two generations, consequently, North American farms turned their highly productive soil into a wasteland.

The farm crisis of 1925–1935 was addressed in the U.S. by the New Deal reforms that supported beleaguered farmers through government purchases of surplus commodities. This form was replicated after the war by other advanced capitalist countries. Although this policy stabilised farm incomes it had the unintended consequence of subsidising the overproduction of food in advanced capitalist countries, which in turn, depressed production in developing countries. Furthermore, productivity was restored not by returning to High English Farming practices, but by a value maximizing assemblage of industrially-produced inputs, including machinery, agro-chemicals and genetically-improved seeds.

The continued failure to deal with the commodity nature of agricultural production resulted in a renewed food crisis in 1974, in the midst of a period of immense global economic turbulence. Falling profitability of U.S. manufacturers coupled with escalating national balance of payment deficits forced the U.S. to deal with its accumulated food surplus. A massive Soviet-American grain deal in 1972 and 1973 provided the U.S. an opportunity to sell off its massive surplus for needed hard currency. Consequently the reliably abundant U.S. food surplus was suddenly unavailable to developing countries and prices for grains and oilseeds tripled. Furthermore, the crisis precipitated the abandonment of the post-war Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates, which essentially enabled the freer movement of international capital, and consequently, the expansion of trans-national corporations. Corporate dominance, therefore, has more to do with the failure of an earlier reformist policy to deal with

"Environment" continues on page 4

Frankfurt School, continued from page 2

ences in a post-revolutionary Germany

the communist past of Institute affiliates, such as Weil and

Grossman, as a way to rile up dissent against them. This

in its last struggle to maintain stability in a country that

had become politically polarized into Communist and Nazi

camps, made it illegal for people on the governments pay-

roll to belong to either of these parties. Finally, in the same

year's election the Nazi party won a majority in parliament.

Left wing students of the Frankfurt University, including

some graduate students affiliated with the Institute, had

tactics could offer only temporary protection. The election

continue his work at the helm of the Institute, Horkheimer

replaced him as director. He shared none of his predeces-

sors "scientific" optimism. In view of the threat that the

rising tide of Nazism presented to an academic institu-

tion run by Jewish Marxists, Horkheimer transferred the

Institute's finances to Switzerland and set the stage for

flight. Horkheimer's inaugral speech was very different

from the one Grünberg gave only seven years before. He

instead referred to the necessity for a backward glance,

an accounting for the failure of the emancipation that had

spoke, not of an unstoppable thrust towards socialism, but

In 1930, two years after a stroke left Grünberg unable to

to organize security contingents after Nazi youth began

demonstrating at the university gates. Such defensive

of Hitler as chancellor was only two years away.

was made easier when in 1930, the Weimar administration,



stadt, Thuringia, 1923. Among them are a few people in the ilieu of the Institute for Socia esearch: Friedrich Pollock op row, second from the left) org Lukács (top row, fourth om the left), Felix Weil (top ow, second from the right). Karl ugust Wittvogel (bottom row, rst from the left), Rose Wittgoel bottom row, second from the left), Christiane Sorge (bottom ow, fourth from the left), Karl Korsch (bottom row, fifth from

he participants of the "Marxist

Workweek" in Geraberg bei Arn-

scope were one of a kind. Weil and Grünberg had created only a few years ago seemed just around the corner. He an institution that saw its present academic role as only a did this by proposing a look at the roots of Marxian Critical Theory, the enlightenment philosophies of Kant and Hegel, preparation for its real role: the center for the social scitogether with an approach to empirical sociology informed But the revolution never came. In fact, the political by Freudian psychoanalysis and focused on mass psycholsituation was taking a sharp turn to the Right. From 1926 ogy. For Horkheimer the traditional Marxist economics of on, it became a common practice of hostile conservative Grünberg, Grossman and Wittfogel were no longer able to explain the shape the world was beginning to take. forces within the university and the government to dig up

> The regression in political consciousness that had taken place, since the failure of the German revolution of 1918, culminated in the popularity and electoral success of the Nazi party. Horkheimer's pessimism, shared by vounger members of the Institute such as Marcuse and Adorno, was a recognition of this fact. To some critics, the pessimistic turn towards theory that the Frankfurt School took in the 1930s represents a cowardly abandonment of revolutionary orthodoxy towards a safe liberalism; to most of its advocates as the fortunate correcting of the more "dogmatic" aspects of orthodoxy. And yet, seen in this historical context, it was neither. It was instead the result of an immeasurable political failure. Kant, Hegel, Durkheim, Freud—the enlightenment the Frankfurt School's brand of Marxism revisited, having once seemed a fait accompli to be safely filed away as a past victory, was now in danger of being negated, forgotten, neutralized. If Grünberg's brand of orthodoxy once dictated the obsolescence of this kind of enlightenment, the political events of 1933 had been such a giant step backwards that it was now forward thinking orthodoxy that had become unable to grasp the present. This is what Adorno meant when he began his own retrospective summation, "Negative Dialectics" in 1966, with a melancholy inversion of Marx's dictum: "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed." IP

Benjamin, continued from page 2

In 1939, as the war began, Benjamin was interned as an "enemy alien" by the French government. He managed to escape the internment camp, but after the German victory and occupation of France in 1940, he had to leave Paris for Marseille. In these dramatic circumstances, he wrote his last piece, the *Theses on the concept of history*, perhaps the most important document in revolutionary theory since Marx's celebrated "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845).

In these few but extraordinarily dense pages, the ideology of progress—also inside the Communist movement is criticized in its philosophical foundations, the linear and empty time, with the help of a "theological" Messianic

A few decades after Benjamin's death, the idea of a theology at the service of the poor in the struggle for their self-liberation, a theology intimately linked with Marxism, comes to life again, but this time in a very different

ity of Latin America. But there is a secret affinity between Walter Benjamin and liberation theology

cultural and historical context: the liberationist Christian-

In August 1940 Benjamin tried, with a group of German antifascist refugees, to cross the French border at the Pyrenées Mountains; they were arrested by the (Franco) Spanish police, taken to the village of Port-Bou, and told they would be delivered to the French and/or German police. Benjamin preferred to commit suicide. It was his

Michael Löwy lives and works in Paris. He is a member of the reunified Fourth International and is a co-author. with Joel Kovel, of the "Ecosocialist Manifesto." Among his published books is Fire Alarm, an in-depth analysis of Benjamin's "Theses on the Concept of History.

Environment, continued from page 3

the financial instability that plagued the 1930s than, as Dr. Speth asserts, an unfortunate corporate legal structure. From this perspective, the increasing influence of corporate actors in determining agricultural development, from genetically modified crops to monoculture, must ultimately be understood as a historic failure of an earlier reformism

rather than a property inherent of corporations per se. The solution to the food crisis of 1974 was to work towards an international agreement on agricultural trade. We are presently witnessing the failure of this solution, as international food prices again sore in 2008. High food prices were the genesis of the original reforms in 1846 and yet, after three major international food crises, reformist policies have only deepened the problem. The failure to arrive at an international agreement on agricultural trade at the World Trade Organisation's Doha round has set the stage for the latest reformist attempt to deal with the food crisis. Private capitals have seized on the failure of multilateral agricultural negotiations to establish their own international food standards. These standards have enabled the development of two internationally differentiated food streams: one stream for affluent consumers providing high quality food grown with environmentally sustainable

practices and fair-trade labor, while another stream supplies the remainder of humanity with the opposite

Herein lays a deeper problem with reforming capitalism and one that drives at the heart of the paradox identified by Speth at the beginning of his interview: why in the face of a looming environmental crisis does a mass movement of "common concern" fail to act? The constant cycle of reformism and crisis suggests that an underlying dynamic is directing events rather than the actions of political movements. In the absence of an international politics of the Left, contemporary politics are unable to fully confront or resolve crises and are, thus, understandably disempowering. While the instruments of reform (eg. cap and trade emission trading system, redesigning corporate legal structures) have the capacity to avert crisis, they focus on these "means" at the expense of seriously considering the "ends," or more specifically, the "reorganization of society around the central value of enhancing ecosystem integrity." Speth's "ends" are all mediated indirectly through capitalism. It is this indirect path, I believe, that has made environmental politics resemble more a "will-less football" than the necessary and engaged mass movement that it needs to be. IP

A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

This, our 5th issue, will be the last of the spring of 2008. New issues will resume in the fall. As we break for the summer we have a few brief comments and announcements. First off, we want to thank all of our contributors for the rich material they have provided us. We look forward to further submissions—which we strongly encourage and are always accepting—from these and more writers. We also want to encourage feedback from our readers; please note that a comments section accompanies each article on our website, www.platypus1917.org/theplatypusreview. Lastly, we would like to invite our readers to our first *Review* forum, projected for July, 2008. Please check with our website and watch for PR event posters for updates and announcements.

Requiem for

Response to a boycott of discussion of "40 years of 1968"

The Platypus Historians Group

canceled, as we will explain.

THE PLATYPUS AFFILIATED SOCIETY in Chicago, in coordination with several chapters of the new Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in Chicago (at the University of Chicago, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Columbia College, Chicago) organized a public forum on "40 years of 1968: the problematic drama of the past in the present," scheduled for the evening of Thursday, May 8 downtown at the School of the Art Institute. Invited panelists included Bill Ayers and Mike Klonsky, of the historic SDS and its Revolutionary Youth Movement, and currently active in the Movement for a Democratic Society (MDS). But these two panelists withdrew and the forum was

The motivation for the forum was the need to work through the very mixed and confusing legacy of the 1960s New Left. For instance, the new SDS, founded in 2006, has found it difficult to discern whether it takes its inspiration from the historic SDS in its early instantiation in the optimism of participation in the Civil Rights Movement, *The Port* Huron Statement, ERAP (the Economic Research and Action Project, funded by the United Auto Workers), or whether it is fated to pick up precisely where the preceding SDS left off, with the frustration at the on-going Vietnam War and manifest futility of anti-war protests, the Days of Rage, the insularism of division and break up, and transformation of a key faction of its leadership into the terrorist Weather Underground after 1968. 1968 seemed an important turning point. So a critical-retrospective appraisal of the trajectory of the 1960s by those who actually lived through it and still claimed its legacy seemed to be in order, and we looked forward to hearing what might be said.

The forum was prepared by a several-month long series of film screening-discussions hosted by SDS chapters and allies at various Chicago schools of Columbia Revolt 1968, Finally Got the News (1970, on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers/Detroit Revolutionary Union Movement), Brother Outsider: the Bayard Rustin Story (2003), The Weather Underground (2002), and Rebels with a Cause (2000, on the 1960s SDS), and readings and discussions of documents from the period collected in anthologies by Carl Oglesby (*The New Left Reader*, 1969), Massimo Teodori (The New Left, 1969) and Harold Jacobs (Weatherman, 1970), and contemporary histories by Irwin Unger (*The* Movement, 1974) and Kirkpatrick Sale (SDS, 1973).

But, at the last minute, several days before the forum, Mike Klonsky and Bill Ayers withdrew, causing the forum to be canceled: Klonsky made a noisy e-mail protest; Ayers gave a polite excuse. Ayers is a current subject of controversy for the Obama Presidential campaign for his participation in Weather Underground terrorism; in the 1970s Klonsky was the leader of the communist movement in the U.S. officially recognized by the People's

The following is a response written by members of the Platypus Historians Group who helped prepare the forum. Appended below this response are the original forum description and questions for discussion circulated to the panelists.

The youthful (then, pre-) Marxist German literary critic, historian and philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote a age 21 in 1913, during the ennui of the terminal crisis of modern European civilization, but just before the advent of its apocalypse in 1914, that "experience" is an ambiguous concept, especially from the standpoint of youth. As an admonition in the mouths of one's elders, "experience" means not merely a caution against the folly of youth, but the message that "it's all been tried already—and failed," which, to Benjamin's rebellious mind, poorly conceals the conclusion that "life is meaningless." Benjamin found this deference to past experience intolerable, and so should we.

The aggression of ancestors in frustration at their failures is found in their insistence that those who come after them live according to the supposed lessons of their experience. (For instance, we are supposed to learn that because they failed to overcome their own racism that we must accept as they did the late-1960s turn to Black Power separatist politics, and that, according to this enduring '60s-era sensibility, a critique of such politics must somehow mean opposition to black liberation.) But this then negates the very concept of "experience." It seems to maintain the meaningfulness of the past, but only at the expense of the present and future. Actually, it allows for neither.

Benjamin wrote (after Baudelaire and Proust) that "what is passing takes on the character of an image." But an image cannot be disputed by rational argument but only obliterated—even if only under the dust of ages. The 1960s New Left insists on retaining its image-character, which might however indeed reveal that the politics of this period and its legacy belong definitively to the past. The enduring image of the '60s is a challenge to the present, to not remain spellbound by its power but to chart our own—new—experience for the present and future. For those of us who have been born only after 1968, this becomes not only an imperative but a simple necessity, for us to live through our own struggles and not relive those of our predecessors, however we might learn from them. The present apparent inability to treat the 1960s as history finds its expression in various forms in this year marking 40 years of 1968, not least in the symbolism of the U.S. Presidential campaigns: McCain's candidacy offers the possibility of continuing the seemingly never-ending battle against the Nixon administration, Clinton offers the continued wisdom of post-'60s political cynicism with

nostalgia for the 1990s when the 1960s generation found

prosperous maturity, and Obama is regarded uncomfortably with both hope and fear as the "inexperienced" "youthful" upstart who promises—symbolically—to put the '60s behind us, after two administrations of Boomers. Bu is it yet too early, or already too late for this requiem for the 1960s? For young people today the experience of the '60s is not only past but history.

There are two questions that remain for further consideration: Whether there are present and future social-political possibilities not circumscribed by the history and further trajectory of the thoughts and actions of the 1960s New Left: and whether it is possible to critique and overcome this history of our inherited present.

The answer that the '60s generation would seem to want to give us to both questions is: No. But perhaps this is because they can't abide that the real answer might be Yes.

The Platypus Affiliated Society and new Students for a Democratic Society present a public forum on:

The problematic drama of the past in the present

Karl Marx wrote in 1852 that "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" (The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte), and complained of the rehearsal of past historical dramas in the politics of his day. Marx cited Hegel that "great world-historic facts and personages appear twice," but added "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."

More than 150 years after Marx the traditions of the world-historic moment of 1968 prove a problematic legacy. What is to be learned, both positively and negatively, from the 1960s New Left? How has the "New" Left grown old? And can it be redeemed? In what ways must we reconsider and depart from this legacy in order to have an effective Left for today and the future? How can we avoid becoming trapped in the ruins of the political movements that have

Join us for a panel discussion and audience Q&A, with distinguished veterans of the 1960s New Left, as we reflect critically upon the social and political necessities of the present and the obstacles to an adequate emancipatory imagination expressed in the inappropriate masks of the '60s we continue to wear in contemporary politics.—What would it mean today, more than a generation after the 1960s, to start in the 21st Century what Marx demanded of the 19th Century, to take our poetry from the

Bill Ayers, former SDS, Revolutionary Youth Movement, Weather Underground

Chris Cutrone, Platypus Atiya Khan, Platypus

Mike Klonsky, former SDS, Revolutionary Youth Move ment, October League

Prexy Nesbitt, former Columbia University Student Afro-American Society during 1968 strike (Moderator: James Vaughn, Platypus)

Questions for panelists

For all of the following questions for which this is appropriate, please consider the question in two dimensions: (1) What did you think then (i.e., in 1968); and (2) What do you

. What was the historical heritage of the preceding, "Old" Left (of the 1920s-30s)? Why was a "new" Left necessary in the 1960s? What inspired and informed this "new" Left?-What events, movements, thinkers?

2. Why did separatist politics (according to, e.g., race, gender, and sexuality, Black Power, feminism, gay liberation, etc.) become so salient by the late '60s? Why was it necessary, if so, to organize separately?—How did ideas of "self-determination" affect and inform politics in the 1960s?

Despite such separatism, how was the common "movement" understood? What, if anything, was the basis for the unity of the "movement?" (Why, do you think, did all these various diverse aspects of the move ment emerge at roughly the same time, by the late '60s?)

Why was the labor movement seen more as part of the problem rather than as part of any potential solutions to social and political problems in the 1960s? (For example, the 1960s Students for a Democratic Society broke up in 1969 over attempts to create a "worker-student alliance," with those resisting this orientation striking off on the basis of the "revolutionary" character of "youth.")

How, if in any ways, was the labor movement part of the problem? What about the role of labor today? Do we need a "worker-student alliance" today? If so, why not then, or did it turn out to have been necessary, after all?

4. How was the U.S. role in the war in Vietnam understood in relation to other social and political issues?

What were the differences between the early and late 60s movement, e.g., from the Civil Rights Movement to the anti-war movement? What impacts did this shift of focus have on the possibilities for progressive politics?

5. It is said that those of you participating in the 1960s movement(s) thought you could have changed the world. How was this change imagined? What kind of trans formation would have been involved? What was thought to have been necessary and possible? How and why, do you think, did your attempts to change the world fail? Or did they succeed? How do we now stand as regards such demand for change? What lessons can be learned from this demand and its success orfailure?

How, in your estimation, has the world changed since the 1960s? How does your sense of such change inform your thinking now, both retrospectively about what happened then, and about the world as it stands and what might be necessary to change it today? IP

"Race," continued from page 1

nature of the problem, and thus prevent the politics necessary to overcome it.

Those thinkers and actors in a certain anticapitalist

critical-theoretical and revolutionary political tradition, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Lukacs, Benjamin, Adorno et al., did not emerge out of a hyper-racialized social context like the U.S. The depth and meaning of anti-black racism in the U.S. is peculiar to its history; it is not a matter of ethnocentrism, national oppression, or any other form of cultural chauvinism, etc. Despite for perhaps because) Marx did not share the concrete social context of such a racist society as the U.S., he recognized very clearly the stakes of the American Civil War against slavery that "Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded" (Capital, 1867), a formulation that remains unsurpassed. Black Americans are American, as American as any "white" American could possibly claim to be. At the same time, the history of antiblack racist oppression is inseparable from the development of capitalism. And, historically, socialism has been the most consistently anti-racist form of politics.

It was not any supposed lack of awareness or insensitivity to the issue of racism that caused black radicals of the "Old" Left in the 1920s-30s such as Claude McKay and Paul Robeson, inspired to Communist politics by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, to have failed to articulate a "black" power ethos or practical political principle, but because this would have cut against the grain of their actual progressive-emancipatory politics. These figures were not lacking in black "pride" or political militancy, but they were part of the truly heroic (and truly tragic) history of radicalism of the early 20th Century that now lies obscured behind the more recent history of the 1960s and the aftermath of its failures (which were more farcical than tragic). As Davis pointed out in her Jan. 24 lecture I reviewed, the real historical background and basis for the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-60s was the earlier "cross-racial" organizing of workers, in the South—where it meant risking one's life, white or black—as well as in the North, in the 1920s-30s, when it was actually much more difficult to do this than it would have been in the 1960s, but which the "Left" of the '60s failed to even try to do, rationalizing their failure with separatist Black Power ideology.

The late-'60s Black Power turn was the result of the failures and frustrations of the limitations of the liberal integrationist politics of Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, et al. But this was not because King et al. were somehow lacking in "black" consciousness—as was scurrilously implied by Malcolm X with his famous "house nigger"-"field nigger" rhetoric—but because the practical politics of liberal-reformist integrationism could not address adequately the issue of capitalism, though King et al. were concerned with labor issues (the 1963 March on Washington was "for jobs and freedom"). Coming as we do today after the manifest inadequacies and failures of the policy reforms of the Civil Rights era, we can fall victim to naturalizing the logic of the Black Power turn of the late '60s and think of it and

the attitudes we inherit from it as some kind of necessary stage. But this would be a mistake, and not only because the Black Power turn was not a turn to the Left, but rather to the Right—the Black Power turn was a conservative recoil, an adaptation to defeat and dashed expectations. a lowering of horizons that involved the unwarranted assumption of the intractability of white racism—a sin much worse on the part of the "white" radicals who embraced this perspective than perhaps for the black radicals who

More importantly, we can and must say today, more than 40 years later, that post-Black Power politics has obviously failed—and much more miserably than the Civi Rights Movement—to improve the social conditions for black people in the U.S.—as Adolph Reed, who I cited in my review of Davis, for one, has written about extensively, for instance in "Black Particularity Reconsidered" (AKA "The 'Black Revolution' and the Reconstitution of Domination," 1979/86), pointing out the highly detrimental effects of "posing as politics."—But whereas earlier black radicals of the 1920s-30s moved on from the charlatanry of Marcus Garvey et al. to the liberal, radical and socialist politics of W. E. B. Du Bois et al., the "politics" informed by the '60s-'70s "New Left" regressed backwards along the same path, to Ron Karenga inventing holidays like Kwanzaa, etc., by the 1980s even rehabilitating Booker T. Washington's avowedly conservative notions of "self-help' and waxing nostalgic for the "black community" of the segregated conditions of the Jim Crow era (see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., et al.), and affirming "black culture" as already constituting a valid political realm of "everyday acts of resistance" (see Robin D. G. Kelley et al.)—all the results of political failures on the "Left." As Bayard Rustin pointed out at the advent of the Black Power turn, "Passionate self-assertion can be a mask for accommodation (quoted in John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: the life and times of Bayard Rustin*, Free Press, 2003, p. 475).

So this is not a matter of whether one chooses to prioritize "race" over "class," etc., but rather how one understands the problem of racism and how capitalism is understood as a context within which changes in socia problems like racism (becoming better or worse) take place. Capitalism is a global social system that determines the value and employment of human activity (or "labor") and its reproduction in ways over which people have remained relatively powerless as individual and social agents. Capitalism is the reason why there is such a thing as "disposable" labor, why human beings as potential laborers are subject to being "disposed of," and all the social consequences of this. So both social categories of "race" and socioeconomic "class" find their conditions of greater social context in the dynamics and historical changes of capital. (This is also true of issues of gender and sexuality. See the potentially seminal but largely neglected essays by Juliet Mitchell, "Women: the Longest Revolution," 1966; and John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," 1973.) Not simply "race" and "class," but racism and capitalism and how they are related need to be addressed by any

purportedly social emancipatory politics. The ways the

"Left" has tried—or failed to try, and found excuse from

trying—to address the problems of racism (as one would need to do in organizing the working class) since the 1960s have been worse than inadequate, and have turned into ideological distractions and political dead ends, bogged down in a host of pseudo-problems (that, for instance. Barack Obama was able to identify in his speech against the desperate last gasp of racist politics by the Clintons et al.), whereas, according to Rustin's critique of the Black Power turn, "the real cause of racial injustice

... is not bad attitudes but bad social conditions" ("The Failure of Black Separatism." Harper's Magazine, January. 1970). Without a practical political focus on capitalism. the social conditions for racism will remain unaddressed, and racism and the problems affecting black people and others can continue.

"Race" is a pseudo-biological category that deserves to be placed in quotation marks because it is not "real;" it is not to be naturalized and taken for granted as a point of departure, but rather needs to be attacked as the very thing to be overcome. An anti-racist politics, a politics opposed to any form of racism, cannot just assume "race"

from the start without becoming confused and confounded. Black "racial" identity is a negative not a positive value and cannot be rehabilitated or inverted for it has only ever meant degradation. We ought not to forget that antiblack racist sentiment—the disqualification of individuals rationalized by reference to their blackness—is just as prevalent among blacks as among whites and other

As Frantz Fanon put it very succinctly over 50 years ago, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), "What is often called the black soul is a white man's artifact," "For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white," and "The Negro is not. Any more than the white man." We ought not to forget this

Because we all share a social destiny in capitalism, one which we must work through and overcome in order to undermine the social conditions of possibility for racism (which are modern in nature), as Fanon also said, perhaps most outrageously, "Long ago the black man admitted the unarguable superiority of the white man, and all his efforts are aimed at achieving a white existence."—I strongly encourage all those interested in the possibility of overcoming racist oppression to read closely and ponder and internalize deeply the theses in the Introduction and Conclusion of Fanon's brilliant and profound book.

"Sickness and madness"

The world might not have been very ready to overcome capitalism up to now, but it has been more than ready to overcome racism, and so there's no reason to resign ourselves to it or treat it as more of an obstacle than it need be. The persistence of racism—including the accommodation of it on the "Left"—is the surest sign of the barbarism of our times. And so "racial" consciousness can be nothing other than debilitating and fundamentally depoliticizing. As the late Malcolm X characterized his regrets about his participation in the black nationalist Nation of Islam.

"[I] remember the time [when a] white college girl came into the restaurant who wanted to help the [Black] Muslims and the whites get together and I told her there wasn't a ghost of a chance and she went away crying. Well, I've lived to regret that incident. In many parts of the African continent I saw white students helping Black people. Something like this kills a lot of argument. I did many things as a [Black] Muslim that I'm sorry for now. I was a zombie then—like all [Black] Muslims—I was hypnotized, pointed in a certain direction and told to march. Well, I guess a man's entitled to make a fool of himself if he's ready to pay the cost. It cost me twelve years. That was a bad scene, brother. The sickness and madness of those days—I'm glad to be free of them." (Interview with Gordon

It's incumbent upon us on the "Left" to try to root out and eliminate such "sickness and madness" as completely as possible, for it is nothing other than an obstacle to

social emancipation or even the possibility of reform. As the psychoanalyst Fanon pointed out, such "race" consciousness is an expression of wounded narcissism. a traumatic fixation on the past, and resulting paranoia, problematic for a healthy reality principle, and maintaining the past in the present at the expense of the future.

Identifying one's political consciousness and practice as racially "black"—or "white"—is, as Fanon put it, citing the German Idealist philosophical tradition, an evasion and abdication of working through the "pathology of freedom," work that must be based on the "refusal to accept the present as definitive." IP

Catastrophe, continued from page 1

by Islamic fundamentalists at working-class Israeli towns

point towards an emancipatory politics. Platypus agrees with Lenin as he put it that Marxism is incompatible with "even the most refined nationalism" and solidarity with the victims of national oppression must not be confused with supporting the nationalism of the oppressed. (Zionism and Jewish history provide the classic warning in this respect! We must resist the emotional blackmail that equates natural sympathy for the victims of the Holocaust with support for Zionism and natural sympathy for the victims of the Nakba and continuing Zionist oppression with support for Palestinian nationalism.) Furthermore we emphatically emphasize along with our Enlightenment predecessors that any emancipatory politics must be resolutely secular. The triumph of a practical godlessness in politics is one of the great victories of the Enlightenment. To struggle against Zionism and Imperialism under the banner of Islam is a recipe for catastrophe and it will be a disaster for the Left if it allows its own struggle against Zionism and Imperialism to cause it to become mere cheerleaders for Islamist "resistance."

Another world is possible. But it is first necessary to tell the truth about where we are and how we got here. Platypus seeks to provoke such conversations on the Left. IP