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Statement of purpose

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

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

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

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

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

**Submission guidelines**  
Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: *review\_editor@platypus1917.org*. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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responsibility, the valorization of the heteronormative, urban communities. His solution is more parental extensive reinvestment in blighted and abandoned large-scale redistribution of society’s resources and more effective. Obama’s solution is certainly not and his skill at emoting with black audiences, he’s because of the claims he can make to racial talking points. But Republicans, and New Democrats before him. Reagan purveyed by generations of Cold War liberals. He engages in the same underclass mythology projects. He engages in the same underclass mythology of groups like Big Brother’s Big Sisters, his “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative, and other mentoring factors only to pivot towards calling for more support acknowledged unemployment and other structural factors only to pivot towards calling for more support Obama’s response to Baltimore, like all his other speeches on questions of urban inequality, presidential hopefuls have called for the Confederate Emanuel Church massacre in South Carolina. Democratic We are going to see much more of that. Since the Mother or their culpability in reproducing the current inequalities without dealing with the underlying class contradictions them a way to connect with their electoral constituency elements of the “New Jim Crow” argument. It provides Baltimore and beyond have already learned to embrace might be helpful on the campaign trail. Politicians in 2020? The Democrats depopulate whatever talking points tremendous disruption. So, I guess hindsight really is between crack and powder cocaine, the championed welfare-to-work reform and the razing of public housing, social policy experiments that have generated an omnibus crime bill that upheld the sentencing disparity problem in this country. Not only did Bill Clinton support administrations that helped to ramp up the prison gupton given that she was a part of two presidential stump during the Baltimore events. That takes some Clinton talked about mass incarceration on the campaign to social policies that might change things. Even Hillary to their electoral advantage without making commitments **CR:** They are part of the problem! They use these tragedies directly address structural unemployment.

**GB:** One likely outcome arguably would be that we are faced post-BLM with the further legitimization of the Democratic Party. Is it possible to work effectively through the Democrats?

**CR:** They fail to

**GB:** Does this criticism also apply to the Left?

**CR:** It’s primarily the Democrats but there is culpability on the Left. Some of us can’t seem to discern the actual dynamics at play, much less what an effective solution might look like. For instance, many fetishize grassroots activism, but some of that activity, if it is incapable of contesting the powerful, will end up merely creating an audience for non-profit and neoliberal solutions. In the case of Baltimore, since the rebellion there has been a rapid mobilization among the black professional and managerial stratum. They have been quick to frame issues in a way that opens the door toward further integration of the city’s public administration and a renewed legitimization of those who are already in power. State’s Attorney Marilyn Mosby stepped forward and brought an indictment, exciting people who have seen too many police killings and without one or with a trial that ends in acquittal. Even if the trials are a wash or the officers get minimal sentences, she will have a political future based on that one act. But the indictment had the effect of taking the wind out of the sails of street protest. We have seen this before. The more reformist elements are concerned about a conviction. They will but simply about justice for Mike Brown, or for Eric Garner, etc.

On the other hand, there are tendencies calling for something more substantial, such as the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) campaign. Their initial statements demand demilitarization of police forces and reductions in the amount of spending on policing. They do not now have the power to bring about such changes, because that would mean compelling city councils, state legislatures, and even Congress to act in a progressive manner. At this point it is just a moral appeal. I agree with Adolph Reed, Jr. when he says that BLM is not a movement, but simply the latest campaign within a long series of struggles, in some ways disconnected and episodic, which have sought to reform the prison system, combat police brutality,

offer no real alternative either. They are content to follow the same strategies of supply-side stimulus and neoliberalization that create dispossession and precarity. The back-end solution supported by both capitalists parties is to build up the prison state. This is what we face: Instead of investing in individuals and communities up front, we’ve resorted to incarceration as a means of warehousing the poor in order to soothe middle class angst about property crime and urban violence. Many people evoke the issue of unemployment in conversations taking place after the Baltimore rebellion, but they do so as a way of pivoting back toward the same old solutions. They concede that there is high unemployment in Baltimore, particularly among African American men, but their solution is to create entrepreneurial incubators and recruit more volunteers to clean up the city or to

police forces needs to be considered. These individuals are not motivated by racial animus. Rather, their behavior reflects a mode of policing that targets the working class, the unemployed, and those who live in areas where the informal economy is dominant. On the national level, blacks do not live in large numbers, the same dynamics are at play with whites and Latinos. This is the dominant means for managing social inequality in an era of obsolescence and pervasive economic insecurity.

**GB:** For Michelle Alexander and her many followers on the anti-racist left, these are instances of a “New Jim Crow.” How do you respond?

**CR:** The same. If you look at the prison population, blacks are not the majority. African Americans are certainly overrepresented, and in certain states they constitute a majority of those incarcerated or under court supervision. Therefore, we are not looking at something motivated exclusively or even primarily by racism. I’m not suggesting that the system is not racialized, or that racist policing is not a part of the equation. It is. But there is much more that we need to get a handle on, especially if we want to build a movement powerful enough to change the current state of affairs.

The heart of the problem, as I see it, dates back to the process of deindustrialization and its consequences for working people. When you look at the years from 1960 to 1990, most of the job loss within the US is due to technological change. From the 80s onwards, outsourcing and globalization caused further job loss. What happens to those persons residing in cities during this period of labor force contraction and technology-induced unemployment, not to mention the impact of the neoliberal rollback of the social safety net? This population that previously was absorbed into the Fordist economy is now left to fend for itself. The same thing happens in rural areas, where we find the same sort of revolutionary changes in the forces of production, namely, the mechanization of agriculture beginning in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as its corporate consolidation. Thus, there is a lot of disruption within the economy. People are being thrown out of work without real viable solutions being debated. Certainly none are advanced by the New Right, which demonizes the unemployed, blaming them for their plight. But the New Democrats

*Gregor Baszak of the Platypus Affiliated Society conducted an interview with Cedric Johnson, author of From Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics (2007). What follows is an edited transcript of their conversation.*

**Gregor Baszak:** Most on the Left claim that the recent cases of police violence suffered by Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, and others are racially motivated. Some even say that it has an aspect of ethnic cleansing. Do you agree?

**Cedric Johnson:** The truth is that cops intensively patrol and surveil particular neighborhoods within America’s cities. Blacks and Latinos bear the brunt of this form of policing, which was set in motion by the so-called “War on Drugs.” This has gone on for decades now. Directed against black people have a certain emotive and rhetorical force. However, ultimately they misdiagnose the problem. According to a Justice Department report on cases where people were killed in car accidents during police pursuits and those who committed suicide during an arrest, blacks are overrepresented (as are Latinos), but they are not in the majority. When I present such information to my liberal anti-racist friends and students, they have little to offer in response other than “Yes, of course, whites are the majority of the population, so don’t those deaths figure into the conversation? Isn’t it possible to condemn police violence against blacks while simultaneously demanding justice for all victims? What do these victims—black, white, Latino, male and female—have in common? Why do so many Americans view the current crisis strictly in terms of anti-black slogans? We need a more dialectical appreciation of historical progress: How have the defeats and victories of earlier anti-racist struggles produced new social contradictions, altering the conditions we now confront? Additionally, when we look at those who carried out the killing of Freddie Gray, three of the six police officers involved were black. In the case of Eric Garner, a Latino officer choked him to death. So, the fact of integrated

# Marxism through the back door

## An interview with Cedric Johnson

Gregor Baszak

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patriarchial family form—the black father as antidote to poverty, violence, unemployment, the achievement gap, and many other problems. This is a shibboleth of black public discourse stretching back through the 1995 Million Man March and *The Cosby Show* all the way to the debates surrounding Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. It is a form of politics predicated on victim-blaming that mystifies the power of class in American society.

What is most troubling about all this is that the New Democrats have consistently relied on this same dog-eared playbook since the late 1980s. They have constantly presented us with empty moralizing when it comes to the poor. Yet they are careful to distinguish that problem from the neoliberal “reforms” that they have forced upon the nation. The New Democrats’ mode of operating is to tip their hats toward symbolic elements of the New Deal coalition, extend token concessions to women, blacks, labor, etc., and then make decisions indistinguishable in substance from those of the New Right. If anything, the New Democrats are more effective at advancing the agenda of privatization than the neoconservatives because they are able to cajole and defuse potential opposition.

**GB:** Historically, one prominent left advocate of working through the Democrats was Bayard Rustin, whose 1965 essay “From Protest to Politics” you describe as “[signaling] his own departure from radical protest toward a more conservative politics of insider negotiation. . . . His partisan view of pursuing racial justice via institutional politics was recognized and promoted by the state apparatus as an antidote to the mass disruptions of the civil rights movement.”<sup>2</sup> To that strategy you oppose a “movement politics as the most effective means available to marginalized, poor, and working-class people to realize their historical will.”<sup>3</sup> But couldn’t we also understand his strategy as an attempt to transform the Democrats toward a coalition between labor and the Civil Rights Movement, particularly in the historic absence of a socialist mass party in the United States? Are you saying pursuing the aim of forming a national party inevitably resulted in demobilization of the Left in the wake of civil rights? Or is your critique primarily directed at the Democratic Party-oriented strategy Rustin advocated? Should the Left today advocate a party-oriented politics or do you still promote extra-parliamentary approaches, albeit perhaps under different auspices than the BLM?

**CJ:** There are a number of problems with Rustin’s essay. I criticize his turn to a politics of elite brokerage as part of a broader discussion of Harold Cruse, who also dismissed protest and advocated elite-driven politics, but from a different set of motivations and assumptions than Rustin. Although these men could easily be counterposed in an “integrationist versus nationalist” frame, what I was trying to illustrate was how different political tendencies within black public life in the middle 60s were converging in their commitment to institutional politics. They did so in a manner that obscured what politics was about or should be about. Rustin’s formulation of protest as a transitional stage whose time had passed was troubling. It parallels shifts within the labor movement that found their most grotesque representation in George Meany’s leadership of the AFL-CIO, as well as in black power militants who abhorred interracialism in terms of leadership, but were comfortable with a fiscal interracialism. They simply aspired to control the economic and political institutions that organized black urban life. Rustin’s desire to further social democracy in the US at that moment is admirable, but what he seems to forget is that the advances of the interwar period within the labor movement and those of the Civil Rights Movement after the Second World War were derived from an array of political actions, such as legal campaigns, popular protests, organizing support at the grassroots and among wealthy benefactors and sympathetic politicians. He forgets about this winding path of social change, and with it, any sense that politics—which is, in its broadest sense, the exercise of power—entails force as well as persuasion.

Rustin is a tragic figure during the 60s. I suspect his embrace of conservative politics at that moment stems in large part from how he had been marginalized within movement circles. Here we have someone who was a member of the Young Communist League and the War Resisters League, someone who had a genuinely rich experience of political activism. He was also a gay black man. His communist past and his sexuality were easy targets for those who wanted to discredit the movement. The clergy and other movement leaders respected his work, expertise, and acumen as an organizer. Still, he was relegated to toiling behind the curtains while others took center stage. This changed during the early 60s, but what happens when Rustin is no longer closeted by movement leaders? As he and others gained access to the halls of power, appointments at the White House, and so on, he grows more conservative, if only in terms of strategy. Even before the 1965 *Commentary* essay was published, he’d already demonstrated a willingness to stifle dissent within the movement. The two most famous incidences were his muzzling of John Lewis at the 1963 March on Washington and his work brokering the compromise with the Mississippi Freedom Democrats at the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

I doubt Rustin’s wisdom at that historical moment. His belief that participation sans protest could steer the Democratic Party during the middle 60s towards more extensive commitments to social democracy seems even more foolhardy in hindsight. He had reason to be optimistic about the prospects given the Johnson administration’s civil rights reforms and the War on Poverty, but there were very real reactionary tendencies within the Democratic Party at that time. The party included Vietnam hawks, Southern segregationists, and legions of voters who were firmly committed to the middle class consumer society. Rustin cedes too much ground to them. And, again, his fatal flaw is that he no longer seems to appreciate the role of movement pressure.

With respect to our own times, my views on these matters may be more complicated now than when I wrote those passages. For the most part, I still see

popular movements and political disruption as some of the most important levers of social change within American society. But when I wrote that book, I was responding in part to the decades of demobilization and political decomposition within black public life. The book began as a dissertation during the 1990s. My questions and preoccupations were prompted by the lack of any sustained and viable black protest movements. Black radicalism at that moment was dominated by Afrocentric and culturalist politics. Black elite politics as I experienced it within the Washington Beltway was veering towards extensive commitments to Clinton New Democratic politics, an amalgam of multicultural social liberalism and neoliberalization. Of course, since the Clinton years, we’ve witnessed the emergence of strong, visible social protests beginning with anti-globalization struggles at the close of the nineties, continuing through the anti-war campaigns that followed September 11, Occupy and, now, the anti-police brutality and criminal justice reform actions represented by BLM, the Black Youth Project, and other organizations. Their emergence has changed some of my thinking, or at least refined some of my views, forcing me to ask different questions.

So, we need both. Elections matter, but they shouldn’t be seen as way of building a movement. They are moments to shape the political arena, but the work of organizing a political alternative shouldn’t be bound to the election cycle. The emergence of the Labor Party, the success of the Greens and other minor parties at the state and local level, and the election of some progressive Democrats now and again, should all give us some hope. Still we know that the American party system is stacked in favor of the wealthy and, at the national level, the election of Congressional representation is biased against cities, where most Americans live.

**GB:** In his 1970 essay “The Failure of Black Separatism,” Rustin implies that black separatism is right-wing.<sup>4</sup> You agree that black nationalism had “conservative political dynamics.”<sup>5</sup> In the same period, C. L. R. James argued that the black political struggle as an independent struggle could nevertheless be directed toward socialism.<sup>6</sup> Harold Cruse, finally, believed that Afro-Americans were subject to domestic colonialism but that therein lay their revolutionary character.<sup>7</sup> These are in many ways drastically varying interpretations. Can we say that the potential direction of black nationalist politics was still up for grabs in the late 60s? What made and makes it so difficult to locate black nationalism politically?

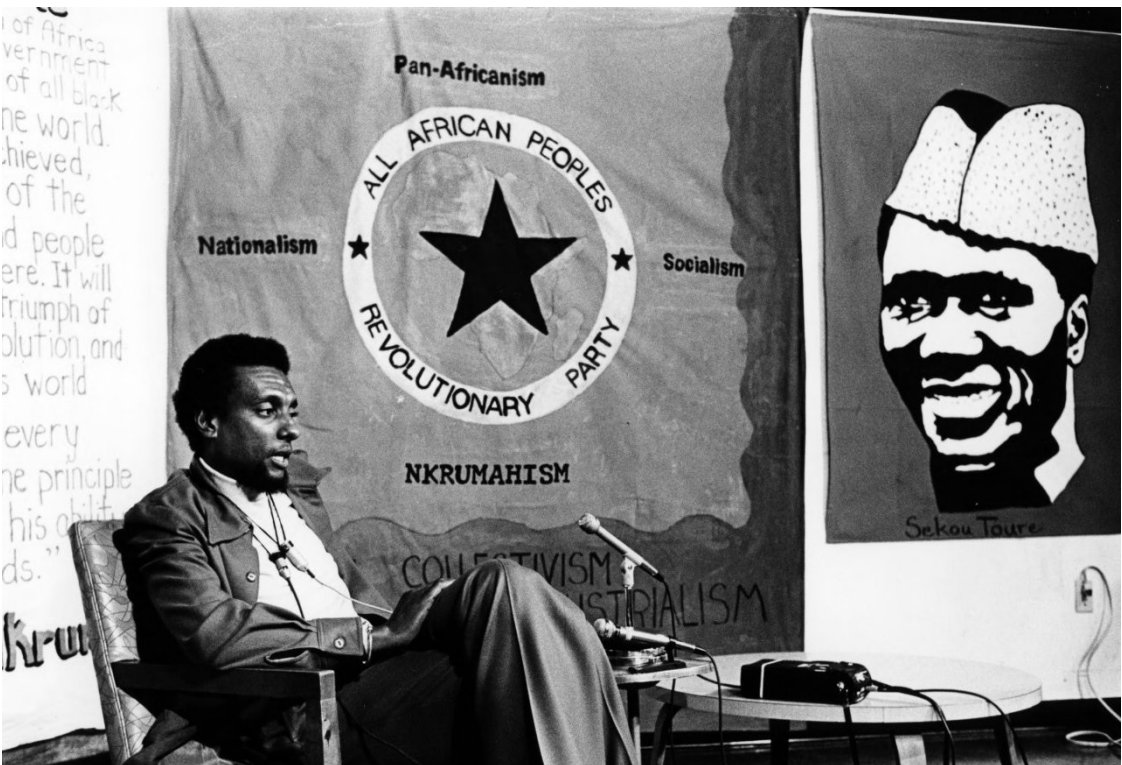
**CJ:** In each of these different statements, what we have are intellectuals trying to make sense of the movements unfolding around them and attempting to shape the course of events. This is something that we all as intellectuals hope to do. They are also speaking to very different contexts. For instance, Cruse’s 1962 essay “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American” where he lays out the argument that blacks are the “American problem of underdevelopment” was written from the critical vantage point of what some referred to at the time as the “new nationalism” or “new Afro-American nationalism.” This tendency was represented by Malcolm X in the Nation of Islam, the Revolutionary Action Movement, but also by intellectuals like Cruse and others who wrote for magazines like *Liberator* and *Soulbook*. Some were refugees from the American Communist Party. Others had been devotees of Marcus Garvey responding to post-war historical conditions. They were united in their skepticism towards liberal integration and the philosophy of non-violent resistance, as well as by their sense of solidarity with anti-colonial struggles in Africa and other parts of the Third World. This intellectual movement anticipated the black power militancy of the late sixties.

C. L. R. James was by then writing about the US from a distance. His comments reflect the optimism that many felt at that moment, when it seemed like—given the emergence of organizations like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, and the massive riots in American cities—the country was entering a revolutionary epoch. Rustin is literally writing after the smoke has cleared. He had witnessed waves of urban revolt, police repression of black militancy, and the emergence of Nixon’s version of black power as black capitalism. Surely, he saw all these derivations of black power as a retreat from the politics he felt might steer the country in a social-democratic direction. I should also add, that he was attacked mercilessly by some cultural nationalist elements. When I was conducting research on my dissertation years ago, I remember stumbling upon Amiri Baraka’s “Open Letter to Bayard Rustin” where Baraka denounced him as “paid pervert of the racist unions.”

I agree with the characterization offered by Wilson J. Moses, and more recently by Dean Robinson, that black nationalism tends to take the shape of its historical container. It is not disconnected from broader “white” public discourses, but intimately constituted by them. This is how we end up with Marcus Garvey and other UNIA members donning British naval regalia and parading through Harlem emulating imperial power, or Stokely Carmichael, Cruse and others drawing on fairly conservative ethnic pluralist accounts of American politics to develop their theories of black power.

**GB:** You critique Harold Cruse for ultimately “[rehabilitating] the racial uplift politics of the Jim Crow era where black elites serve as the role models and legitimate voice of the masses,” i.e. for promoting an elite-driven ethnic politics as opposed to one rooted in the working class.<sup>8</sup> However, you acknowledge that Cruse’s work served as an inspiration early on during your graduate student days.<sup>9</sup> How did Cruse’s writings figure in your development as a Marxist? What other intellectual influences led you to critique his approach?

**CJ:** As an undergraduate, Cruse’s work resonated with much of what I had read and observed as a teenager. His work was also contradictory in both conscious and unintended ways. Even as he advocated for a form of black ethnic politics, Cruse outlined in painstaking detail the array of ideologies and positions that coursed through black political life over the twentieth century, facts that made the prospects of black unity unlikely and any talk



Stokely Carmichael lecturing on Pan-Africanism in the 1960s.

of a singular black political will difficult to abide. My criticism of the ethnic paradigm, and of identity politics more generally, is in many respects autocritique.

I came of age in the waning years of the Cold War, at a moment when left politics was in disarray and retreat, and I grew up in a region of the country where black liberal commitments to protecting the gains of the Civil Rights Movement and nationalist ideas about economic and political independence were dominant. Opelousas, Louisiana is my home town. At that time St. Landry Parish was the poorest county of its size in the United States. The experience of growing up in a majority black city, and living in places like Baton Rouge and the Baltimore-Washington region as a student, further complicated for me inherited notions of black ethnic politics. Although I was socialized into the same modes of essentialist thinking and bourgeois aspiration as everyone else, my formative sense of the complexity of black political life was gained through living in different black communities, and experiencing the internal class dynamics from various perspectives, as the child of public school teachers, a lay church member, janitor, groundskeeper, restaurant cook, collegiate student-athlete, sergeant-at-arms at the Louisiana State Senate, substitute teacher, an adjunct lecturer and ultimately tenure-track professor.

Throughout childhood and adolescence, I belonged to many majority black institutions. I grew up in Holy Ghost Catholic Church, which was at that time the largest black Catholic congregation in the United States with some 10,000 parishioners. That church was pastored by Reverend Albert J. McKnight, the father of the “southern cooperative movement.” The congregation was a hub of political and social activism throughout the 80s and early 90s, hosting the Black Youth Congress which drew hundreds of teenagers from Louisiana, Texas and Mississippi, and Camp Manhood Development for Black Boys; constructing an assisted living housing complex; and creating the annual Southwest Louisiana Zydeco Music festival. We discussed adolescent issues, read and discussed books like Carter G. Woodson’s *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933), participated in dramatic and choral performances, and debated the problems facing African Americans during the Reagan-Bush era. For a short time, the church launched a cooperative supermarket, Heritage Square, and the congregation’s activism was crucial in electing the first black mayor, city councilors, and chief of police in a town that was still dominated until the early 80s, despite having a black electoral majority, by the white merchant-landlord class. During my junior year of high school, Holy Ghost was a driving force behind protests against a pending school consolidation plan which would close various community schools throughout the parish, many of them located in majority black farming communities. The protests escalated over the course of a year with a student-walkout, sit-ins, mass arrests, and, eventually, a march to the state capitol. The new schools were eventually built, but the activism altered the terms of public debate and the site selection decisions, empowering blacks throughout the Parish. Even though I try to avoid being too nostalgic about it, that period was profoundly transformative for me personally. After leaving my hometown, I attended Southern University-Baton Rouge, which was then the largest historically black college with around 10,000 students. When I finally got around to reading Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, it provoked a sense of *déjà vu*. His ideas about black political self-assertion and the need for institution-building, the responsibility of the black intellectual, the problem of white cultural appropriation and, relatedly, the lack of black economic ownership, were all very familiar to me. I was enamored of the kind of intellectual he represented, one that possessed a broad historical consciousness unconstrained by disciplinary expectations. He was more motivated by race advancement than career advancement. I don’t agree with some of his interpretations and prescriptions, but many of the questions he raised were the right ones, and many remain unanswered. They are likely to remain unanswered as intellectual life within academe drifts ever farther away from bread-and-butter concerns that preoccupy the vast majority of people in our society.

**GB:** So, is it fair to say that you came to Marxism out of frustration with even the most thoughtful strains within black nationalism? How would you describe the process of coming to Marxism at a time when it was clearly on the retreat both as a global politics and as an intellectual current? While the disadvantages of coming to Marxism at such a time are manifest, what, if any, are the insights this experience allowed you?

**CJ:** I entered Southern University as a freshman in the summer of 1989, and that period, the so-called “end of history” for Francis Fukuyama and his ilk, was a tough time to openly embrace socialism. That said, when I first

read *The Communist Manifesto* as a freshman, it made sense to me. Marx and Engels’ text resonated with my understanding of the world. To express any interest in communism at that moment, however, was to condemn oneself to the margins of any political discussion within black public life, and the US more generally. I had grown up in underdeveloped South Louisiana where struggles over environmental pollution, incarceration, poverty and racism were all too real, so I was enamored of their approach to thinking about history, and their critique of capitalism. I also came into Marxism through the “back door” so to speak. Marx’s writings were off limits in an era where Afrocentrism and neo-black nationalist ideas were dominant, but there was room to engage Caribbean and African leftist writers. Despite the anti-communism of black cultural nationalists and the black bourgeoisie, it wasn’t uncommon to find copies of *The Black Jacobins* (1938), Eric Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), the writings of Chinweizu and Nkrumah, the speeches of Maurice Bishop and Thomas Sankara, the works of white British historian Basil Davidson, and so forth, nestled on the shelves of many black bookstores and stacked neatly on the book tables at various African American street festivals and bazaars across the country. Much of that literary culture and the infrastructure of independent black booksellers sadly has vanished in many cities. Many black nationalists saw these figures as acceptable because they viewed them as Pan-Africanist, first and foremost, who just happened to be Marxist. I embraced them because of their visions of national industrial development, and critiques of neocolonialism. There were also specific mentors who steered me from a basic moral opposition to capitalism towards a more mature analysis of the process of accumulation. Roderick Sias, one of my homeboys who also grew up in Holy Ghost Church, took me under his wing at Southern University. He got me involved in protests against the Persian Gulf War and capital punishment in Louisiana. Years later, he introduced me to the work of Henri Lefebvre while he was completing a graduate degree in architecture and planning, and for me he still represents the highest level of intellectual engagement and political integrity. Gary Clark, one of my political science professors at Southern University really challenged my thinking, especially with respect to international politics, and his example inspired me to become a university professor. In my first quarter as a graduate student in the Ohio State University’s Black Studies department, Ike Okafor Newsum introduced me to the writings of Gramsci, Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams, works by various queer and feminist theorists especially Adrienne Rich, and the Black Arts Movement canon, e.g. Larry Neal, Baraka, Ishmael Reed, etc. And the person who really sharpened my understanding and cemented my commitment to Marxist analysis was the late Linda Faye Williams of the University of Maryland, College Park. I spent a semester with her reading intensively on African American politics and it probably saved my graduate school career. Our conversations rambled on for hours, and she shared some amazing stories of black political life during the 70s, her connection with Walter Rodney and the Working People’s Alliance, and experiences in Guyana during the reign of Forbes Burnham. I took an intimate graduate seminar with her in the wake of the 1994 Republican Revolution and on-going efforts to dismantle welfare and public housing.

**GB:** We’ve been talking about the series of movements that have emerged since the late 1990s from anti-globalization to BLM. In many ways these have coincided with a movement to the right in politics overall. What does Marxism specifically have to offer by way of reversing what seems an ongoing downward spiral? After all, giving political expression to Marxism would seem to involve simply joining one of the many sectarian *disiecta membra* of an American socialism that never quite was.

**CJ:** As long as capitalism exploits and degrades living labor and the environment, Marx will remain relevant. Over time, I’ve gained many insights about politics, the history of capitalist development, dynamics of globalization and international trade, technological development and the labor process, and the consumer society from studying the writings of Marx, Adolph Reed, Judith Stein, Nick Dyer-Witheford, David Harvey, Neil Smith, Mike Davis, Christopher Gunn, and so many others who have worked within the interpretive tradition of historical materialism. This is a diverse and rich body of knowledge. Many of the problems in our society that are often treated as distinctive and disconnected, are in fact rooted in the process of capital accumulation. This is not to say that every problem can be explained through materialist critique, but I’m convinced that we cannot



# Ghosts of national sovereignty: SYRIZA and the Left in the current situation

Teo Velissaris



The head of SYRIZA party Alexis Tsipras takes a selfie with the leader of right-wing, anti-bailout Independent Greeks party (ANEL), Panos Kammenos.

**A SPECTER IS HAUNTING THE LEFT** lately: the specter of national sovereignty. If the ghosts of dominant powers in the past were expressing existing social trends—such as the “ghost of communism” over Europe—the ghosts of the Left, instead, seem to ignore these trends. The specter of communism was a real historical force, whereas the specter of national sovereignty appears irrelevant and obsolete.

Devotees of sovereignty complain because within the world capitalist division of labor, people are crushed by prevailing TINA [There Is No Alternative] policies of the supra-national technocrats of power. In this concept of sovereignty, we can include the anti-authoritarian left with the local sovereignty, self-sufficiency, autonomy and the autarky it fosters as ideals. On the one hand we have a project of statism, on the other a project of localism. When referring to national sovereignty, emphasis rests on sovereignty, that is why we can recognize it even in those who politically reject the nation-state (many of whom nevertheless explicitly accept national sovereignty as a first step towards their vision of anti-national/local sovereignty). Hence, sovereignty unites statists and anti-statists in the current prevailing ideas among the Left.

The idea of emancipation comes forward as a vision only if people manage to regain their sovereignty from the powerful international markets. And after they recover national or local sovereignty, and only then, they will indulge in the work of left internationalism. This perception of internationalism implies as preconditions strong nation-states and powerful folk communities, otherwise it is a misnomer. Here are the prophecies of the ruling left: We cannot sublimate the spurious pseudo-internationalism of the system towards real internationalism. The latter requires a long detour of national and local retreat. Some steps back, and then one forward.

Here two problems arise: first, whether a retreat is possible, secondly, whether it is politically desirable. On the former, suffice at this stage to note that even the most powerful force internationally, the United States, is economically dependent on the international market and in no way self-sufficient. Despite the relatively broader range of policies that it can implement, U.S. politics are limited by the international environment. Needs today are (pseudo-) covered through an unprecedented globalized division of labor. Regarding the second problem, one wonders what particular leftism is peculiar to these demands, especially inasmuch as they are supported by the right. For example, the struggle of SYRIZA to end austerity in Greece within the Eurozone was perfectly defensible from the uber-right party, ANEL. How can one find the difference when both Tsipras and, say, the leader of UKIP, Farage, understand democracy in Europe to mean the enhancement of the role and power of each nation-state (even if the former wants this enhancement within the EU)? How much more conservative do those claims appear compared with the bourgeois revolutions like the American or French, revolutions that the Left imagines it has progressed beyond, and the international brotherhood they were calling for?

A problem of the Left in the present is the belief that the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a century of progress for revolutionary ideas and actions. We are facing a complete naturalization of the nationalist framework of politics, a legacy we are carrying on semi- or unconsciously. The Stalinism of “socialism in one country,” to cite one example, prevails unquestioned by both Stalinists and anti-Stalinists who seem to imply that a nation can prosper if the correct set of policies are implemented. Another example is the emergence of the New Left or identity movements, whose importance is taken for granted even though they were advanced basically in a narrow national framework, detached from the idea of an international socialist revolution and very weak in concrete organization towards this direction.

At the same time, the narrative about technocrats against democracy obscures the possibility of politicizing in a revolutionary way what appears technocratic: It is easy to yell “technocrats!” and still miss the fact that they express, and are used by, dominant modern forms of politics. Rather, we have the clash between different policies, not technocrats versus politics. Reference to technocrats may express a fear of a mass form of international politics. But what conditions make technocrats necessary today? Why do mass politics appear, as from necessity, to acquire

similar characteristics? Wouldn’t a revolutionary politics utilize technocrats? So, for that matter, can the European political scene become a realm for revolutionary politics? Can the Left seek the expansion of this realm, beyond the provincial anti-Americanism of the European status quo and its racist and conservative stance towards immigrants? The answer to these questions cannot be automatically negative without any serious consideration.

Those on the Left who uncritically adopt these ideas of national and local sovereignty might need to remember Marx’s bitter criticism of the Gotha Programme adopted by his comrades in 1875:

In fact, the internationalism of the program stands even infinitely below that of the Free Trade party. The latter also asserts that the result of its efforts will be ‘the international brotherhood of peoples’. But it also does something to make trade international and by no means contents itself with the consciousness that all people are carrying on trade at home.<sup>1</sup>

Have we even wondered if the Left’s internationalism today stands infinitely lower than that of the forces it opposes? How poor in relation to Marx’s quote is modern talk by intellectual celebrities, like Joseph Stiglitz, who hoped that via a “no” vote in the recent referendum, Greece would “grasp its destiny in its own hands”: a phrase that the Left likes to use in many variations.<sup>2</sup>

Not that the European Union is internationalist. It remains a superficial union of nation-states without any substantial prospect for fiscal, not to mention political, integration (at least on the short-middle-term). And even if the latter gets some time on the agenda within the established framework, it would appear under the statist perspective of one dominant Europe opposed to “international dangers” (e.g., U.S., China, and, worst of all, immigrants).

Against the hypocritical pseudo-internationalism of the dominant forces, the Left needs to be truly internationalist, and not nationalist or localist because of a reflexive reaction, and furthermore, by necessity, pretensively local or national, given the international interdependence achieved today (with all its monstrous unevenness). Without extending a revolution to the core capitalist centers, any international economic arrangement would not, self-evidently, be neutral, innocent, or in the interest of the oppressed.

One of the many unexamined preconditions of leftism today is the reaction against what is considered the dominant capitalist policy as an end-in-itself. (The “secondary” capitalist policies, e.g., in the level of nation-state, or of pariah-states, are often considered better.) But the abstract, absolute reaction to capitalism is not automatically progressive; it can frequently multiply the suffering that it wants to overcome. For example, the movement that deposed the representative of the major capitalist force in 1979 in Iran, the Shah, was not accompanied by the consolidation of a left theory and practice, but by the ayatollahs and the physical and ideological annihilation of the Left. The example is not mentioned here because the Left had to be in favor of the Shah, but as a demonstration of the fact that anti-capitalism itself is not necessarily progressive. That is why Lenin in his classic polemic against “left-wing communism” stressed that Marxists aim at the overcoming of capitalism “on the basis of capitalism itself.”<sup>3</sup>

Marx and Lenin are not mentioned here as models but as examples of how revolutionaries in the past did not want to resist capitalism, but to overcome it, in a way that seems neglected today. Let us look at another example from Lenin’s thought:

The bourgeoisie makes it its business to promote trusts, drive women and children into the factories, subject them to corruption and suffering, condemn them to extreme poverty. We do not ‘demand’ such development, we do not ‘support’ it. We fight it. But how do we fight? We explain that trusts and the employment of women in industry are progressive. We do not want a return to the handicraft system, pre-monopoly capitalism, domestic drudgery for women. Forward through the trusts, etc., and beyond them to socialism!<sup>4</sup>

To a large extent all of the aforementioned problems are associated with the idea of the Left as a tool of the oppressed in their reaction against their oppressors. The Left sees itself through a sociological perspective, considering how to foster the demands of weak and exploited social strata. This becomes problematic only in its one-sidedness, which does not recognize the Left as a potentially revolutionary political expression of the discontents of the exploited, without which the oppressed will be expressed through reactionary political forces. It is assumed that an existing emancipatory politics of the oppressed already exists, and in its “tail” the Left should stand and “push.” Marx warned, however, not only that the oppressed social strata may spontaneously support reactionary policies (in his analysis of the phenomenon of Bonapartism), but even that capitalist society without capitalists could exist, still oppressing itself! The need for serious international socialist politics has been cast aside for the sake of social defense against the capitalist march, instead of complementing and guiding this defense.

In the Greek case of the leftist mobilization around the referendum, the Left itself thought that it was guiding the mobilization of the oppressed, but the opposite happened, the oppressed were guiding the

Left, as long as the main ideological position of that mobilization remained the feeling of “national pride” and “dignity,” the wave of which swept some of the prominent representatives of the Left. The “no” vote was supported mainly, not only from SYRIZA, but also ANTARSYA, and sections of the anti-authoritarian/anarchist milieu (especially those fostering direct democratic politics and autonomy, or those that are workerist in perspective). Those resisting the “no” vote supported abstention from the referendum. The main leftist force in this side was KKE (the Greek Communist Party), but also other Stalinist or Maoist extra-parliamentary, smaller groups, together with some anarchists (of the communist or “communisation” tendencies). It is symptomatic that the possibility of a leftist “yes” was absolutely excluded, and any small minority of (basically liberal) leftists supporting it was attacked immediately as traitors, without allowing even the slightest discussion of it. We are not advocating the choice of a leftist “yes” here, but rather the difficulty, or even impossibility, of any serious leftist response to the problem posed by the referendum.

To return to previous concerns, the aforementioned sociological and incomplete self-consciousness of the Left has led to a series of misunderstandings concerning SYRIZA in government. Because SYRIZA seems to promote (in their declarations) a program less painful for the poorest social strata, this automatically means classifying it in the Left (let’s not expand now on how SYRIZA failed as a government to deal with conservative forces like the Church, the military, the rich tax-evaders etc.). A similar program of opposing harsh austerity can be promoted by anyone, not necessarily leftist, e.g., Obama. Does this make SYRIZA and Obama leftists, while Merkel is right-wing? The Left as an idea has to do with the demand for the radical transformation and overcoming of the dominant framework towards individual and social emancipation. Not with the complete acceptance of this framework and the struggle for its improvement. That does not imply that reforms and policies of immediate relief should be avoided, quite the opposite: At stake is their connection with the aforementioned transformation.

There is another problem with the SYRIZA government as a representative of the Left in leftist imagination which has to do with the statism we highlighted earlier. A leftist force that is aware of the tasks to be carried out cannot be exhausted in negotiating games of a bunch of people behind closed doors or in ministerial offices. The Left as a transformative power cannot be based simply on voting, but on the organized majority. This is lacking to a large extent, not only for SYRIZA, but for the whole Left, in Greece and internationally. The application of a left program is not enough to be declared, but must be applied, which requires conflicts throughout the social field of civil society. In this way the Left can assume responsibility for the aspirations and the results of its choices, without compromising essentially to the status quo, appearing as an opportunist or gambler in each situation.

The failure of responsible revolutionary politics on the part of the Left is obvious from its call, on any given Sunday, to transform any crisis into a “break,” a rebellion or even a revolution. But all days are not Sundays for social revolution. Every revolutionary force that respects itself knows when to proceed to call for a revolutionary rupture and when to practice revolutionary patience. Otherwise we end up being sectarian keyboard revolutionaries (without revolution), or being the counter-revolutionaries of eternal procrastination.

Given all that, we cannot but also recognize that SYRIZA, at least, was not afraid to participate in, and deal with, mass forms of politics, as opposed to its super-revolutionary critics. Even in its narrow character and bourgeois scope, SYRIZA’s intervention opened up political discussion and horizon, despite its utter failure (or demonstrated how this horizon is perhaps not totally ruined), especially concerning the crucial issue of political power.

## Marxism, continued from page 3

fully understand poverty, policing, climatic change, gun violence, the limitations of bourgeois democracy, how cities have developed in the US over the past century, gender and racial inequality, and so forth without thinking critically about the power of capital, the demands it places on living labor and its pernicious effects.

When we look at the current brouhaha between BLM activists, so-called “black twitter,” and the Bernie Sanders campaign, it reveals just how bad things have become, as well as the downside of new technologies for developing progressive or even revolutionary left politics in this country. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard people champion the virtues of new communication technologies and their radical potential. But after living with cellphones, social media, etc. for some time now, I can’t say that we’re better off. The opposition to the Sanders campaign reveals a shallow understanding of class by some of his detractors who seem to view race and class as equivalents, and who appear to be unaware that their racial militancy is itself a form of class politics. There is a crass opportunism at work here that we’ve seen before. Bruce Dixon’s recent essay<sup>10</sup> is really perceptive in identifying the problem. In reasserting the primacy of “race” for understanding contemporary inequality, the activists who interrupted the Netroots Nation event were attempting to stake out a claim as brokers for some black constituency, if not for all blacks writ large. Herein lies one of the many limitations of politics in the wireless age, and that is, that anyone with a cellphone or a Twitter handle can lay claim to representing this or that constituency without the accountability and hard work that comes with some other more honest form of political representation. The same media also allow for an undisciplined style of intellectual and political engagement, one that too often mirrors the sensationalism, Babbity, philistinism, and short attention span of corporate news media.

So, we can’t reverse the problems of left disarray that you note here through social media or elections. We have to start elsewhere. We need to go back to basics.

Those of us on the Left who are already engaged in local campaigns, neighborhood organizations, tenants groups, unions, left political organizations etc., need

Furthermore, responsibility for this failure lies more with Germany as the leading Eurozone power, despite the fact that SYRIZA fell like an amateur into Germany’s (and its followers’) trap to discredit and destroy SYRIZA and all other possible anti-austerity parties. Germany, and the rest of the “Troika,” could complete the Greek program with the previous Greek government, but was afraid that a SYRIZA government, after the end of the program, would reverse all of its results. They preferred instead to risk a disaster and allow for a SYRIZA government before the program ended so that they could easily manipulate SYRIZA, since, while still in program, any Greek government would be totally dependent on the “institutions.” Germany and its allies acted as bankers, lenders or, put bluntly, as rackets, and not as “responsible” capitalist leaders (similarly in the first memorandum, when they imposed austerity with no debt relief to protect their banks). The “harvest” of this miserable politics is a more unstable Eurozone still under crisis, with Germany ending up considering possibilities that they were trying to avoid, like Grexit. The bourgeois class can no longer rule and the working class is not yet able—to recall another classic Marxist formulation.

SYRIZA’s greatest mistake, however, was that the Eurozone was already changing, slowly, towards a direction of less harsh austerity. Not towards a welfare state of course, but in a way similar to the one SYRIZA was advocating, resembling U.S.-Obama politics, with Draghi winning in European courts the right to apply his quantitative easing program against Germany’s reactions. That does not mean at all that Obama’s model is necessarily better for workers and the majority in general. So, instead of aligning with and enforcing a change that already takes place, SYRIZA tried to restart the game from scratch with childish negotiating tactics. Instead of exploiting these tendencies and conflicts within the “institutions,” SYRIZA’s adventurism united all these forces against itself! Why? Because SYRIZA had to play the role it has given itself within the populist anti-memorandum politics that led to its alliance with ANEL in the first place. With a better consciousness of international politics, they would have closed the program while they could when the economy was slightly recovering, and only afterwards trying to raise their own agenda broadly. But they were afraid that the people would attack them as traitors, so they had to pretend they were negotiating hard, supposedly realizing how they needed to capitulate only in the last instance, when the economy could not suffer any more damage. When SYRIZA decided to “capitulate,” it was as if Greece was transferred by a time machine back to 2012, returning to recession, budget deficits, unsafe banking system, etc. SYRIZA focused in the marketing task of persuading the people that “it tried its best”; a populist policy that fed nationalism and led to harsher economic conditions.

But there is a limit in addressing all these issues. An international left as a serious and organized political agent is needed both in order to be able to interpret our world today and to change it. Insofar as this condition is missing, the Left will engage in a series of unfortunate events, always in the role of the conformist who permanently makes a virtue out of necessity. **IP**

1 Marx, Karl. *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, 1875. Available online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>  
2 Stiglitz, Joseph. “How I would vote in the Greek referendum,” *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/jun/29/joseph-stiglitz-how-i-would-vote-in-the-greek-referendum>  
3 Lenin, Vladimir. “Left-Wing” Communism: an Infantile Disorder, available on-line at: <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch07.htm>>  
4 Lenin, Vladimir. *The Military Programme of the Proletarian Revolution*, 1916/17, available on-line at: <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/miliprog/ii.htm>>

to broaden our efforts to include the uninitiated, the despondent, and even those who may hold reactionary views now. Powerful social movements engage people across social layers, create unlikely allies and change perceptions of what is possible. This won’t happen solely through social media, which reproduces market niches and social cliques, and allows people to lambaste and troll others without fear of reprisal and without the civility and responsibility that typically disciplines face-to-face conversations, and actual relationships. Social media is an effective means for publicizing and organizing certain kinds of events, connecting people across geographic expanses, and rapidly circulating information, but it cannot develop the kinds of deep bonds and relations of trust that are necessary for political activity predicated on risk-taking and protracted commitment. This is difficult work, but I don’t see any way around it. How else will we be able to develop broad, powerful political opposition to the investor class in this country, and begin to build the world that we want? **IP**

Transcribed by Katarzyna Piotrowska

1 Andrea M. Burch, “Arrest-Related Deaths, 2003-2009 – Statistical Tables,” *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, November 2011, <<http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ard0309st.pdf>>  
2 Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*. *Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007], 36, 38.  
3 Ibid., xxix.  
4 Bayard Rustin, “The Failure of Black Separatism,” *Harper’s Magazine*, January 1970, 25.  
5 Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders*, xxiii.  
6 C. L. R. James, “Black Power,” in *The C. L. R. James Reader*, ed. Anna Grimshaw [Oxford, UK/ Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1992] 362-74.  
7 Harold Cruse, “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American,” in *Rebellion or Revolution* (Minneapolis/London: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2009), 74-96.  
8 Cedric Johnson, foreword to *Rebellion or Revolution* by Harold Cruse (Minneapolis/London: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2009), 6.  
9 Ibid., 1.  
10 Bruce Dixon, “NetRoots Nation Confrontation Wasn’t About #BlackLivesMatter At All,” *Black Agenda Report*, last modified July 23, 2015, <<http://www.blackagendareport.com/netroots-nation-confrontation>>



# The fickle power of the people

Eduardo Frajman

“¡NO SOMOS MARIONETAS! YA!,” THEY SCREAMED. “We are not puppets! Enough!” Their name commanded attention too: the *indignados*, the indignant. It said, “We are not victims. We are not acting out like impotent children. We see you and we know what you are doing. We have power, moral power, but also the power of hands and feet and screaming voices.”

Also known as “15-M movement”, they trace their birth to May 15, 2011. On that day, social organizations staged demonstrations across Spain to voice their popular repudiation of their political leaders’ ineptness and corruption, under the shadow of economic catastrophe. As the story goes, a group of forty *indignados* made camp on the *Puerta del Sol* plaza. From that seed emerged the movement, organically sprouting new branches, new encampments, assemblies, collectives. They talked of a new kind of society, of horizontality, of an end to the game in which one has to pick the least repulsive megalomaniac to make decisions for everyone. They talked of justice and solidarity.<sup>1</sup> Yet they were not just a few hippies and unemployed lifelong radicals. They were the masses. Everyone was talking about them even before the Spanish media revealed the numbers: between six and eight-and-a-half million people, according to a survey published in June of that year,<sup>2</sup> dipped their toes in the waters of the new. Millions! One in eight Spaniards, possibly one in six!

As always happens when a popular explosion of this magnitude occurs, intellectuals and activists of the Left around the world were quick to appropriate the *indignados*. Rather than allow the Spanish popular upsurge to be what it was: a powerful, spontaneous, marvelous, but also by necessity short-lived, reaction to the depravity of the market and the callousness of those in power; 15-M was symbolically enlisted by the Left to do a job, whether the participants were interested in this or not (though many doubtless were): to be the *avant garde* of the global revolution, the great offensive against representative democracy and predatory capitalism.<sup>3</sup> The stirrings of the people never fail to arouse the desperate, confused and splintered international Left.

In certain circles there appears a need to engage in endless debates about “what the Left is,” but I do not think it is very difficult to demarcate the Left, at least in terms of its ultimate political objectives. I mean the “real” Left, what the rest of the world calls the “radical” Left, or, more evocatively, the “far” Left. A Left that envisions “a transition toward democratic social coordination of the economy and the construction of a development model in which human needs are prioritized over the needs of capital.”<sup>4</sup> By “democratic” is meant “participatory, deliberative, discursive, negotiated, cooperative, and consensual” democracy of some kind.<sup>5</sup> There are other goals certainly, those of the multicultural left, and the indigenous left, and the feminist left, and the post-colonial left, and so on, but, they all overlap in their desire to achieve this central political objective and in their belief that such a state of affairs can somehow be made real.

In any event, it took little time for left-wing humanists, post-modernists, and critical theorists to make the *indignados* one with similar, or not so similar, eruptions of unrest around the world. Here is a typical example:

In the last few years we have witnessed a wave of mass protests against authoritarianism, corporate monopoly, privatizations, and the decline of social protections. The uprisings against neoliberal policies and corrupt, authoritarian and repressive governments in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria, coined the “Arab Spring,” have inspired other similar forms of activism such as: the occupation of the Wisconsin statehouse by the organized labor movement and their supporters; teachers’ strikes in Chicago; rallies against economic austerity measures in Madrid and other Spanish cities organized by the *indignados*; protests against economic injustice in Athens and Tel Aviv; the yoSoy132 movement in Mexico; the mass mobilizations in New York against global economic injustice known as Occupy Wall Street; followed shortly by a plethora of other Occupy movements in North America, Europe and elsewhere; and, a wave of student protests in Quebec, Canada. [...] Using the metaphor of “1% versus 99%,” these various movements have questioned the global economic order that has resulted in wide disparities in economic wealth and political power. Employing the model of consensus decision-making, these movements have attempted to establish alternative models of grassroots democracy that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have described as the “multitude form.”<sup>6</sup>

At last! The Multitude has come! The people have

awoken! The multitude will win the world not through revolution, for violence is the tool of the oppressors, but through the recontextualization of conscience, the obliteration of hegemony.<sup>7</sup> Could it be? Could change, real change, radical change, be truly on the horizon? Many were the prophets of the coming revolution.<sup>8</sup> “By the late summer” of 2011, says Stephen D’Arcy, “it was already possible to see the outline of a transnational movement of people’s assemblies.”<sup>9</sup> “Today’s protests and revolts,” affirms the ubiquitous Slavoj Žižek, “question the global capitalist system as such and try to keep alive the idea of a society beyond capitalism.”<sup>10</sup> Even the venerable *Time Magazine*, nobody’s revolutionary rag, jumped on the bandwagon, proclaiming “the protester” as its Person of the Year and declaring the start of a “global wave of dissent.”<sup>11</sup>

But was it true? Were all these movements one movement? Were they all questioning capitalism? Were all the angry demonstrators in Tahrir square thinking in terms of “1% versus 99%”? Did eight million Spaniards truly yearn for a world in which all decisions are made through localized people’s assemblies? Žižek, for one, was prescient enough to hedge his bets:

It is also important to recognize that the protesters aren’t pursuing any identifiable ‘real’ goal. The protests are not ‘really’ against global capitalism, ‘really’ against religious fundamentalism, ‘really’ for civil freedoms and democracy, or ‘really’ about any one thing in particular. What the majority of those who have participated in the protests are aware of is a fluid feeling of unease and discontent that sustains and unites various specific demands. The struggle to understand the protests is not just an epistemological one, with journalists and theorists trying to explain their true content; it is also an ontological struggle over the thing itself, which is taking place within the protests themselves.<sup>12</sup>

There was, as it turned out, not much time to ontologize the protests. The popular fervor surged, then just as quickly receded. Alexandros Kioupiolis and Giorgos Katsambekis hurried to put out an edited volume that explored whether the new wave of global unrest was best understood as the rise of Hardt and Negri’s Multitude, or perhaps as the consolidation of the “counter-hegemony of the people” theorized by Ernesto Laclau.<sup>13</sup> By the time the book was finished they were already lamenting “the apparent eclipse of the square movements” and expectantly transferring their hopes to new waves of protest in Turkey and Brazil.<sup>14</sup>

15-M still exists, as do Occupy and many of the movements that spearheaded, or emerged out of, these popular upsurges. The dream of a better world that brought them into being is still being pursued by many activists. They work for global change and they work to change their own lives, “to live out and build real democracy.”<sup>15</sup> The masses? The millions? Most of them returned home. Some wanted to stay but could not. Others never knew why they came in the first place. The movement persists, but the upsurge has abated and with it the purity of the original dream. These days, many of the remaining *indignados* try to maintain their presence through, a political party, ironically, named *Podemos* (We Can). Whether Podemos will become an established force, fighting for social change within the existing political institutions, remains to be seen. The most recent elections in Spain offer encouraging signs. This is all to the good. Left-wing parties that emerged out of mass popular movements, such as the Workers’ Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*) in Brazil, have able to win increasing support until reaching political supremacy in their countries. Inevitably, as will happen with Podemos, the more influential the new party becomes, the more its behavior becomes like that of the old guard the people’s movement sought to repudiate. As this happens, the original dream of a new kind of politics dissipates into memory.

The outcome in Spain was eminently predictable. Inevitable, in fact. The Left is complicit in this inevitability while it continues to place all its hopes for fundamental change on spontaneous popular protests. Popular upsurges are enormously important, of course. They seem, in fact, to be an integral aspect of contemporary politics. Consider the “People Power Revolution” in the Philippines in 1986, the pro-democracy campaigns in Latin America and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, the *caracazo* of 1989 in Venezuela, the anti-corruption protests in Brazil in 1994, the *cacerolazos* in Argentina in 2001, the Water Wars, the Gas Wars, the Velvet Revolution, the Cedar Revolution, the Orange Revolution, the Saffron Revolution. For those who yearn for the people to rise and realize its power these were surprising events, full of meaning and potential. They each created its own sect of prophets for the coming of the new age. Look at

what we have accomplished, they said to themselves. What can we not accomplish?

It seems as if the Left suffers from deliberate amnesia. “We’ve never seen anything like it,” says Charles Reeve of the *indignados*.<sup>16</sup> But we have. Many times. The closest analogue, to my mind, is the national upsurge in Argentina during that country’s economic crisis in 2001 and 2002. Over several years, more and more social organizations had joined the popular rejection of neoliberalism, most notably the *piqueteros*, the unemployed who forced themselves on the world consciousness by blocking roads and refusing to budge. Then, on December 19, 2001, they were joined by the multitude, the poor and the middle classes, who banged their pots and pans and screamed “*que se vayan todos!*,” they should all leave. They formed neighborhood assemblies and spoke to their neighbors and to strangers, and dreamed of social justice and a better world. Close behind came the prophets of the Left, who pointed to the Argentine rebellion as the locus for a new global revolution.<sup>17</sup> Antonio Negri and his collaborators were particularly enamored of the Argentine movement.<sup>18</sup> As with the *indignados* and Occupy, there was much theorizing of the significance of the new ways of doing politics, of horizontality and participatory democracy and true freedom.<sup>19</sup> The rhetoric of Podemos is infused with such ideas.

However, by December 2003, on the second anniversary of the upsurge, three separate marches took place around Buenos Aires, as the leaders of the different groups involved were no longer on speaking terms. The movement was now many movements. The dream of real change was, for all purposes, dead. The energy it engendered was captured and channeled by the true victors of those events, Presidents Néstor Kirchner and his wife and successor Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

The story was similar elsewhere in Latin America in the 2000s, in Ecuador and Bolivia, Chile and Brazil, and yes, even in Venezuela. The radical left gained short-lived visibility though its protagonism in popular upsurges. According to James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer, it “blocked capital” yet was “unable or unwilling to replace it.”<sup>20</sup> Some social organizations were co-opted by new center-left governments, others ended up in permanent confrontation with them. On other occasions they actually contributed to the rise of pro-market regimes, that at best paid lip service to the fanciful dreams of social activists.<sup>21</sup>

And so it will be with Podemos, if it succeeds in retaining its relevance. It will produce its share of leaders, who will attempt to coopt the energy that led to the already legendary surge of the *indignados*. At best, this will bring economic stability and security, more inclusive politics, and a renewed sense of social responsibility to the Spanish government. It will not bring about participatory democracy or restructure the economy based on human need. It will not bring about the revolution.

An upsurge is not a movement. And without a movement there can be no revolution. Upsurges birth movements, but they are not movements. Movements can effect real change, upsurges cannot. In fact, if you want to get into Žižekian ontology, the two are somewhat incompatible. Upon the demise of the most recent popular explosions, Alain Badiou laments that they were “blind, naïve, scattered,” lacking “durable organization.”<sup>22</sup> But this is exactly what made them so attractive, so exciting and seemingly new [as we have seen, they are not new]. The people awoke, they roared, they danced, and then they went back to real life. This, history teaches, is the only thing that can happen in any society with the most minimal recognition of individual freedom: the hundreds of thousands, the millions, the multitudes, cannot be herded indefinitely. Most people, the prophets of the Left incongruously forget, cannot afford to spend all their time and effort on creating counter-hegemony. They have to eat.<sup>23</sup>

The prophets of the Left continue to believe they can theorize popular mobilization without bothering to learn how it actually operates in the real world. The most cursory look at forty years of social-science research on social movements shows the absurdity of ascribing revolutionary potential to a spontaneous and momentary social phenomenon. Spontaneity wanes as time passes and “the Multitude” sprouts leaders and would-be leaders.<sup>24</sup> Mobilization is contingent on resources and opportunities.<sup>25</sup> It is hard to forge alliances across different groups and even more difficult to maintain them.<sup>26</sup> Protest is simply not sustainable indefinitely, it comes and goes like waves, and participants are invariably beset by boredom, frustration, and exhaustion.<sup>27</sup> The energy that brought the multitude to the streets is sometimes captured by social movements, sometimes by political parties. These patterns of [mostly peaceful] protest seem to be inextricably tied to social life under democratic capitalism. Recent history shows that short-lived, mass social protest does not lead to systemic change. The Chinese government, for one, counted on this when popular protests broke out in Hong Kong in 2014. There was not repression, no tear-gassing of protesters. The authorities sat and waited. The protesters, who found that they were uselessly pounding on an impassable door, could do nothing but go home. And what of the Arab Spring, where protesters were beaten and gassed and much worse? Tunisia is now the “success story,” for beginning to build the kind of liberal democracy that Occupy wants to destroy.

An intellectually responsible Left will absorb the insights of the social movement literature and learn from it. If there is a way to create Hardt and Negri’s multitude or Laclau and Mouffe’s counter-hegemonic subject, it must be illuminated by the sound empirically-based analysis. Ontologizing social movements without Piven and Cloward, Tilly and Tarrow, is akin to interpreting the Bible while ignoring Wellhausen and Graf. The multitude, as it turns out, does not seem to care much for global revolution in our liberal democratic age. The Latin American waves of protest of the last decade, if anything, showed the people making demands of the state, not calling for participatory democracy or the dissolution of representative politics.<sup>28</sup> More recent waves of protest in that region, moreover, have revealed also how the multitude can turn around, how the people who banged their cooking utensils demanding an end to austerity can just as easily defend the interests of the market, of capital, or worse. In 2006,

and again in 2008, many of the same Argentines who had inspired the Left in their rejection of neoliberalism just a few years earlier took to the streets again, only this time the left-wing Kirchners were their target and the largest agro-industrial companies the people’s champions. In Venezuela there seems to be not one, but two multitudes at any given time. Is it truly up to the prophets of the Left to determine the sincerity of either? In Brazil, the people who brought the Workers’ Party to power, now march in massive anti-corruption demonstrations against its leaders, some of which openly invite the military to take power once again. The Left forgets the double-edged potential of the multitude at its peril. It dreams of the day when Carl Sandburg’s prophecy will come true:

When I, the People, learn to remember, when I, the People, use the lessons of yesterday and no longer forget who robbed me last year, who played me for a fool—then there will be no speaker in all the world say the name: “The People,” with any fleck of a sneer in his voice or any far-off smile of derision. The mob—the crowd—the mass—will arrive then.

But such a thing will not just happen spontaneously. We learn this from history, and we learn it from systematic study. We should still aim to bring justice to the world, but it is unproductive to shut our eyes to reality. Wishful thinking has never been a solid basis for ontology. **IP**

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Still from video taken at Plaça de Catalunya [Catalonia Square] with Indignados, June 2011. It shows a discussion circle among activists. (Licensed under creative commons, produced by www.thetailorpress.com, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9x2j6DGEV0>)