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self-consciousness of its historical significance. Today, by contrast, we need to remember not the historical political movement so much as the form of critical consciousness given expression in Marxism. This must be traced back to the thought and political action of Marx himself.

If Marx is mistaken for an affirmer and promulgator of "communism" as opposed to what he actually was, its most incisive critic (from within), we risk forgetting the most important if fragile achievement of history: the consciousness of potential in capital. As Marx wrote early on, in an 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge that called for the "ruthless criticism of everything existing," "Communism is a dogmatic abstraction and... only a particular manifestation of the humanistic principle and is infected by its opposite, private property."²²

The potential for emancipated humanity expressed in communism that Marx recognized in the modern history of capital is not assimilable without remainder to pre- or non-Marxian socialism. Marx's thought and politics are not continuous with the Spartacus slave revolt against Rome or the teachings of the Apostles—or with the radical egalitarianism of the Protestants or the Jacobins. As Marx put it, "*Communism* is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism as such is not the goal of human development, the form of human society."²³ Communism, as a form of discontent in capital, thus demanded critical clarification of its own meaning, and not one-sided endorsement. For Marx thought that communism was a means and not an end in itself.

So what does it mean that, today, we continue, politically, to have "communism"—in Badiou's sense of demands for "radical democratic equality"—but not "Marxism"? Badiou's periodization of the history of modern communism in the history of civilization dissolves Marxism into one of its constituent parts—or at least submerges it in this history. But Marx sought, in his own thought and politics, to comprehend and transcend the specifically modern phenomenon of communism, that is, the modern social-democratic workers' movement emerging in the 19th century, as a constituent of *capital*, as a historically specific form of humanity. So, what would it mean, today, to view the history of the modern society of capital through the figure of Marx? The possibility of such a project is the Marxist hypothesis.

"Marx-ism"

It goes a long way in making sense of the most important historical figures of communism after Marx, such as Engels, Kautsky, Plekhanov, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Bukharin, Lukács, Stalin, and Mao, among others, to evaluate them as followers of Marx. It is significant that they themselves sought to justify their own political thought and action in such terms—and were regarded for this by their political opponents as sectarian dogmatists, disciples of Marxism as a

religion. But how did they think that they were following Marx? What are we to make of the most significant and profound political movement of the last two centuries, calling itself "Marxist," and led by people who, in debate, never ceased to quote Marx at each other? What has been puzzled over in such disputes, and what were—and are still, potentially—the political consequences of such disagreement over the meaning of Marx?

Certainly, Marxism has been disparaged as a religion, and Marx as a prophet. (For instance, Leszek Kolakowski dismissed Marxism as the "farcical aspect of human bondage."²⁴) But what of Marx as a philosopher? If Marx has been widely discredited as a political thinker, nevertheless, in 2005, for instance, a survey of BBC listeners polled Marx as the "greatest philosopher of all time," well ahead of Socrates, Kant, Nietzsche, and others. On the face of it, this does not seem like a particularly plausible judgment of Marx, either in terms of his own thinking and practice or of "philosophy" as a discipline, unless Marx's philosophy is understood as indicating how we have not yet overcome the problems he identified in modern society.²⁵ As far as the reputation of Marx as a thinker is concerned, we seem to have been left with "Marxism" but without Marx's own "communist" politics: "Marxism" has survived as an "analysis," but without clear practical importance; "communism" has survived as an ethic without effective politics. How might we make sense of this?

The Marxist hypothesis is that the relation between Marx and "communism" needs to be posed again, but in decidedly non-traditional ways, casting the history of Marxism in a critical light. For it is not that communism found a respected comrade in Marx—perhaps more (or less) estimable than others—but that Marx's thought and political action form an irreducibly singular model that can yet task us, and to which we must still aspire. Hence, the continued potential purchase of "Marx-ism." The question is not, as Badiou would have it, what is the future of communism, but of Marx.

To address any potential future of Marxism, it is necessary to revisit Marx's own Marxism and its implications.

Marx in 1848

Marx pointed out about the revolution in Germany, in which he immediately involved himself after writing the *Manifesto*, that the capitalists were more afraid of the workers asserting their bourgeois rights than they were of the Prussian state taking away theirs. This was not because of a conflicting class interest between the capitalists and Junkers (Prussian landed aristocracy), but rather because of the emerging authoritarianism in post-Industrial Revolution capital, at a global scale. For such authoritarianism was also characteristic of the revolution of 1848 in France, in which Napoleon's nephew Louis Bonaparte's rule, as the first elected President of the Second Republic (1848–52), and then,



Napoleon III and Bismarck after the defeat of the French at Sedan, 1870.

after his coup d'état, as Emperor of the Second Empire (1852–70), could not be characterized as expressing the interest of some *non*-bourgeois class (the "peasants," whom Marx insisted on calling, pointedly, "petit bourgeois"), but rather of *all* the classes of bourgeois society, including the "lumpenproletariat," in crisis by the mid-19th century.²⁶ As Marx put it mordantly, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), bourgeois fanatics for order were shot down on their balconies in the name of defense of the social order.²⁷ The late 19th century rule of Napoleon III and Bismarck—and Disraeli—mirrored each other. Marx analyzed the authoritarianism of post-1848 society, in which the state seems to rise over civil life, as a situation in which the bourgeoisie were no longer and the proletariat not yet able to master capital.²⁸ This was the crisis of bourgeois society Marx recognized. Badiou's account, on the other hand, is rather a history of ruling class power opposed by the resistance of the oppressed. As early as 1848 Marx was not a theorist of *classes* but *capital*, of which modern socio-political classes were "phantasmagorical" projections.²⁹ Marx sought to situate, not capital in the history of class struggle, but history in capital,³⁰ to which social struggles and their history were subordinate.³¹

Capitalism, communism, and the "state of nature"

Jean-Jacques Rousseau had raised a hypothetical "state of nature" in order to throw contemporary society into critical relief. In so doing, Rousseau sought to bring society closer to a "state of nature." Liberal, bourgeois society was a model and an aspiration for Rousseau. For Rousseau, it was human "nature" to be free. Humans achieved a higher "civil liberty" of "moral freedom" in society than they could enjoy as animals, with mere "physical" freedom in nature. Indeed, as animals, humans are not free, but rather slaves to their natural needs and instincts. Only in society could freedom be achieved, and humans free themselves from their natural, animal condition.³² When Rousseau was writing,

in the mid-18th century, the promise of freedom in bourgeois society was still on the horizon. Bourgeois society aspired to proximity to the "state of nature" in the sense of bringing humanity, both collectively and individually, closer to its potential, to better realize its freedom. With Marx, communism, too, aimed for the realization of this potential. The imagination of a "primitive communism," closer to a "state of nature" of unspoiled human potential, recapitulated the Rousseauian vision of bourgeois society as emancipation. But, in capitalism, bourgeois society had come to violate its own promised potential. It had become a "state of nature," not in Rousseau's sense, but rather according to Hobbes, a "war of all against all"—a conception that Rousseau had critiqued. Society was not to be the suspension of hostilities, but the realization of freedom. Moreover, humanity in society exhibited a "general will," not reducible to its individual members: more than the sum of its parts. Not a Leviathan, but a "second nature," a rebirth of potential, both individually and collectively. Human nature found the realization of its freedom in society, but humans were free to develop and transform themselves, for good or ill. To bring society closer to the "state of nature," then, was to allow humanity's potential to be better realized. Communism, according to Marx, was to follow Rousseau, not Hobbes, in realizing bourgeois society's aspirations and potential. But, first, communism had to be clear about its aims.

Communism: not opposed to, but in, through, and beyond the bourgeois society of capital

The Marxist hypothesis is that Marx's thought and politics correspond to a moment of profound transformation in the history of modern society, indeed, in the history of humanity: the rise of "industrial capital" and of the concomitant "social-democratic" workers' movement that attended this change. This was expressed in the workers' demand for *social democracy*, which Marx thought needed to be raised

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to greater self-consciousness to achieve its aims.³³ Marx characterized the moment of industrial capital as marking the crisis in modern society—or even, an event and crisis in "natural history"³⁴—in which humanity faced the choice, as Luxemburg put it (echoing Engels), of "socialism or barbarism."³⁵ This was because classical bourgeois forms of politics that had emerged in the preceding era of the rise of manufacturing capital in the 17th and 18th centuries, liberalism and democracy, proved to be inadequate to the problems and tasks of modern society since the 19th century—Marx's moment. With Marx, humanity faces a new, unforeseen task. However, unfulfilled, this task has fallen into neglect today.³⁶

In the transformed circumstance of capital, liberalism and democracy became *necessary* precisely in their *impossibility*, and thus pointed to their "dialectical" *Aufhebung*—completion and transcendence through negation, or self-overcoming.³⁷ Liberalism and democracy became not only mutually contradictory but each became self-contradictory in capital. It is thus not a matter of communism *versus* liberal democracy—as Badiou and Žižek take it to be. Communism was, for Marx, the political movement that pointed to the possibility of overcoming the necessity of liberalism and democracy, or the transcending of the need for "bourgeois" politics per se. But this was to be achieved through the politics of the demands for the *bourgeois* rights of the working class. Marx regarded the socialism and communism that had emerged in his time as expressing a late, and hence self-contradictory and potentially incoherent form of bourgeois radicalism—expressing the *radicalization* of bourgeois society—but that demanded redemption. Marx sought the potential in capital of going beyond demands for greater liberalism and democracy. Subsequent "communism" lost sight of Marx on this, and disintegrated into the 20th century antinomy of socialism and liberalism.³⁸ The Marxist hypothesis is that Marx recognized the possibility, not of opposition, but of a qualitative transformation, in, through, and beyond bourgeois society. | P

Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 1.

10. See Louis Menand's 2003 Introduction to the republication of Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), originally published in 1940, in which Menand cites Wilson's statement that "Marx and Engels were *philosophes* of a second Enlightenment" (xvi). Furthermore, Menand points out that:

Marxism gave a meaning to modernity.... Marxism was founded on an appeal for social justice, but there were many forms that such an appeal might have taken. Its deeper attraction was the discovery of meaning, a meaning in which human beings might participate, in history itself. (xvii)

11. See, for example, Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–65*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 2006).

12. Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," trans. Lewis White Beck, in *Kant on History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 11–25.

13. For instance, the title of Lenin's pamphlet *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) indicates what the historical era of "imperialism" meant to Lenin and other contemporary Marxists: the eve of revolution. The self-understanding of the Marxists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries grounded the history of Marxism itself in the history of capital, even if their propagandistic rhetoric had the unfortunate character of calling the crisis of capital expressed by Marxism "inevitable." See note 18, below.

14. See Karl Korsch, "Marxism and Philosophy," *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Halliday (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008). Originally published in 1923. Also available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxism-and-philosophy.htm>.

15. See Lars T. Lih's extensive work on Lenin's "Kautskyism," for instance in *Lenin Rediscovered: What is to Be Done?* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008).

16. In a portentous first footnote to his book *What is to Be Done?* (1902), available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/i.htm>, Lenin put it this way:

Incidentally, in the history of modern socialism [there] is a phenomenon... in its way very consoling, namely... the strife of the various trends within the socialist movement.... [In] the disputes between Lassalleans and Eisenachers, between Guesdists and Possibilists, between Fabians and Social-Democrats, and between Narodnaya Volya adherents and Social-Democrats... really [an] international battle with socialist opportunism, [will] international revolutionary Social-Democracy... perhaps become sufficiently strengthened to put an end to the political reaction that has long reigned in Europe?

17. See Leon Trotsky, "Art and Politics in Our Epoch," a June 18, 1938 letter to the editors of *Partisan Review*, available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/06/artpol.htm>:

Not a single progressive idea has begun with a "mass base," otherwise it would not have been a progressive idea. It is only in its last stage that the idea finds its masses—if, of course, it answers the needs of progress. All great movements have begun as "splinters" of older movements.... The group of Marx and Engels came into existence as a "splinter" of the Hegelian Left. The Communist [Third] International germinated during [WWI] from the "splinters" of the Social Democratic [Second] International. If these pioneers found themselves able to create a mass base, it was precisely because they did not fear isolation. They knew beforehand that the quality of their ideas would be transformed into quantity. These "splinters"... carried within themselves the germs of the great historical movements of tomorrow.

18. See Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*:

[A] transformation and development of Marxist theory has been effected under the peculiar ideological guise of a return to the pure teaching of original or true Marxism. Yet it is easy to understand both the reasons for this guise and the real character of the process which is concealed by it. What theoreticians like Rosa Luxemburg in Germany and Lenin in Russia have done, and are doing, in the

field of Marxist theory is to liberate it from the inhibiting traditions of [Social Democracy]. They thereby answer the practical needs of the new revolutionary stage of proletarian class struggle, for these traditions weighed "like a nightmare" on the brain of the working masses whose objectively revolutionary socioeconomic position no longer corresponded to these [earlier] evolutionary doctrines. The apparent revival of original Marxist theory in the Third International is simply a result of the fact that in a new revolutionary period not only the workers' movement itself, but the theoretical conceptions of communists which express it, must assume an explicitly revolutionary form. This is why large sections of the Marxist system, which seemed virtually forgotten in the final decades of the nineteenth century, have now come to life again. (67–68)

I have elaborated further on the significance of Korsch's important essay in my review of Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (2008), *Platypus Review* 15 (September 2009), available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2009/09/03/book-review-karl-korsch-marxism-and-philosophy/>.

19. Adorno in "Reflections on Class Theory" (originally written in 1942), provides the following unequivocally powerful interpretation of the perspective of Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*:

According to theory, history is the history of class struggles. But the concept of class is bound up with the emergence of the proletariat.... By extending the concept of class to prehistory, theory... turns against prehistory itself.... By exposing the historical necessity that had brought capitalism into being, political economy became the critique of history as a whole.... All history is the history of class struggles because it was always the same thing, namely, prehistory. (*Can One Live After Auschwitz?* A *Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford University Press, 2003), 93–94.)

20. Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," *Selected Writings* vol. 2 1927–34 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 735. Originally published in 1933.

21. The term used to describe this effect is the "Anthropocene."

Jeffrey Sachs, in the second of his 2007 Reith Lectures, "Survival in the Anthropocene" (Peking University, Beijing, April 18, 2007, available online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2007/lecture2.shtml>), characterized it this way:

"The Anthropocene"—a term that is spectacularly vivid, a term invented by one of the great scientists of our age, Paul Crutzen, to signify the fact that human beings for the first time have taken hold not only of the economy and of population dynamics, but of the planet's physical systems, Anthropocene meaning human-created era of Earth's history. The geologists call our time the Holocene—the period of the last thirteen thousand years or so since the last Ice Age—but Crutzen wisely and perhaps shockingly noted that the last two hundred years are really a unique era, not only in human history but in the Earth's physical history as well.

22. Marx, "For the ruthless criticism of everything existing," letter to Arnold Ruge (September, 1843), in Robert Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 12–15. Also available online at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm.

23. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 93. Also available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm>.

24. Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents in Marxism* (New York: Norton, 2005), 1212.

25. See Robert Pippin, "Critical Inquiry and Critical Theory: A Short History of Nonbeing," *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (Winter 2004), 424–428, also available online at <http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/issues/v30n2/Pippin.html>. Pippin wrote that,

[T]he dim understanding we have of the post-Kantian situation with respect to, let's say, "the necessary conditions for the possibility of what isn't".... is what I wanted to suggest. I'm not sure it will get us anywhere. Philosophy rarely does. Perhaps it exists to remind us that we haven't gotten anywhere. (428)

26. See Marx, *The Class Struggles in France 1848–50* (originally published in 1850) and *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (originally published in 1852).

27. Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, in Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*:

Every demand of the simplest bourgeois financial reform, of the most ordinary liberalism, of the most formal republicanism, of the most insipid democracy, is simultaneously castigated as an "attempt on society" and stigmatized as "socialism".... Bourgeois fanatics for order are shot down on their balconies by mobs of drunken soldiers, their domestic sanctuaries profaned... in the name of property, of family... and of order.... Finally, the scum of bourgeois society forms... the "saviour of society." (602–603)

28. Engels summed this up well in his 1891 Introduction to Marx, *The Civil War in France* (1871), in Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 620.

29. See Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 165.

30. See my "Capital in History: The need for a Marxian philosophy of history of the Left," *Platypus Review* 7 (October 2008), available online at <a href="http://platypus1917.org/2008/10/01/capital-in-history-the

Petrified unrest: A review of the Creative Time Summit

Bret Schneider

In this situation of "crisis in perception," it is no longer a question of educating the crude ear to hear music, but of giving it back hearing. It is no longer a question of training the eye to see beauty, but of restoring "perceptibility."

— Susan Buck-Morss¹

THOUGH PROMPTING BOOS from the audience at this year's Creative Time Summit, J. Morgan Puett's declaration that "capitalism is here to stay" was unintentionally but conclusively affirmed by the content of the event as a whole. In its second year, the Summit is an annual, weekend-long international forum showcasing various forms of public art practice that strives to be anti-capitalist. Divided into themes ranging from markets and food to education and institutions, Creative Time has sought to expand the art world's political commitments by inviting artists, curators, and pedagogues to discuss anti-capitalist aesthetic campaigns in contemporary art. Yet within and across all these themes, the panels failed to illuminate the efficacy of their own putative anti-capitalism in ways distinct from the standard platitudes of left activism. In rehashing as flat assertions the familiar non-politics of art as resistance, and by never confronting the central political question for artists—namely, how aesthetics are not only constrained by poor social relations, but also held hostage to bad politics, including bad anti-capitalist politics—this year's Summit gave one an all-too-real sense of what it is like to live in a world where aesthetic experience has become as impossible as it is necessary.

This impasse was widely exhibited and seldom recognized. Everyone directly acknowledged the existence of oppressive social relations and, by extension, at least implicitly acknowledged a failure of earlier political interventions, including aesthetic interventions of various kinds, to transform these relations. Yet none of the more than 40 presenters generated any cohesive politics that might prove adequate to the current situation by turning a critical eye toward the history of those failed attempts. On the contrary, most went to varying lengths to naturalize anaesthetic experiences, opting instead to liquidate art into pure means for achieving economic, institutional, or administrative ends—and these ends tended to be impoverished *per se* when judged precisely in terms of their putative anti-capitalism.

In the first presentation of the Summit, Professor of Art History Julia Bryan-Wilson addressed poor working

conditions in Houston's factories and drew interesting, if somewhat impressionistic, links between the deaths of factory workers due to air pollution in their working environments and the proliferation of "air-based" art, as in the work of Hans Haacke. Bryan-Wilson implied that due to impoverished social conditions extrinsic to aesthetics, art is relegated to attend to such crises, albeit in abstract ways that do not immediately resolve them. Foreboding the Summit content to follow, this tension—the non-identity of politics and art—was generally left unilluminated by Bryan-Wilson, and as a cover for this deficiency a ruse of harmony between the two was generated.

Near the end of her presentation, Bryan-Wilson misapprehended Marx's famous quote, "All that is solid melts into air," in a manner that unfortunately set the tone for the Summit. Marx saw the contradiction of capitalism, and by extension of modernity itself, as being expressed in how the ceaseless dynamism of capital enables potentially emancipatory social transformations that occur only as part of a process of change which, because it unfolds according to a logic ultimately outside of human control, proves both liberating and alienating at the same time. However, Bryan-Wilson characterized the ceaseless transience *within* capitalism as desirable in itself. Though at one level merely a petty intellectual violation, this misunderstanding of Marx set the stage for a politics that valued the anaesthetizing, ahistorical character of contemporary life. The dissonance of an anti-Marxist politics rooted in Marxist vocabulary prompted the audience to voice skepticism during the question and answer session. Indeed, the audience questions, generally sophisticated and intelligent, outstripped the content of many of the presentations. Several questions drew attention to the possibility that these "resistant" forms of art were simply regenerating capitalism, but unknowingly. Others pointed out the vagueness of what people actually meant by "socialism." The presenters evaded the questions by resorting to catchphrases from their presentations, or worse, by taking refuge in what they should have been trying to clarify: the gray area between aesthetics and politics. Panelists who generally made claims in their presentations about the radicalism of dissolving aesthetics into political activism later downplayed their political stances when pressed, saying that really they were interested in "community art." This crystallized into a paradox many presenters were insistent on not resolving: How can an effective anti-capitalist politics exist when there is no coherent understanding of what



Hans Haacke, *Blue Sail*, 1964–1965, installation.

capitalism is in the first place?

Eliding this question, "community" tacitly stood in for socialism, at least in the panels on "Market" and "Food." Even *e-flux*'s Anton Vidokle, one of the few presenters conversant in the history of socialism, grappled with the question of structural transformation only within the context of mundane community projects. When asked about the political consequences of *e-flux*'s Time/Bank project, a "platform where groups and individuals can pool and trade time and skills, bypassing money as a measure of value," Vidokle admitted that the exchange of time is, well, capitalism. For all the anti-capitalist rhetoric, constructed upon familiar relational art idioms, Time/Bank amounts to little more than Craigslist for the art world. Representing the aestheticization of politics instead of the politicization of aesthetics, Time/Bank exemplified the state of political art in general: Beginning with a political idea, often trite in itself, it used aesthetic techniques in a wholly instrumental fashion as a means to dress up the prefigured idea with design. Time/Bank was also unfortunately representative in its reduction of socialism to anti-finance. A general contempt for wealth as such reigned at the Summit, turning commodities into metaphysical entities divorced from

the social conditions of production. Nearly every panel was burdened with the question of where funding for each project came from. Audience and presenters alike obsessed over tracking cash flow, which ended up mythologizing what they disdained: the source of funding came to be treated as the ultimate determinant of one's authenticity and artistic worth. This anxiety around funding could also be detected in a different form in the website Kickstarter. A pledge-based forum for projects in need of funding, Kickstarter shows the extent to which even modest artistic projects are not possible today without extensive financial bureaucracy and peer administration. The existence of Kickstarter evidences a continual decline into poverty wherein accomplishment of the most menial of tasks hinges upon whether or not one can receive financial backing to achieve the material necessary.

Vidokle defended Time/Bank and his artwork in general as being motivated politically by a "primitive form of communism." But this put aside the question of whether or not this primitive form of communism may, in its explicitly premodern social relations, be worse than the current forms of capitalism. The desire for "real wealth," for "community," sounded as a distorted echo of an echo of the anarchism of the 19th century: the one-

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sided critique of capitalism, animated by the impotent yearning for a return to untarnished social conditions. When Adorno said, "The pressure of reified Bourgeois culture incites flight into the phantasm of nature,"² he might as well have been talking about artists today who trade in fantasies of withdrawal into premodern communalism as an answer to the ills of modern society. Such "flights," as an immediate response to alienation, fail to orient a politics of overcoming that from which it flees. Moreover, the retrograde anarchism of contemporary art practice has become timid and tenuous, as seen in Amy Franceschini's presentation, in which she defended community gardens as anti-capitalist on the basis that they express "anarchist consensus." Those same gardens have been adopted programmatically by the city of San Francisco, as the political imagination of anarchism grows increasingly self-deluded about the nature of rebellion and its own practice. Resistance fuels the culture industry, while even the most basic programs of urban redevelopment and beautification today apparently require elaborate rationalizations from the art world.

The yearning for premodern life found its most acute expression in artist and writer Claire Pentecost's keynote presentation in the panel on "Food." Central to Pentecost's talk was the assertion of agriculture, and by extension human culture in general, as part of nature. But agriculture was at the same time the first moment in humanity's transformation of nature and thus of itself—the first truly human endeavor, the first step towards liberation from the arbitrary oppression of wanton natural conditions. As seen in Pentecost's use of the phrase "The New Us" throughout her presentation, there was at least the imagination of solidarity and agreement as to the need for humankind to learn its "place" in the natural order once again. This sentiment expressed a tendency common to the Summit and the aesthetics of social activism writ large: the reinvention of folk culture as nostalgia for the "lost authenticity" of premodern life, and for a fantasy of communal existence projected onto pre-industrial society. Once clearly recognizable as a project of the conservative right, "the community" has become a fulcrum of leftist politics.

The Summit was not entirely oriented by concerns over community, however. Nato Thompson presented his survey of public art in nations ranging from Thailand to Mexico, including reports on museum initiatives. Though a salutary move toward themes of curation, Thompson's work lacked coherence and direction. It remained unclear whether these regional reports were meant as a step towards international coordination, or simply a retreat of multiculturalism that hoped to celebrate diversity. Meanwhile, Tirdad Zolghadr reported on an artist's imperative in Taipei, Taiwan, to fund artist unions. It seemed the imperative was being pursued along the lines of what had briefly occurred in the Vkhutemas and other autonomous schools of art decreed by Lenin, though Zolghadr did not establish any historical connection. Unfortunately, such a project today seems unlikely to succeed, as prevailing conditions allow less and less space for an autonomous aesthetic and science

freed from the whims of topical politics—a situation that this year's Summit, in its blithely instrumental approach to aesthetics, actually contributes to.

The most provocative moment of the Summit was Gridithiya Gweewong's afterthought on the conditions of art and artists in Asia. At the end of her presentation she asked, "How much longer must artists work in the streets, and when will they work in studios?" The question cut against the predominant take-to-the-streets mentality. This actionism, common to the practice of many artists and activists alike, has also found expression in theories of art history, as seen in Agnes Denes's presentation in the "Food" panel, which depicted the history of art as a natural—and naturally unidirectional—process of art's breakdown into everyday life. Gweewong's reversal loosens aesthetics from natural determinism and points up the conditions of a world where aesthetic experience *could* exist. Even as it became alienating—as it increasingly had in the course of the 19th and, especially, the 20th century—the separation of art from life nevertheless remained constitutive of both. This separation was not overcome, but has merely broken down. Art and life can no longer be held in a productive and clarifying tension—each hemorrhages into the other. In romanticizing this situation, the Summit as a whole submitted to the repressive attenuation of aesthetic experience. In contrast, Gweewong implied that aesthetic experience *might not have occurred yet*, because the conditions that would make aesthetics possible have yet to be achieved. Such a proposition is pessimistic only superficially; its deeper appeal lies precisely in the hope it allows for, by avoiding the one-sidedness of simply cheering the "anti-elitism" of art and life's non-separation on the one hand, and the actionism-cum-fatalism implicit in simply declaring the continuation of struggle on the other.

Emancipatory politics are apparently so impoverished that, in an absurdity that has gone widely unremarked, even artists are expected to pick up the slack. Ad Reinhardt's principle that no sane person goes to an art exhibition expecting to learn about anything other than art has been reversed: Now, art exhibitions and symposia are thought of and relied upon not only as bastions but also as *laboratories* of political ideologies that, unable to stand on their own, fashion art as their crutch. Commitment to bad politics dooms aesthetics. A leftist politics deserving the name would seek to open up possibilities for aesthetic transformation, rather than making artists into a new class of social workers. So long as the aesthetic continues to be canalized into modes of political activism that have been taken for granted to the point of becoming lifeless formulae, the possibility of aesthetic experience will remain precarious at best. | P

1. Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 [Autumn, 1992]: 18.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 113.

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again the tar sands may stand as an exception.

Unions could engage in actions that could produce larger consciousness about oil and capitalism. When it comes to oil, however, this seems unlikely after the 2009 creation of the Oil and Natural Gas Industry Labour-Management Committee, a group consisting of the American Petroleum Institute and fifteen labour unions that plan to work together to retain and increase employment in the oil patch for its members.

AM: But, from the Ogoni and Ijaw in Nigeria to the Achuar people in Peru to fisherman in Louisiana to farmers and ranchers in your home province of Alberta, protests against oil companies seem intent on merely resisting the dynamism of capital. Is there a viable future within these movements? What, if anything, is the upshot of "resistance"?

IS: Resistance... is futile? It seems the problem you are pointing to is the difficulty there has been thus far in developing a politics that goes beyond an immediate negation of (let's say) a corporate decision. As an example, we could imagine someone taking an oil company to court, saying, "You have polluted my land illegally, so you must, by virtue of the existing set of rules and policies, recompense me." This is a necessary but not sufficient condition of a politics organized against the broader logics of capital. Can this necessary condition become sufficient? I don't see why not. But it may be that some of the impetus and direction for it to become sufficient must be applied onto these movements from points outside of them. I do not buy the idea that opposition organically or inevitably moves from part to whole, as seems to be the assumption guiding a number of Left theoretical positions today.

AM: In your work you have commented on an inability, or at least a protracted difficulty, of the Left to locate "the political, economic and conceptual significance of raw inputs into the shape of capitalism."⁴ But isn't capitalism characterized precisely by its capacity to continually reshape the significance of these natural inputs? Surely the task of the Left would be to realize the potential latent in oil through emancipating society, rather than to naturalize the use of oil under present conditions?

IS: On the contrary, I make no insistence on the present conditions passing over into the future. Let's put this another way: The Left needs to think about capitalism and work to bring about its end. But it should also consider what that end might look like, though one must be wary of engaging in a kind of "bad utopianism" that tries to sketch out exactly what the future is supposed to look like. When the Left adopts the view that it is a crime to use oil at all, that we should give up on this resource at once and then figure out what to do next, we are presented with neither a convincing position about the present nor about the future.

By mid-century it is estimated that we will have a global population of 10 billion. The carrying capacity of many parts of the planet, in the absence of fertilizers,

would be well below what it currently is. We face a future in which we will continue needing fertilizers, whether or not this is seen as being against some inviolable notion of Nature. The planet is filled with infrastructure of all sorts, which is a history unto itself that actively shapes the direction of social life in significant ways. It is unlikely to be simply abandoned, in the manner of a ludic fantasy that the Left still tends to exhibit in some of its concrete imaginations of the future—a future that, apparently, would be filled with trees instead of computers.

The inheritance from capitalism need not commit the future to be capitalist. But it does represent a material and political reality with which we have to contend. I think the banishment of oil from our lives and our consciousness, which does constitute at least some part of the Left's response to energy, is an error. Indeed, why couldn't we see oil as a means of emancipating society? Granted, oil could not serve as a permanent means to maintain emancipation, since oil itself is impermanent and limited, and because there are negative ecological repercussions to its use. But imagining that there is a more general politics contained within a blunt opposition to fossil fuels seems to me an error. At best, such an opposition is a first-level response not just to environmental concerns, but to the system that generates them. At worst, it is not much of a politics at all, since it offers only the smallest negative gesture without any suggestion of what might yet be. | P

1. Retort Collective, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in the Age of War* (New York: Verso, 2005). Szeman's response to Afflicted Powers can be found in his article "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.4 (2007): 805–823.

2. "The Regina Manifesto," Program of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation 1933–1956, <http://economics.uwaterloo.ca/needhdata/Regina_Manifesto.html>.

3. See Szeman, "System Failure."

4. Szeman, "The Cultural Politics of Oil: On Lessons of Darkness and Black Sea Files," *Polygraph* 22 (2010).

Oil and the Left: An interview with Imre Szeman

Andony Melathopoulos with Brian Worley

In September of this year, Andony Melathopoulos interviewed Imre Szeman, author, professor, and founder of the Canadian Association of Cultural Studies, on behalf of the Platypus Review, to discuss his analysis of oil politics in light of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and the political responses to it. The interview was prepared in conjunction with Brian Worley.

Andony Melathopoulos: In your estimation, did the recent BP disaster precipitate any new thinking from the Left? How could the Left's responses be characterized and do they reveal anything about the state of the Left more generally? Did the disaster in any way change your thinking about oil?

Imre Szeman: I must admit to not following the BP disaster too closely after the initial few days of the event. The direction that the news on the Gulf spill was heading followed a path well trodden by other disasters of the present age, whether natural or social. Shock that such an event could happen, public and political accusations of government and corporate malfeasance and ineptitude, a frightful encounter with [ecological] limits, and finally mitigation in the form of high-sounding words from those in power that seem to put everything back in its place and allow more quotidian disasters and problems to roll back into the news stream. I did not want to be taken on this particular ride, even given my interest in oil; I checked in with the news but tried to keep my distance.

One might expect that an environmental disaster on this scale might prompt some change in how oil is extracted and how it is consumed. Indeed, in a televised address on June 15, 2010, President Obama declared that the BP spill showed that the US had to end its "century-long addiction to fossil fuels," and made promises to support the creation of alternative fuel sources. It's an eerie echo of Richard Nixon's speech from the White House on November 7, 1973, when in reaction to the oil crisis of that year he said that "in the long run, [the crisis] means that we must develop new sources of energy, which will give us the capacity to meet our needs without relying on any foreign nation." Or Jimmy Carter's Presidential Address on April 18, 1977, when he stated that "because we are now running out of gas and oil, we must prepare for a... change—to strict conservation, and to the renewed use of coal, and to permanent renewable energy sources like solar power."

As the spill fades from public and political consciousness, I suspect that the outcome of the most recent presidential speech will be like those in 1973 or 1977. Not much will change in the way in which oil is used, not just in the U.S., but anywhere in the world. Our social and economic systems are designed in such a way as to be utterly dependent on oil. After the 1973 oil crisis, the U.S. consumed 14.9 million barrels per day; in 2009, it was estimated that estimated U.S. oil consumption grew more than 40 per cent, to 20.7 million barrels a day. Obama may well want to get the U.S. off its addiction to fossil fuels. But he has a much bigger oil system to deal with. His actions at the COP 15 meeting don't exactly leave one full of hope at the prospect of change, though the BP spill might alter the political landscape on this issue in some ways.

I'm not sure that the oil spill substantially changed any of my opinions. Mostly, it has reaffirmed several facts about oil. We need it to keep our social and economic systems operating—or at least, operating in their current fashion. We are running out of it, which is why dangerous, deep ocean drill rigs like the Deepwater Horizon—or the Mariner Energy Well, which caught fire in the Gulf on September 2—are in operation to begin with. We are likely to continue to try to find oil wherever it might be, because the operations of capitalism depend on it. While there is lots of talk about changing behaviors and altering the forms of energy we use in order to mitigate such disasters, the reality is that oil remains relatively cheap, easy to store and transport, and can be used for other purposes, too, such as for fertilizers and plastics.

As for responses to the oil spill on the Left, I would say that there are positions one can take with respect to fossil fuels that are not very productive, and insofar as the Left finds itself adopting these positions, it is problematic. The first problematic approach is to insist on the need for better legislation regarding where one drills for oil, as can be found in calls for a moratorium on deep water drilling. The implicit suggestion of such calls is that drilling elsewhere—that is, on land—is fine, as long as certain protocols are followed and laws adhered to. This is an environmental version of liberal capitalism, one that takes an ameliorative approach by which Nature is protected through the strong arm of the state. A second troublesome position is a blunt call for the end to all oil drilling and oil consumption, if not in the present, then in the near future. What this position gains in ethical certitude it loses in a test



Activists protest at the Canadian tar sands in September and October of 2009.

against reality: It comes across as moral hectoring or bad utopianism. In general, I think the Left must take oil as a symptom and be cautious about reacting to it on the same level on which it appears, namely as a "bad" source of energy that the Left has to reign in, eliminate, or come up with a "good" substitute for. The real issue is capitalism, not oil.

More broadly, the BP disaster exemplifies the way we tend to react to disaster with a kind of "faux shock"—faux because such spills have happened before and cannot but happen, given the scale of oil drilling on the planet—followed by rapid memory loss so that things can continue much as they did before. It was weeks before the U.S. media remembered that a major spill had occurred in the Gulf three decades earlier—the Pemex-owned Ixtoc 1, which spilled an estimated 3,000,000 barrels into the ocean in 1979–1980.

AM: Given that the real issue is capitalism, the difficulty would seem to rest in how one understands

capitalism and, with regard to the politics of oil, how one understands the relation of capitalism to oil. In 2007 you took issue with the Retort Collective's attempt to locate a capitalist core governing the economics and geopolitics of oil production.¹ Rather than separating contemporary capitalism and oil out, you suggest they should be intertwined as "oil capitalism." What are the political stakes of making or failing to make this distinction?

IS: It is a heuristic move, one designed to draw attention back to capitalism rather than back to oil. The tendency is to think of oil as an externality, an element of capitalism (energy) that can be easily substituted by some other element (solar, wind, nuclear, etc.) without much impact on the nature or character of the system. This is why, when there is talk about energy futures, it seems to be assumed that the economic system of that future will continue to be capitalism. "Oil capitalism" is intended to make us think differently and more deeply about the socio-ontology of capitalism. Could we have

"Oil" continues below

Oil, continued from above



Oil workers in Iran on strike, 1978.

capitalism without oil? Plainly. Would it have the same character and form, especially on a global scale? I think not. This is more than a game of alternative histories, of asking, "What if there was no such thing as oil?" Rather, it is meant to confront some challenges coming in the future, and to get the Left to think about topics essential to social emancipation and justice. We tend not to think about the work that energy does socially, and will have to do even if political circumstances change.

But I also think that conjoining capitalism to oil is productive in a more crudely materialist way. Oil is an essential element of capitalism today—essential to its being. We live out a laughable social existence, which at its base depends on a material that resulted from a happenstance of geological history that cannot be repeated and which is rapidly dwindling. Even if we were able to access all the oil on the planet, it would still be of limited supply. I continue to find it amazing that this fact of limit seems to have no impact on the day-to-day operations of capitalism. But how could it in a system in which the crude matter of nature comes as if for free and which measures itself not by limits but by the growth of profit year over year?

When I say that in thinking about oil we should think about "oil capitalism" it is, again, another way of saying that the problem is not oil, but capitalism. No matter what system we operated within, oil would be limited. In other systems, however, we might have a greater capacity to manage the expansion of our economies and populations, and to take this fact of limits into account instead of doing what we seem so adept at today: forgetting about it.

AM: Many Canadian leftists connect Alberta's massive oil reserves to the 40-year political domination of conservatives provincially, as well as to the growth, since the 1990s, of a conservative populism nationally. Do you

agree that the ways in which oil has transformed Alberta should have necessarily led to a rightward move? Are the activities of the Left with respect to Alberta oil in any way implicated? Does the Left's naturalization of rightwing politics in areas with oil reserves clarify or obscure the political situation?

IS: These are difficult questions, in part because I am still trying to take the measure of the politics of my new home in Alberta. I don't think that there is anything about oil that should of necessity push a polity to the right or leave it stuck there. Norway would be an obvious counterexample of a space with a very different politics connected to its oil riches. (Though there are problems with this, too: What do we make of a left-leaning country that accumulates riches through the demand and high prices for a commodity that generates political and ecological problems? Perhaps their Seed Vault assures a guilty conscience.)

On the other hand, consider the political and economic interests involved in the Athabasca oil sands, commonly called "the tar sands," in northeastern Alberta. The tar sands have been identified by the U.S. in numerous policy documents as a source of energy so secure for the U.S. that it can be considered less foreign than national. This has been done openly over the past decade or so, beginning with Dick Cheney's 2001 National Energy Policy. The tar sands also constitute the largest single capital project on the planet, and perhaps one of the largest in the planet's history, with more than \$200 billion invested to date, not just by all the major players in the oil industry, but also by various sovereign investment funds. Incidentally, Norway is among them. So in short, a space dominated by powerful corporate interests and the global hegemon, as areas with large oil reserves tend to be, will have enormous amounts of pressure exerted on it to fall in line politically with the

interests of capital.

This creates a formidable challenge for the Left. There is a tendency among some leftists to imagine an inherent conservatism in the Alberta populace—as though a kind of ingrained, old West libertarianism makes the necks of folks out here red, and their brains difficult to change. But how would one explain, then, the founding of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in Calgary, Alberta in 1932—a party which led to the NDP and which proclaimed that it would not "rest content until it has eradicated capitalism and put into operation the full programme of socialized planning which will lead to the establishment in Canada of the Co-operative Commonwealth"? It is a mistake to write off Alberta as a rightwing dead zone; this supports a misguided notion that activity concerning the tar sands or other political issues within Alberta must always be directed outward, to the rest of Canada or even to the world. Seeing Alberta as rightwing in every possible way serves a dangerous ideological function in the rest of Canada, allowing other governments to get away with neoliberal policies disguised as social democratic measures, as Alberta serves to absorb any fears and anxieties about a shift to the right.

Have the activities of the Left somehow enriched or supported the right? I don't think so. There are innumerable groups, institutions, and individuals who do invaluable work in the province, including the Pembina Institute and the Parkland Institute. As I said before, the challenges are enormous: This space matters for capitalism, and so it should not be surprising that there is a vast amount of work to be done to produce a new politics in the province. The fact that the right is connected to oil does, I think, obscure what the real issue for the Left should be, since leftists tend to feel they must approach politics through environmental issues. At the level of official, party politics, there is no space for the Left: Could the Liberals or NDP suggest abandoning the tar sands? Insofar as these parties are committed, at best, merely to ameliorating the status quo, the answer is no. I think the focus should be rather on the crimes and misdemeanors of the system—that is, of capitalism. How to approach this at a practical level is a genuine challenge, though the tar sands do offer openings. Norway is a beginning point; it has a huge social trust fund as a result of its oil fields. Alberta has virtually nothing. Is this a legitimate outcome of a public resource?

But this can only be a step. One certainly can speak about capitalism in other than glowing terms in Alberta. In classes I have taught at the University of Alberta, students required little convincing that the system they lived in benefited the few at the expense of the many, and was unlikely to allow them or their fellows lives unstinted by the brutal game of profit.

AM: You have identified three political narratives that take oil to be their central object—namely strategic realism, technoutopianism, and apocalyptic environmentalism—and criticized them for their inability to inform a politics that could overcome capitalism.² How can this critique, and your desire for a Marxian approach to oil politics more generally, help to clarify limitations in the politics of the Left? Why should energy production be seen as anything other than an immediate effect of capitalism?

IS: Talking about oil does not mean moving away from a critique of capitalism, nor does it mean privileging a discussion of energy over the broader system in which it operates. But it does offer a new way into the problem of capitalism, and thus perhaps new political possibilities, while also raising the question of energy for Left critique. One can say energy production is nothing other than an effect of capitalism, which is to say that the latter precedes the former, comes into history fully formed, and so on. Isn't capitalism as it presently exists, in the form we are living it, an effect of energy production as well?

AM: Certainly, but there is much political content to the history of energy production. At the end of the 19th century, the working class consciously precipitated energy crises through their organized activity around the mining and shipping of coal. In many ways the concentration of energy in hydrocarbons, and its centrality to the expansion of capital, make the worksites where energy sources are extracted and moved ideal foci for the Left. With regard to coal, the Left was once able to integrate its energy politics into a critique of capital. By contrast, energy crises from the latter half of the 20th century onwards appear unconnected to a project of expanding human freedom through the overcoming of capital. These crises have been driven by other social and political forces, notably post-colonial nationalism—one thinks of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), for example. Meanwhile, during the Canadian mini-crisis of the 1980s, the politics of then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's National Energy Policy were shaped, essentially, by a clash between a centralizing nationalism and a regional Alberta populism, with neither side remotely resembling a Left. How do you account for this historically dynamic aspect of energy crises and the diminishing capacity of the Left to give these crises a determinate political character?

IS: This raises an intriguing point: Couldn't oil workers go on strike? Couldn't those who work on rigs stop what they are doing and create a crisis on an unheard of scale? Crises in relation to oil now come not even from geopolitical maneuvering—OPEC is unlikely to repeat its 1973 gambit for a whole variety of reasons—but from breakdowns of the system and from demand. "System breakdown" can mean, literally, when one of the aging series of large-scale refineries has to shut down due to mechanical problems, or when a port where oil is transferred from supertankers to container facilities encounters a problem. Supply chain problems and global demand matter more than political instability.

If this is the case, it would seem easy for the Left to have an impact through collective action of one sort or another. Part of the problem is that the supply chain is in many parts of the world not just carefully guarded, but hidden away, sequestered underground. It is one thing to block trucks dragging coal away from mines and another to identify essential sites in the supply chain of oil. How do you stand in front of a pipeline, for instance? Coal mines are labor intensive and accumulate bodies on a different scale than oil production sites, though here

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