To unite the many
An interview with Adolph Reed, Jr.

Gregor Baszak and Spencer A. Leonard

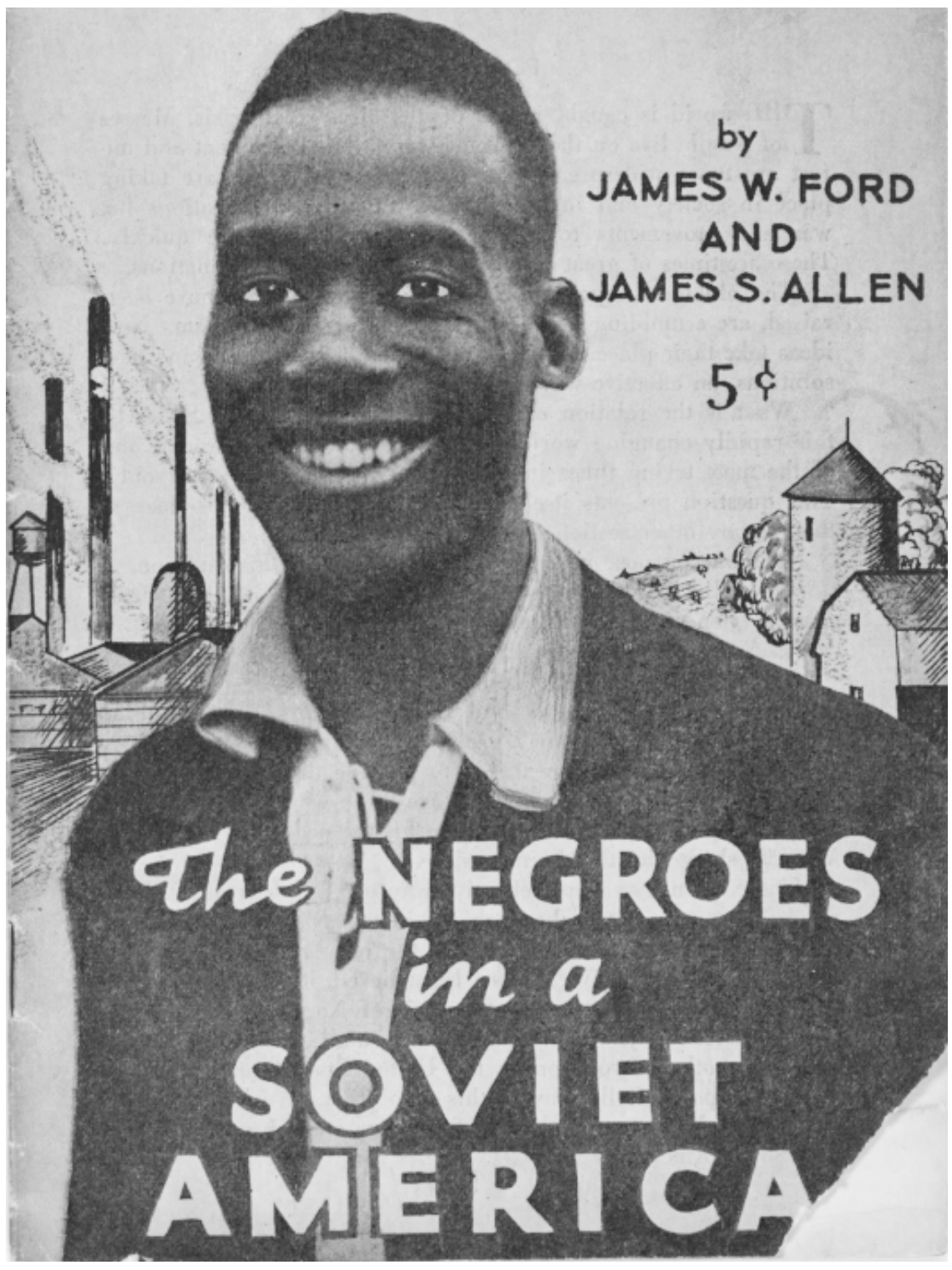
On February 17, 2015, Gregor Baszak and Spencer A. Leonard of the Platypus Affiliated Society conducted an interview with Adolph L. Reed, Jr., author of The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon *(1986),* W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought *(1997), and* Stirrings in the Jug *(1999). What follows is an edited transcript of their conversation.*

Spencer Leonard: At the beginning of the essay you recently published in *Harper's* titled "Nothing Left" you write that the major period of the Left's influence on the course of American politics was from the mid-1930s to the end of the Second World War. At that time, the Left gained a prominent voice in the Democratic Party and helped advance the social agenda generally associated with Roosevelt and the New Deal. This was a high point for the Communist Party, which promoted popular front tactics to defeat fascism worldwide and forged an alliance with Democrats around support for the New Deal. Yet the Popular Front also led to the Left's subordination to the Democratic Party from which, arguably, it has never recovered. It would seem that this period formed in substantial measure the political landscape of your lifetime. Is it fair to view this period as the high point of the Left in post-Civil War American politics and, simultaneously, as the Left's last great crisis, if not its greatest crisis?

Adolph Reed: It is almost certainly the case that it is the Left's last great crisis, but there was a similar moment of lesser crisis in the mid-1960s when the issue of how to come to terms with economic inequality came close to surfacing. In both cases, the 1930s and the 1960s, the response shifted the discussion of inequality or social justice from the realm of political economy to the realm of culture. A new kind of racial liberalism emerged and consolidated in the late 1940s, a racial liberalism detached from an understanding of racial inequality as rooted in the dynamics of American capitalist political economy. This new racial liberalism was rooted in a combination of 14th Amendment equal protection, i.e. state action against Jim Crow in the South, and psychology, meant to expose and counter bigotry and intolerance. The mid-1960s witnessed a repetition of something like that. In the language that a certain strain of political scientists finds appealing, one might call that a "path-dependent" outcome: The major circumscription of progressive political imagination was already accomplished by the late 1940s and early 1950s. But after the legislative victories of the Civil Rights Movement in 1964–65, Bayard Rustin, who was pretty much on point about this, observed, "Okay, we've won those victories and they're important, but they relate mainly to the South, to a kind of backwater of American capitalism. Moving forward, the main issues that confront black Americans in pursuit of equality and social justice have to do with political economy, so that it's not clear that it even makes sense to consider the movement as a 'civil rights movement' anymore." Rustin underscored the necessity of taking a different approach to politics and of forming a different kind of coalition. Rustin had his own limitations—limitations that set him up to be dismissed by the Black Power types as a conservative or a sell-out or an "Uncle Tom" or whatever—but the fact remains that Black Power ultimately ends up being a culturalist solution to the political-economic problem that Rustin was so keenly aware of.

SL: Rustin is aware that racism is really a conditioning factor of the political constitution of the working class?

AR: Exactly. So, to return to the original question, the late 1940s was the crucial moment of the defeat of the Left. This connects to the limitations of the different forms of American exceptionalism that have been adduced over the last two-thirds of a century to explain versions of the question, "Why is there no effective Left in the United States?" The simplest answer is that the United States's left never experienced the kind of institutional gains that Central and Western European countries' social-democratic parties did. At the end of World War II their capitalist classes were by and large weakened and discredited by their association with fascism. The American capitalist class came out of the war stronger than ever—rehabilitated, ironically enough, by the war and hell-bent on a campaign to roll back (or at least stop the advance of) the Left. That's what we've been living with ever since.



The Negroes in a Soviet America, written by James W. Ford, three-time vice-presidential candidate for the Communist Party USA, and James S. Allen, a leading theorist of the CPUSA's "Black Belt Thesis."

SL: The way the postwar black question poses itself would seem to fit into this crisis of the organized left. But before we come to that I want you to elaborate on the account you give in "Paths to Critical Theory" of how you came to Critical Theory—to Korsch, Lukacs, and the Frankfurt School—via American debates that are typically treated as if they are wholly distinct from the concerns of Marxism. For instance, you speak of the importance of Harold Cruse, Christopher Lasch, and others for your own development. Through such studies you grappled with the black question as a young radical in a way that led back to Hegelian-Marxism which, of course,

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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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I was struck again at how the interpretive tropes are always the same: There's always the tale of the extraordinary, larger-than-life black individual who is both dignified and race-conscious overcoming great adversity. This, of course, is why director Ava DuVernay had to portray LBJ the way she did: because a black person can't have allies, because they're all against us all the time. It's like that over and over. My son teaches at Illinois State University. He has remarked to me in recent years that the Martin Luther King Day speaker is the one that the Student Affairs Staff take charge of. They're under pressure both from the student body and the administration to produce turnouts. What the students want, because they don't know any better, is people who are famous, people they see on TV. The resulting speaker is inevitably some form of racial self-esteem hustler.

SL: They have recently been showing the movie *Glory* on Headline News complete with a panel discussing it commercial break by commercial break. The one thing that the panel cannot bring themselves to discuss explicitly is the main theme: black soldiers making history as soldiers, united in purpose with their white abolitionist officers, their common purpose shaped and directed by military discipline. Black soldiers on campaign, trained and armed to uproot slavery by fire and sword, isn't Black History enough for these commentators.

AR: I know, it's absolutely incredible. When *Glory* came out some of my friends turned their nose up at it because of the white officers, never stopping to ask the obvious question, "What else would there have been?" What's more, there's another way to look at the issue of the white officers, other than as a liability of the movie or of the history. I keep *Glory* downloaded to my laptop and I sometimes watch the James Island battle scene (when they engage for the first time in combat) just to lift my spirits. You put your finger on it: The ideology of black authenticity is the fraternal twin to neoliberalism. It's a Thatcherite discourse. Black authenticity is about extraordinary individuals and their families doing it all on their own.

SL: With no help from the accumulated military science transmitted to new generations at West Point…

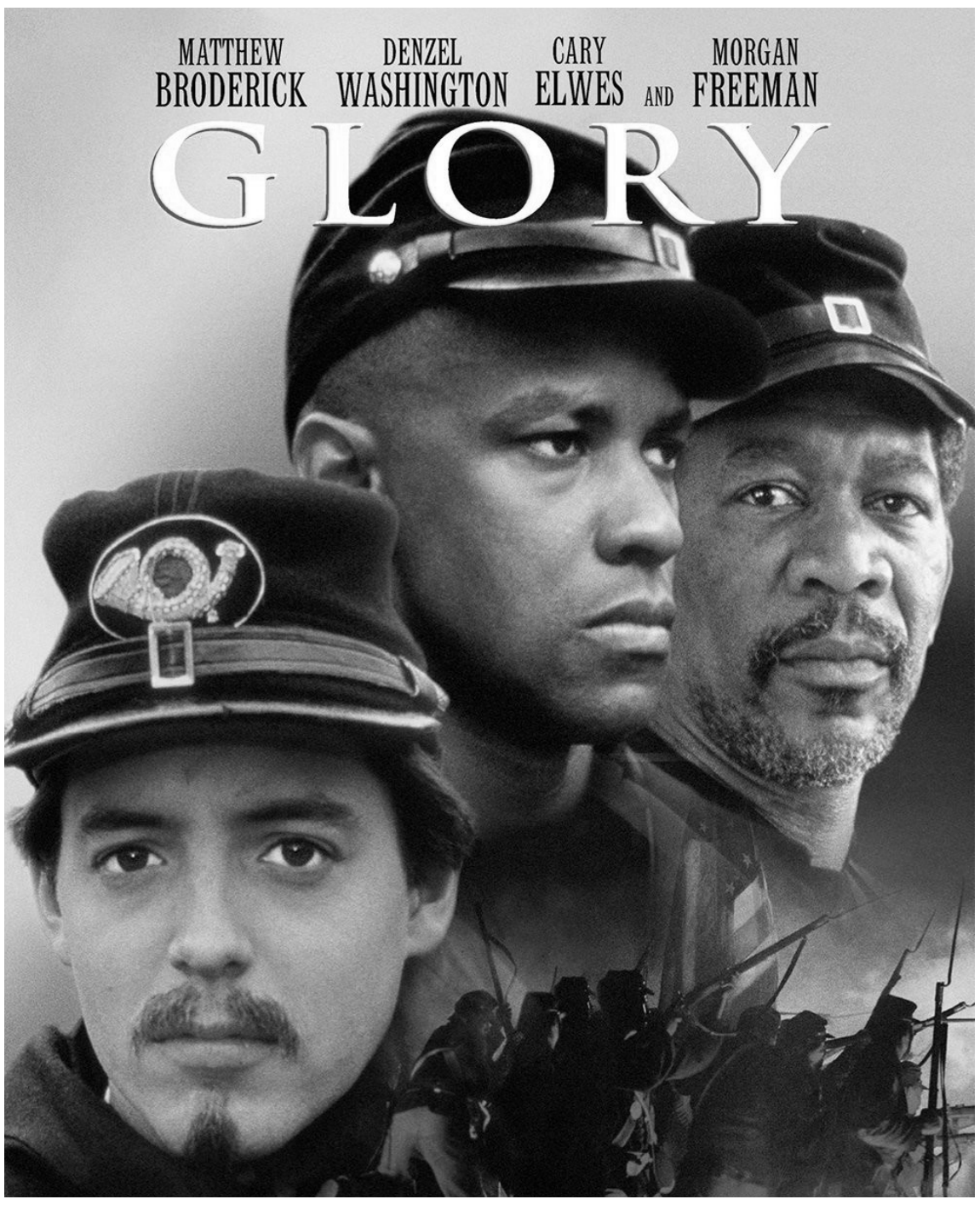
AR: It reminds me of my reaction to the criticism of the *Lincoln* film, which was to ask: How is acknowledging that it was the presence of the Union Army that enabled black flight from the plantations (as occurred during the Treasonous Insurrection) supposed to besmirch black agency? It's incredible, but also incredibly *revealing* as a class position. One of my uncles was a Tuskegee airman, incidentally, shot down at the Battle of the Bulge; he spent the remainder of the war in a German POW camp, where, as he often noted, he commanded white soldiers for the only time in the war against the racist Nazis. When George Lucas made *Red Tails,* his abominable live-action cartoon about the Tuskegee airmen, Lucas went on *The Daily Show* to hype the film. He compared it to *Glory*, which he disparaged as being about white officers leading black soldiers to their deaths. He said that, by contrast, what he wanted to make was a movie with black heroes. You can't make this stuff up.

SL: It reminds me of what you were saying about the forgotten histories that Judith Stein has unearthed respecting labor organizing in the age of a triumphant black managerialism. In a sense, black managerial politics *becomes* "Black History."

AR: Absolutely, and it's consolidated as Black History through the institutionalization of Black Studies.

SL: To me, the most pointed way of describing your thesis in "Black Particularity Reconsidered" is that black nationalism was an adaptation to the failure of the American left. As you suggest, with the failure to go beyond the Voting Rights Act, black nationalism as a dominant component of the radicalism of the 1960s was ultimately and unconsciously bound up with the kind of unconscious re-proletarianization that took place in the absence of (any other) political leadership. In other words, the political leadership that triumphed ensured that the re-proletarianization that took place ultimately gave us neoliberalism. In this sense, past failures to come to terms with (and potentially overcome) the black question are masochistically affirmed almost as if to cover the collapse of socialism.

AR: That makes sense. I have a couple thoughts. The first is quite mundane, namely, that nationalism is always a class ideology (and it's always the ideology of the same class). This basic point was made by Harold Cruse in his own way almost half a century ago. The idea of the nation as a coherent unitary entity is an ideology that makes sense to a rising bourgeoisie or an aspiring petite bourgeoisie; this is true from Bangladeshi nationalism to German National Socialism to all points in between. The second point, in some ways less and in some ways more mundane, is that in retrospect we can recognize that the black political classes that consolidated in the aftermath of the Voting Rights Act both in the North and in the South, especially in the cities, were aligned from the very beginning, like twins in the womb, with the more radically growth-oriented elements in local bourgeois classes. These were often aggressively downtown-redevelopment-oriented segments of the bourgeoisie who, no less than the black aspirants, felt themselves hemmed in by the entrenched political alliances and coalitions within local partisan organizations and patronage networks. At the same time, aspiring black politicians (and, to a limited degree, black people themselves) also had an interest in breaking through to get access to the patronage networks from which they had been excluded. Case study after case study shows this history in detail for city after city: Clarence Stone's work on Atlanta, which was pioneering in this regard; Kent Germany's *New Orleans After the Promises*, which focuses specifically on the role of War on Poverty and Great Society agencies in facilitating the formation of new alliances; John Arena's book *Driven from New Orleans: How Nonprofits Betray Public Housing and Promote Privatization*; Timothy Weaver's forthcoming *The Neoliberal Persuasion: Urban Policy and Politics in the United States and the United Kingdom,* etc.



Released in 1989, the movie *Glory* depicted the Boston abolitionist Robert Gould Shaw's leadership of the 54th Massachusetts, one of the first all-black volunteer regiments to fight for the Union in the American Civil War.

SL: You're saying this was a class of people, both black and white, who genuinely had a program for the reconstitution of capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s?

AR: Absolutely, although I'd say the program they improvised turned out to be instrumental for reconstituting capitalism during that period. It's neoliberalism *avant la lettre*. Now, this was no inevitable unfolding of the terms on which the Civil Rights Movement was won; but, as a political scientist, what we do most effectively is predict what has already happened and show that it had to happen.

SL: Political scientists love to speak of this "necessity" as "path-dependency."

AR: Absolutely, and when they talk about it I feel like shouting, "Put your hands on the desk where I can see them!"

SL: It was much better, because more self-conscious, as Right Hegelianism!

AR: Indeed.

SL: Moving on, you conclude your *Harper's* essay "Nothing Left" by writing that we need to acknowledge that "no politically effective force exists" on the American left today, and that the present task is to rebuild an effective labor movement in the United States. In this context it is significant that in the mid-1990s you were involved in the Labor Party project, which was meant as an alternative and, hopefully, as a challenge to the Clinton Democrats. Could you explain your role in the Labor Party, what its aims were, and what you see as the reasons for the project's demise (or at least its being putting on hold)?

AR: My role was to do whatever the collective leadership, of which I was a member, and Tony Mazzocchi felt I should do. I have no difficulty acknowledging that I'm an *apparatchik*—that's my orientation to politics.

The idea behind the Labor Party was straightforward: to build an independent political party of the working class and to anchor it in the trade union movement. You can't be a working-class party unless you're anchored in the trade union movement; that's where the working class is organized politically as a class, to the extent that it's organized anywhere politically as a class. The immediate historical precipitants that it grew out of were networks of trade union activists who had been active in the anti-concessions movement in the 1970s and 80s; that's why we were centered disproportionally in the industrial sector. The idea, as reflected in one of our popular slogans, was that the bosses have two parties so we should have one of our own. We tried to build around a program that was worked out in a participatory way but was shaped by a vision of pursuing class power. We were not interested in organizing the Left in the sense of aggregating left stances; we wanted instead to be a political party anchored in the working class. We always focused more on institutional affiliations from unions than on individual memberships because we knew that the key was to have the political capacity as well as the broader institutional capacity of the trade union movement. We were relatively successful in winning and retaining institutional affiliations. There was, I believe, only one local union that ever actively disaffiliated; the rest of what we lost was through merger and attrition, as many locals simply went out of business. We lost international affiliates through merger. But we hit a threshold in the trade union movement, and some international unions came together around portions of the critique at the most general level but for various reasons just couldn't get themselves to take the next step.

Our experience with electoral politics helped me to see in very concrete ways the kind of problems that existed among the Left. Most of the American Trotskyist grouplets believe that you build a movement through running candidates for office. We didn't share that view; we always considered the electoral realm to be a site for the consolidation of victories that have been won on the plane of social movement organizing. So that was a bone of contention throughout. But it wasn't just the Trotskyists. By the mid-1990s, I was surprised to see how much importance many people who identified themselves as leftists, or even radicals, put on backing candidates and running candidates. Most recently, in response to people denouncing Karen Lewis as a sellout before she even declared, I've argued that these people (like the Democrats) vastly exaggerate the significance of elections. That said, we in the Labor Party got to a point where our members decided it was time to take the electoral option. And we did. We undertook a campaign in South Carolina, which we picked for a couple reasons. One of them is that the South Carolina AFL-CIO was the only state labor federation apart from the New Jersey Industrial Union Council to affiliate with the Party. Unsurprisingly, therefore, we had good connections in the trade union movement, with the Charleston longshoremen and other groups. We also thought that the "now is not the time" line on engaging in independent politics hinged on claims that the electorate, even the working-class electorate, isn't ready for an explicit appeal to working-class politics. We figured that South Carolina was one of the most (if not the most) backward states in the union, and if we could win a ballot line there, that would be a lesson. I wasn't fully prepared for what happened next: the more successful we were, the more the skeptics raised the threshold of significance. We won a ballot line, which is already a statement: More than 16,500 registered voters in South Carolina said the state should recognize the Labor Party. The South Carolina Labor Party still has that ballot line and can field candidates. But then the Working Families Party and the nay-sayers in the AFL-CIO, together with those leftists who operate with a different style of politics, said, "Well, they haven't run anyone, they haven't won anything."

In that milieu, we decided to put the thing into mothballs; we felt that we were at a point where we would either grow or die. We didn't want the organizational entity just to stay around on the edges of public discourse in the trade union movement or on the Left. There's a tendency among a strain of leftists and left-liberals to freeze a moment in time and put it behind a velvet rope, to honor it, and we didn't want to be that; we also didn't want to be a carcass of a once-vibrant left organization that the sectarian groups would start fighting over. We wanted to maintain control of it on our own terms so we shut down operations. Mark Dudzic and Katherine Isaac, the central brains in the national office, have written strong and accurate estimations of what we were trying to do and of our understanding of the constraints.

SL: In light of the intractable legacies of the 20th century, in what ways were distinctly American historical issues at stake in the Labor Party experiment? At the same time, how was the epochal condition in the late 1990s a factor in terms of the global discrediting of socialism, due not only to the fall of Soviet Union but also to the apparent exhaustion of the New Left?

AR: I once remarked to Tony Mazzocchi that we were able to do what the Communist Party and other groups like that *couldn't*. This was in part because the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War had opened some space for us. Nobody in South Carolina ever tried to red-bait us; they didn't even try to gay-bait us, at a time when the Republicans there were trying to use a ballot initiative to write a statutory prohibition against same-sex marriage into the state constitution. We were working flea markets and working-class neighborhoods and festivals, and no one ever confronted us with either of these issues, probably because we opened the conversation with jobs, healthcare, education, housing, etc.

This experience brought home to me the extent to which both the Democrats and Republicans in South Carolina are invested in defining race as the central fault line of politics. For one thing, it made their electoral forecasting more predictable. The Democrats at that time would not authorize a black person to run in a district that was between something like 35–50% black because they defined those as "black interest" districts but not as "black candidate" districts. They understood that white Democrats had the best chance of winning office in districts of that sort. Then, when white candidates won office, the state party spent a lot of its time trying to keep them from becoming Republicans! At all events, electoral politics was clearly the most racialized domain of social life in South Carolina. This is becoming more and more true across the country.

SL: It's a lot like prison life! But what about the exhaustion of imagination as to what reforms could contribute to? In other words, what about the loss of an imagination of an actually different form of society—of socialism—as a kind of atmospheric condition of the 1990s, one that persists into the present?

AR: That's a huge problem, as is the prevailing skepticism about institutions, both of which attest to the larger victory of neoliberalism, which has its corollary on the Left. Take Occupy: What could be more the child of a neoliberal understanding of the way the world works? It's all process, no vision, and completely individualist. A lot of people believe that the discourse of "1% versus the 99%" opened a space, but it's actually a puerile way of understanding inequality. These problems attest to the extent to which the Left, insofar as it does exist, is articulated entirely within the ontological framework of neoliberalism.

GB: Do you see anything arising out of the current politics around police brutality and "the new Jim Crow" that might lead beyond further reinforcement of the role of the PMC and the Democratic Party? Anything that might prove productive for the desperately needed project of reconstituting the American left? Or has anti-racist politics become worse than unproductive in your view? What are the potentials in the present moment, despite, or even arising out of, neoliberalism?

AR: I don't really see anything useful arising out of it. On the "new Jim Crow" front, have you seen the recent news about the mental health problems suffered by the *protesters* in Ferguson?[1] That's indicative of where this sort of nonpolitics as politics is overwhelmingly likely to go. When all is said and done, its only political standpoint is self-referential. I have been at meetings on campus recently where earnest activist-ist kids full of the Holy Ghost of political righteousness rise to declaim on what the "Young Activists in Ferguson" want the rest of us to do, the rules of racial and gender etiquette they want us to follow, and to demand that we all declare our willingness to follow those rules, as well as meetings where faculty babble on about the lessons of "intersectionality" we should take from this nonexistent movement, e.g., how meaningful it is that the actual authors of #blacklivesmatter are black lesbians or whatever. Of course, none of this has anything at all to do with political goals, strategies, or vision. And, as Kenneth Warren has pointed out, defenses of all this sort of purely expressive stuff as a politics invariably depend on claims about what it supposedly will enable in some future beyond the scope of strategic projection—that is, on calls for faith in things as yet unseen or unseeable. I think anti-racism is beyond useless as a politics. It is now an artifact of neoliberalism and has been for quite some time. Its inadequacies even for making sense of the carceral state are made clear by contrast with Marie Gottschalk's new book, *Caught*, some of the key themes of which she articulates in a recent interview.[2] As Gottschalk notes, even if all the racial disparities in criminal justice were eliminated, for example, the United States probably would still lead the world in carceralization. Anti-racism—along with anti-sexism, anti-homophobia, etc., as well as diversity as the affirmative statement of them all—is a species of a genus of social and economic justice that is utterly compatible with neoliberalism: parity in the distribution of costs and benefits among groups defined by essentialized ascriptive identities. That is what is commonly referred to as identity politics. Despite the chatter among its proponents about group celebration and recognition, the substantive ideal of identity politics is a condition in which costs and benefits and potential *individual* winners and losers are sorted in rough proportion to their representation in the society. A "Left" committed to this metric, in addition to identifying outrages, focuses on cleansing opportunity structures of invidious and unjust discrimination along identitarian lines within what remains a regime of increasingly ruthless upward redistribution. That is a vision that marks the ultimate triumph of Gary Becker's utopia. **|P**

Transcribed by Grady Forrest Lowery, Lewis Page, and Allison Hewitt Ward

1. Terrell Jermaine Starr, "Ferguson Activists are Struggling with Mental Trauma long after Police Abuse During the Protests," available at <http://www.alternet.org/personal-health/ferguson-activists-are-struggling-mental-trauma-long-after-police-abuse-during>.
2. Marie Gottschalk, *The Prison State and the Lockdown of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); and "It's not just the War on Drugs," interview by Connor Kilpatrick, available online at <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/03/mass-incarceration-war-on-drugs/>.

25 years of 1989

Boris Kagarlitsky, Christoph Lichtenberg, Mel Rothenberg

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the 1989 revolutions—the 'Autumn of Nations' in the Soviet bloc—the Platypus Affiliated Society organized an international panel series on the significance of 1989 for the Left. The panel held at New York University on February 17, 2015 consisted of Boris Kagarlitsky, director of the Institute for Global Research and Social Movements in Moscow, Christoph Lichtenberg, supporter of the International Bolshevik Tendency, and Mel Rothenberg, a member of the Chicago Political Economy Group. The following are the edited excerpts from their opening remarks. An expanded transcript with the discussion that ensued is included in the online edition. A full audio recording is available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2015/02/26/1989-nyc/>.

Christoph Lichtenberg: I am going to speak about the collapse of what is known as East Germany, though I prefer to call it by its German acronym, the DDR (the German Democratic Republic). I will talk about what the DDR was, the events that took place there in 1989-90, and then, finally, the response of revolutionary socialists to these events as they happened.

The DDR was of course a product of the Cold War. Nevertheless, it should be realized that it was historically more progressive than its Western counterpart. It was ruled by the Stalinist regime, which suppressed the workers and, ultimately, ruined the economy. A planned economy cannot be run successfully without the participation of the workers, and the DDR's workers did not participate in a meaningful way. However, the DDR also had a number of significant social gains. These included free medical care, universally available childcare facilities, easy access to abortion, and virtually full employment. All of these things that people in the U.S. would benefit from were available to the citizens of the DDR. It was in our view a "deformed workers' state," and it was very similar in its structure to the USSR. Stalinists ruled the DDR, but they were rooted in a planned economy. While the planned economy was undemocratic, it was still a planned economy. As such, society was organized in a manner different from capitalism, in which profit is the highest principle. This principle did not govern the planned economies of the USSR, Eastern Europe, or the DDR.

The events that unfolded in 1989-90 had two important precursors. One was the rise of Solidarnosc in Poland. In 1980, Polish workers founded an independent union, which organized opposition to the ruling Stalinists. Unfortunately, it became a pro-capitalist formation by 1981 and subsequently rose to power in Poland in 1989-90. Importantly, the workers in the DDR looked to Poland and saw the workers there organized against the ruling elite. That was something that they remembered and took inspiration from, in many ways for the wrong political reasons. Nevertheless, this was an important precursor to what eventually unfolded in the DDR. The other important factor was the regime of Gorbachev in the USSR, which brought about *glasnost* and *perestroika*. *Glasnost* involved greater transparency, and *perestroika* entailed restructuring, which often meant a restructuring of the planned economy in favor of pro-capitalist measures. For example, joint ventures with U.S. companies were allowed. Of the utmost importance for events in the DDR was Gorbachev's statement that he would pursue a policy of non-interference with regard to other Eastern bloc countries.

The regime in the DDR actually rejected the course taken by Gorbachev. The DDR's rulers were not supporters of Gorbachev, and they were very worried about him. While the DDR's regime rejected Gorbachev, its population increasingly rejected the regime. Many people in the DDR wanted reforms, and they looked to Gorbachev as a positive influence. They wanted real participation in the running of society and an end to the travel restrictions that had been imposed upon them. Ordinary citizens in the DDR were not allowed to travel to the West, and they could only go on vacation in Warsaw Pact countries. They wanted an end to the monopoly of the ruling Socialist Unity Party.

Throughout 1989, many cities in the DDR witnessed demonstrations, with people going out in the streets and discussing the reforms they wanted. In autumn, the demonstrations grew in size. There were two tendencies among them. One included those people who simply wanted to leave the DDR in order to go to the West. Nearly a quarter million people left in 1989, many of them young people. The other tendency that emerged, which formed a majority, included those who wanted to reform the existing regime. I want to emphasize that, at this time, reforms did not mean simply capitalist democracy, but rather the creation of something better. Many people talked about socialism at this time in the DDR, which they wanted to make work for them. They wanted better, more genuine socialism.

There emerged different political tendencies from this general situation in the autumn of 1989. Early on, there were the Social Democrats and Democracy Now. These were social-democratic parties and, as such, they were pro-capitalist. They did not really want socialism, but rather were in favor of Western-style democracy and capitalism. They were the counterparts to the West German Social Democrats. There was also the New Forum, which was led by intellectuals who attempted to unite all of the people of the DDR in favor of democratic reforms. The New Forum's effort to unify people was not successful. In January of 1990, its right wing split off because they said they did not want to have anything to do with socialist projects. Then there was the United Left, which was a left-wing formation that called for a left-socialist alternative in the DDR. It contained several political tendencies, including former members of the ruling Stalinist party. They had 1,500 members, but very few workers joined. There were also conservative forces that emerged very quickly, including the German Social Union, which was basically the counterpart to the Christian Democratic Union in West Germany. It was a very conservative formation. Last, but not least, there was the Independent Women's Union, which represented the beginning of the feminist movement in the East. Its members were drawn from the Women for Peace network and it included a number of lesbian activists. This organization eventually joined an electoral bloc with the Greens in 1990.

By September and October of 1989, there were mass demonstrations in all of the major cities, and there were small demonstrations in towns where a couple of hundred people would rally in front of the Stalinist party headquarters to demand resignations. The whole DDR was in upheaval. During these events, the Stalinists lost control. Their monopoly of power, which was enshrined in the constitution and had existed for forty years, was finally broken. Many people realized that "we do not need them," and the ruling party was no longer sure that anyone would follow their orders. Thus, their monopoly was really broken through mass action. People everywhere were looking for an alternative to really existing socialism.

Finally, these developments culminated on November 9, when the ruling party of the DDR declared that all travel restrictions were lifted. This announcement became known as the fall of the Berlin Wall. This also marked a watershed in the ongoing dynamics. After the fall of the wall, and no later than December, the mood in the East was changing, with people more or less coming out in favor of reunification. This had not been on the agenda for the first few months, but, by December, more and more people were talking about reunification. This can be seen in the way the slogans of demonstrations changed. The slogan in October was "We are the People," expressing the population's desire to say, "we should be in charge, we are the people." The slogan had changed by December to "We are One People," expressing a desire for unification with West Germany. Nevertheless, there was widespread concern about reunification. Many people feared that reunification might actually be an annexation of the DDR by West German capitalism.

The elections on March 18, 1990 gave the Alliance for Germany, a coalition of conservative forces, an overwhelming majority. All of the new parties that had emerged the previous autumn basically disappeared, since no one really cared for them, and the majority of people voted for the Christian Democrats or the Alliance for Germany. This set the course for reunification. One of the important factors in all of these events was that the working class never stood on the political stage as a conscious force. There were some economic strikes and a few shop-steward committees were formed, but there was no organized working class conscious of its own goals and power.

I will conclude with what I believe was the appropriate political perspective at the time. The predecessors of the IBT were the German *Gruppe IV. Internationale* and the Bolshevik Tendency. These formations produced very similar propaganda at the time, and eventually we fused because of the correspondence of our approaches. We called for the formation of workers' councils at the time because we wanted workers to set up an alternative power base to the Stalinists, as well as to create a formation opposed to the reintroduction of capitalism. We participated in protests and argued for workers' democracy instead of the Stalinist police state. As Trotskyists, we always stood for the defense of the social gains of the Eastern bloc against the danger of capitalist restoration. We put out a pamphlet in 1990 that said: "Bankruptcy of Stalinism, fight against capitalist counterrevolution, for proletarian political revolution." That was our perspective at the time. We were not particularly popular for this, but I think it was the right perspective to have, and that is what we fought for. The problem really was that, in the absence of a revolutionary party, the workers of the DDR did not see a viable alternative to capitalist reunification. They could not imagine an alternative material force that was capable of creating something better than what they had already rejected, as well as something better than what was offered to them, which was capitalism. Such an alternative was lacking because a revolutionary party was absent at the time.

Overall, I think that the response of the rest of the Left to these events was abysmal. A lot of the so-called socialists in the West simply became cheerleaders for "democratic" change. They celebrated the end of Stalinism as if this would usher in an era of freedom for the working class. I think this happened because many groups on the Left did not appreciate the real social gains that existed in the DDR and the USSR. The consideration of these social gains did not enter into their analyses. The actual freedom that the workers of the DDR enjoyed after reunification consisted mainly of the total destruction of the country's industry. There was mass unemployment in the East within a few years of reunification, with some areas witnessing 25-30% unemployment. All of these workers were put out of work, and nothing was there to replace it. This was one of the immediate effects of capitalist reunification. As I said, the defense of the DDR was critical at the time. It was not a popular thing to say, but I believe you have to say what is actually necessary. The defense of the deformed workers' states did not entail the defense of Stalinists. We did not want to build unity with them, as the German Spartacist group did. What we had to do was to warn against German reunification, and also to warn against the reform wing of the Stalinist apparatus that was emerging then, a wing that eventually sold out the DDR to West German imperialism.

Boris Kagarlitsky: There are a few questions about 1989 that are absolutely essential for the Left to address, both post factum and in terms of analyzing future struggles. If we are looking at the historical process from a left-wing point of view, what we discover is that there was definitely a change in what one might call the dominant ideology of the critical movements. Christoph has already mentioned that the ideology of the movement in Germany changed. Initially, people were in favor of reforming the DDR, but a few months later they were already excited about reunification. We have to be very clear that, at the time, people did not think of reunification in terms of capitalist restoration—in fact it *was* that, and it *had* to be that, as there was no other way objectively. Nevertheless, we must consider how people actually understood it at the time. In that sense, they did not understand the process of reunification in terms of capitalist restoration, as we socialists and Marxists did. We have to be very clear that most people are not socialists or Marxists, and, even when they are socialists, they are usually not Marxists. You should not expect everyone to be like yourself. You have to take this into consideration from the start, or else you will hardly be capable of mobilizing the masses, as they are not necessarily going to accept what you say, and they have their own vision and illusions. These illusions also have some objective bases, and they do not simply arise from nowhere or from bourgeois propaganda. There are other reasons for these illusions. Unless you understand this, you will fail time and again. This is one of the first lessons we have to draw from this history.

If you examine the opposition to the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, and even to some extent in the USSR from the 1960s to the 1980s, what you discover is that initially much of the opposition shared socialist goals. Most of the dissidents in Eastern and Central Europe were to some degree left-wingers. There were different types, from social democrats to Trotskyists to what we might call "authentic" Leninists. The latter was a current of people who were not so much in disagreement with the official Communist ideology, but rather saw the problem as one of the ruling elites not following this ideology. This was a very strong current both in the USSR and in other Eastern European countries. In the case of Czechoslovakia, who were the main characters associated with the opposition during the Prague Spring? One can be very critical of the Prague Spring, but one must keep in mind that, for a short period before it was suppressed in 1968, it was calling for democratic socialism and democratic reforms not only in liberal terms, but also in terms of workers' participation, workers' councils, and so forth. In fact, some workers' councils survived as late as 1969. There was a whole period of the "Second Prague Spring," during which workers continued resisting long after the so-called "leaders" had surrendered, and councils continued to exist at the factory level. Again, if one takes Hungary, or even Poland, which was an exception, one finds left-wing dissidents such as Jacek Kuroń, Karol Modzelewski, and even Adam Michnik, who is alive and well today as one of the leading right-wing liberal figures in Poland, but who started his career as a dissident, publishing a good book called *The Church and the Left in Poland*, in which he discussed this relation from a left-wing perspective. Initially, he was a left-winger. In Russia, it was a much more mixed and contradictory picture, but again there was a left-wing opposition tendency, which included my friends and myself.

Additionally, one should realize that there were two different types of opposition to Stalinism within the USSR and the Eastern bloc. On the one hand, there were people who were more or less loyal to the system, and who wanted to reform it from the inside—actually, they wanted not so much to reform it as to improve it. These people in East Germany ended up first in the Party of Democratic Socialism, and eventually in Die Linke. On the other hand, there were people who wanted to transform the system from a left-wing, radical, socialist perspective. There were always disagreements and debates between these people, but compared to the restoration of capitalism, both of these tendencies can be seen as on the "Left" in a broad sense.

Where did it all go wrong? Why did it all disappear? If we take the events of 1989, we see that the Left collapsed extremely fast in most of the Eastern bloc countries. There are two explanations for this, which are not contradictory but rather complimentary. On the one hand, the ruling elite within most Eastern European countries (with the exception of East Germany) pursued a project of capitalist restoration from the very beginning, while the opposition did not have a project and, ironically, was very often actually doing the work of the ruling elite. The old bureaucracy was fairly happy about capitalist restoration, which entailed the possibility of converting political power into capitalist property and then turning such property back into political power under the new conditions! Once capitalist development is underway, property becomes power, so these bureaucrats were not losing anything, but actually gaining more resources. The system was definitely in crisis, but the ruling elite benefited from this crisis and had its own plan for getting out of it.

The Left was very weak politically in terms of strategizing, developing its own project, and forming itself into something capable of fighting and winning, but this was only part of the story. Christoph mentioned the working class, and I believe Russia was the only country where the working class really did fight. There were massive strikes in 1992, but not in 1993, when the final battle was fought and lost, and the regime of Boris Yeltsin engineered a coup d'état and imposed neoliberal reform. The most important strikes and working-class resistance happened in 1992, and they were defeated and then people became demoralized. There are two important things to note. This resistance of the working class was a passive resistance waged by atomized masses. The masses were atomized by the Stalinist system itself. The system created a situation where people did not have much of a collective experience outside of their jobs, and in which all of their interests were met by the state. Their social gains were not something that they had to manage, control, or achieve. The new generation did not realize that their social gains had to be fought for. I completely agree with Christoph that the social achievements of the Eastern European countries were absolutely without precedent. In social terms, they constituted the greatest welfare state ever achieved by humanity.

At the same time, it was a welfare state based on what my colleague Anna Ochkina calls "passive democracy." In this sense, one simply receives one's rights, and one expects these rights to be guaranteed and takes them for granted. It was absolutely typical for people under such conditions to think that free education, free healthcare, cheap transportation, cheap housing, the possibility of upward mobility, and so forth would last no matter what happened. At the same time, what the Eastern bloc lacked beyond Western-style democracy were consumer goods. People often called for "democracy" when they were actually thinking about consumer goods—and that is exactly what they got, consumer goods instead of democracy. People lacked class consciousness not only because the Left did not do its work, but also because social experience under Stalinism generated individualists and consumerists. One's social rights were guaranteed by the state, and what one did on his or her own was to accumulate consumer goods and achieve specific personal goals. In this sense, a society of individualists was created. The generation of individualists was one of the results of the Stalinist welfare state. That was one of the reasons why the Left was so weak and why working-class resistance in the USSR was defeated so easily. It was because people did not have the necessary experience to organize effectively and to fight back.

Mel Rothenberg: Our topic is the fall of the USSR and its impact on the Left. This is a huge topic, but I want to narrow it. I will deal with the Marxist left, by which I mean those whose primary frame of reference is support for the international working-class struggle as it was first comprehensively theorized in the writings and political activity of Karl Marx. This is a broader array of political forces than those who describe themselves as Communists, Maoists, or Trotskyists, although it includes them. It also includes left-wing social democrats and anti-imperialist and revolutionary nationalists, from Nkrumah to Stokely Carmichael, who played a major leadership role in the anti-colonial struggles. This category is narrower than the broader one of progressives who view some type of socialism as the most desirable form of social organization and who form an important layer of political activists.

Although all of the Marxist left was surprised by the sudden collapse of the Eastern bloc in 1989, its rapid decline socially, economically, and politically over the previous decade should have been evident. A major section of the Marxist left, including the Maoists, left-wing social democrats, and a substantial wing of the Trotskyists, had previously written off the USSR as any kind of progressive or anti-imperialist force. According to them, the decline was the inevitable fate of a totally corrupt regime, which had long ago abandoned socialism. A different section of the Marxist left, including most of the Communist parties in the West, were uneasy with the turmoil shaking the Soviet bloc, but looked to Gorbachev and the internal reform movement he represented as the great hope for a Soviet revival. There was a third group, less organized and more amorphous, of which I myself could be numbered that, while deeply critical of both the existing Soviet Union as a model for socialism and Gorbachev's reform model, identified both with the broad, international, anti-imperialist movement in which Marxists played a leading role and with the need to support Communist regimes on terrain liberated during this anti-colonial struggle, particularly in Cuba and Vietnam.

What complicated the politics of the Marxist Left during the 1980s is that this period also saw the rapid decline of all Marxist left movements. The earlier retreat of mainline social democracy into social-welfare capitalism stranded left-wing social democrats, who were without an organizational home. Maoism was routed in China, its center, while most of the post-colonial regimes, whose creation was the achievement of the international anti-imperialist forces, abandoned an independent, non-capitalist path of development and embraced, or were forced to embrace, neoliberalism. The collapse of the USSR was the fourth defeat, and the straw that broke the camel's back.

The decline of the Marxist left during the 1980s was based on fundamental social, political, and economic developments, of which the collapse of the USSR was only the most dramatic and conclusive. The crucial question is not why the Marxist left declined at the end of the twentieth century, but rather why, fifteen years into the twenty-first century, there has not been a substantial revival of it, given the contradictions and failures of unchallenged capitalist rule over the past twenty-five years. Some might claim that this is because of the differences between, and the lack of unity among, the remaining Marxist forces. These differences are indeed sharp. However, my second thesis is that it is not the differences between these forces that are the root cause of the lack of a Marxist revival but rather the failed strategic premises that they have in common. While these premises were supported, reinforced, and strengthened by Soviet policy (and by Chinese and anti-colonial politics), they were not invented or imposed by it. They arose out of the real conditions of struggle during the first half of the twentieth century. These premises run deep and are organically imbedded in the international experience and politics of the Marxist left, and that is why they were not really challenged despite the massive failures of the 1980s. However, I contend that they are inadequate for the twenty-first century and, unless they are fundamentally revised and recast to reflect the current reality, there will be no revival of a Marxist left as the core of a major social movement. Until the Marxist left develops a serious strategy for politically engaging the working class, it will remain politically marginal. While treasuring the positive lessons of the Soviet period, and its many real accomplishments, we must accept that its basic line and practice failed to organize the international working class to decisively confront and defeat capitalism. |**P**

To unite the many, continued from page 1

reached its highest development in Europe, where it took no specific cognizance of the black question as it came to be formulated in the 20th century in America. How did this return to Marx and Critical Theory help to clarify your ideas in the 1970s and since? What about your intellectual trajectory up to that point in the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-to late 1960s led you to Marxism?

AR: The second question is kind of easy: I inherited the family business! My father was a Popular Front radical, basically. Before he was drafted, he was a member of the Joint Council of Dining Car Waiters, which was a red union. Ishmael Flory and Tim Black were some of his good friends in Chicago. So I thought of myself as a Marxist since well before I had any sophisticated sense of what it meant. I was raised with an understanding of class struggle as the key to history and, more specifically, as the key to making sense of racial oppression in the United States. My father always argued against the liberal orthodox view that imposition of the Jim Crow order in the South at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th represented some kind of victory for the white working class in politics. I recall from as early as 10 or 12 my father jokingly remarking, "Isn't it funny that if the southern white workers took power the only thing they would want for themselves is white supremacy? Wouldn't you think they'd want some wealth redistribution and some other stuff on that order?" So when I became active in what was in effect Black Power politics in North Carolina when I was in college, I was always the guy on the Marxist edge of the discourse.

SL: When you were in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP)?

AR: This was before, during, and after I was in the SWP. I was only really in the SWP for a little more than a year.

SL: Was this early flirtation with black nationalism something that you argued about with your father?

AR: Actually, we argued more about Trotskyism than black nationalism! That's one reason why I've come to perceive my flirtation with Trotskyism as a version of delayed adolescent rebellion. But in practical terms, what appealed to me about the SWP was that it was the only organization on the Marxist left that had what I thought was a reasonable line on Black Power and black nationalism, the sort of line that people like Earl Ofari and Bob Allen also embraced. So the SWP and that flavor of American Trotskyism at that moment appealed to me as a way to harmonize the nationalist-populist substrate of Black Power with Marxism.

SL: And this was a broader agenda at the time that the other figures you mentioned also participated in?

AR: That's right. And I left the SWP for primarily organizational reasons. It's kind of ironic, because one of the immediate precipitants was that this was a period when the SWP was trying to invent itself as having created and been the driving force behind the student mobilization against the war. They invested a lot organizationally and ideologically in touting the cases where SWP members who had gone into the military were being persecuted for their radicalism inside it. Just as this effort was picking up steam organizationally, they wanted us in the Chapel Hill-Durham local in North Carolina to focus our activities on doing support for anti-war GIs at Fort Bragg a little over an hour away and at Fort Jackson three or four hours away. I balked at this; I thought we should be doing other stuff that was more local and pertinent. The irony is that a few months later I was approached to be part of a group that went down to Fayetteville to set up an anti-war GI organizing project, and I did it. I wound up doing what was at least in part the same kind of support work. I had been more interested in working with local labor organizations around Chapel Hill than doing support work for *cause célèbre* GIs so far away. So I spent probably the next three years doing off-campus organizing of one sort or another—mainly GI support and poor people's organizations. By the early 1970s I could see that left forces had pretty much been outflanked, or had outflanked themselves, with respect to the evolving dynamics in black politics. That's when I decided to go to graduate school.

SL: This was around the time of the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary?

AR: Exactly. In fact, I was involved in the North Carolina organizing for both the Gary convention and for the first African Liberation Day March. In all that, but especially in organizing for Gary in a state like North Carolina, in particular in Durham, where a real black bourgeoisie was prominent in Black Power activism, you could see clearly how class played out in black politics. The same contradictions were evident with the first wave of black elected officials—the pressure they were under, their own limitations, etc. The sort of combative or contentious character of interest-based organizing among working-class and poor blacks steadily gave way to community organizing undertaken by groups that almost inevitably traced their funding streams back to the Ford Foundation. Under influences such as these, organizing was shifting more and more toward notions of community economic development, involving more or less fanciful ideas that depended on moral exhortation to do the work of customs control to develop an autonomous "black economy." These ideas became increasingly dominant and the movement shifted more and more in that direction. You didn't have to be smart to see which way things were going for most working people, you just had to be attentive. It was in that context that I grew frustrated with the interpretive options available to me. Certainly, Plekhanovite Marxism just didn't suffice.

SL: Particularly in the face of an elaborate ideology like black nationalism.

AR: Exactly! Except that black nationalism is not even an ideology, really, it's an ontology. So, all these things were going on at the same time. In the aftermath of that first African Liberation Day March there was a dynamic that people tried to force out of it to create a permanent African Liberation Day committee, what became the African Liberation Support Committee. The people who were central in that effort were Pan-Africanists, but they were Pan-Africanists of two stripes. One was the cultural-nationalist crowd around Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti), Amiri Baraka, and Maulana Karenga. The other was a Southern axis centered on Greensboro, Atlanta, Nashville and New Orleans, where people were at least more connected with anti-imperialist Marxism. The New Orleans chapter was dominated by the Black Workers Congress, and the Atlanta chapter was similar. The Nashville and Greensboro axis was dominated by another group of Black Power-ites becoming Pan-Africanists becoming Marxist-Leninists of some sort (or at least becoming anti-imperialists). What struck me was that they were drawn to a kind of mechanistic understanding of what Marxism as a science was. This was around the time that I stumbled across Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*. Korsch spoke to the frustrations that I was having with the crude Plekhanovite understanding of Marxism and with what amounted to a version of liberalism that I would now call "activistism," drawing on Doug Henwood and others, as well as to my frustrations with black nationalism, which always seemed evasive in its refusal to confront the dynamics driving capitalism in the United States. Black nationalism's anti-imperialist focus seemed more and more like a way to split the difference between Marxism and nationalism.

SL: A lot of this politics issued into one or another sort of Maoism?

AR: Exactly. That's what appealed about Maoism. And, to be honest, I had read Mao with some interest myself. Some of my more intellectually-oriented friends in the SWP scratched their heads (after I had left) about how I could find both the Frankfurt School and Maoism appealing. Some years later I came across Alvin Gouldner's *The Two Marxisms* in which Gouldner argues that there are both voluntaristic and economistic tendencies in Marxism, both there at the core, and the critical tension between them is arguably part of the creativity of Marxism. People in the Western Marxist tradition who stressed the significance of the cultural domain, broadly construed, were receptive to the open-endedness of history in kind of the same way that Maoists were. But that was just a quirk that made me feel better somehow. I felt like I had a response to a question that I didn't want to deal with in the first place.

SL: But how did you feel about the Maoists slotting the black question into the mold of a national-colonial question, coming to anti-imperialism by that route? It seems a leap to go from there to *Marxism and Philosophy*.

AR: Of course, and I didn't. I was always critical of the domestic colony thesis. Certainly, this was the case by the time I started graduate school; around 1973 I wrote a seminar paper that was a trenchant critique of that formulation. But what principally appealed to me about Mao and Maoism had to do with its approach to organizing and the centrality of the notion of protracted struggle. It always seemed an interpretive framework that could help make sense of how to do what I still think is the fundamental warrant of politics, which is (to revive an old Maoist slogan) to "unite the many to defeat the few." In that sense, Maoism was an approach to movement building and to theoretical critique as an element of the project of building an anti-capitalist movement in the U.S. One thing that frustrated the hell out of me was the "scientistic socialism" in the mid-1970s and its tendency to look for catechism and formulae, whether the guise was Maoism, Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, Mao Zedong Thought, the Seven Principles of the Nguzo Saba, or whatever else. The millenarian quality of all that kind of radicalism was predicated, more or less opportunistically, on evading the complexity of trying to think through, in a historical and dialectical materialist way, the tensions and contradictions driving the capitalist order we live in. It also made all kinds of opportunistic alliances possible. For instance, I remember running into a guy who actually went on to be the director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture for a long time, but at that point we were in Atlanta together, where he was a staffer at the Institute of the Black World that Vincent Harding had founded. I bumped into him in the supermarket around the time that the Mayor Maynard Jackson had fired 2,200 striking sanitation workers. This guy's office at the Institute of the Black World was dependent on funding from the Comprehensive Employment and Training Program (CETA), a federal countercyclical employment program administered by the city. (In fact, in one of my stints in city government, in the Department of Budget & Planning, I handled the CETA program's budget.) So he gave me a very elaborate, high-theoretical explanation of how the mayor didn't have any control over that because he was hemmed in so tightly by the powers of capital, etc. It reminds me of something my father always said: "Ideology is the mechanism that harmonizes the principles that you want to believe you hold with what advances your interests in the world."

SL: Yes, I believe you remark in "Paths to Critical Theory" that, "as I became ill at ease about Leninism... my Pan-Africanist colleagues found Marxism in its most stultifying and dogmatic variety, Marxist-Leninism with a Maoist slant. This is the context within which I encountered Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*." But what about the specific environment in which you came to engage with Korsch? What was your encounter or engagement with the *Telos* group around Paul Piccone? Looking back, what do you find most enduring about *Telos* as a theoretical endeavor in the U.S. at that time? What's been lost with the setting aside of another important influence for you, Herbert Marcuse?

AR: I guess I should clarify that I was becoming ill at ease not so much about Leninism as about what Russell Jacoby would call a few years later "conformist Marxism." I really just happened to stumble across Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* in the Monthly Review Press edition around 1970 or 1971. I read a lot of Monthly Review publications then, and Korsch led me to Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness*. I started to get excited about that Hegelian Marxist tendency, not so much for its Hegelianism as for the perspective that it opened to thinking about the relation between capitalism and mass culture and for its critique of positivism, as well as for its understanding of the open-endedness of history. I was just starting graduate school in Political Science and I was looking for a conceptual language within which to shape a critique of behavioralism. It's actually because of *Telos* and the Frankfurt School that I became interested in epistemological questions and began to focus on capitalism as a social system rooted in political economy and stabilized and reproduced largely through an evolving cultural order. Those interests and perspectives remain central for me. I recently saw an old *Telos* comrade, Frank Adler, up at Macalester, and we were reflecting on the intellectual and political significance of that moment in the 70s for us. Marcuse was significant for me in those years as were Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas, and others. I found very exciting and helpful as well the work of others in my rough cohort or a few years older who were trying to infuse American Studies with the insights and perspectives of the Frankfurt School. I'm thinking of people like Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen, Jackson Lears, and others. Before long that tendency was sidelined in the American Studies field, which became more hollow and theoreticist under the rubric of self-consciously leftist Cultural Studies in the 1980s and 1990s. As for *Telos* in particular, I was on the editorial board for about a decade and was close to Piccone for a number of years. As the journal began making its odd turns in the 80s, toward the end of the decade I joined the ranks of those who were in effect purged by being dropped without notice or discussion from the editorial board. Frankly, that made sense from both sides.

Gregor Baszak: Your political trajectory through the 60s and 70s seems to have reached a certain culmination by 1979 when you contributed your essay "Black Particularity Reconsidered" to *Telos*. In that essay you grappled with the consolidation of nationalism in black politics that had been accomplished by that point, but you also took the opportunity to reflect on the specter of the Civil Rights Movement, writing that "the dismantlement of the system of racial segregation only removed a fetter blocking the possibility of emancipation. In this context, computations of the 'gains of the sixties' can begin only at the point where that extraordinary subjugation was eliminated." Following from this, what would it mean to come to grips historically with the Civil Rights Movement, with its success *and* its failure? The Civil Rights Movement dismantled Jim Crow, and yet an ideological confusion emerged from that struggle that was in some ways more intractable and opaque than what had come before. In this sense, to what degree do we continue to live today in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement?

AR: Well, there are some points I would make differently now, of course. But it's true that the terms on which the Civil Rights Movement succeeded certainly advanced the direction of consolidation in black politics, for the reasons I discussed in "Black Particularity Reconsidered." To the extent that black office-holders are no different than any other office-holders and don't have an interest in popular mobilization, political demobilization became one of the outcomes of the Civil Rights Movement and this political demobilization continued over the 80s and 90s. An instructive moment for me during this period was when Jesse Jackson and Coretta Scott King, together with others in the Civil Rights establishment, called a March on Washington—or rather *in* Washington—in August 1983; this march provided the immediate impetus for Jesse Jackson's declaration of his presidential campaign in 1984. The main purpose of the march was to commemorate the march that had taken place on that spot 20 years before. Occurring as it did halfway through Reagan's first term, when the substance of Reagan's agenda was pretty clear, I took that as an unintentional signal from the black political class that they were fresh out of ideas. They had no way to respond to Reagan's counterattack from the right. They were incapable of articulating a response because of their own class-based confusions about race and injustice and inequality. Since then, it has been more and more (and worse and worse) of the same.

SL: The crisis of the Civil Rights Movement was signaled in some ways by its failed transition from the South to the North—the moment of riots, as in Watts. At all events, a fascinating element of "Black Particularity Reconsidered" is the way that you treated black nationalism as paving the way to what we would now term neoliberalism.

AR: Frankly, my perspective on that has only grown more sharply critical in the last 36 years, and not because I've gotten sharper but because these same dynamics have matured. Just recently, Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner has openly appropriated diversity discourse as a front for his attack on the working class. Both Walter Benn Michaels and I should send him a thank-you note once this is over and we win!

SL: Reality never ceases to amaze.

AR: Absolutely. And the various flavors of identitarians and activist-ists can't even notice the crimes they run interference for—or if they do notice, dimly, are incapable of interpreting it or to responding to it effectively. Thank God for them that Kanye West has just provoked another race-tinged crisis in pop culture at the Grammys. Pop culture is their *métier*. Not only is it not possible to parody this stuff anymore, but it's all beginning to feel more and more like orchestrated bread and circuses. It feels like a dystopian science fiction narrative or like *Idiocracy*.

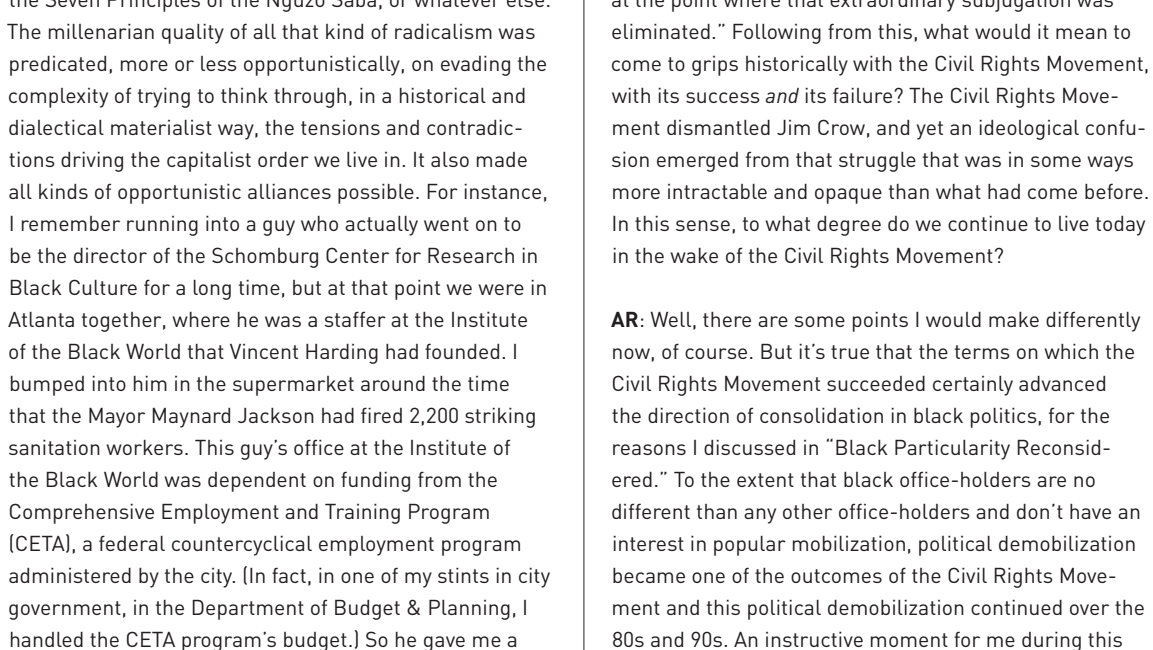
GB: In this sense, can we still speak of the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement? We seem to have moved away from a lot of the questions that the Civil Rights Movement was trying to raise within American society. This historical amnesia leads to another question. In the same essay, "Black Particularity Reconsidered," you also criticized the mass organization model of politics. You wrote that this model was "built on the assumption of a homogeneity of black political interests to be dealt with through community leadership. It is this notion of 'black community' that has blocked development of a radical critique in the Civil Rights Movement by contraposing an undifferentiated mass to a leadership stratum representing it." If you were to update this critique to grasp our present moment, what would that look like?

AR: It would look a lot like, *mutatis mutandis*, the moment at the beginning of the 20th century when Booker T. Washington and others, both his antagonists as well as his pals, were vying to establish what Kenneth Warren describes as "managerial authority" over the Negro Question. That's where we are now. Another way to look at the arc of this politics, of black politics, is on the analogy of the arc from Emancipation to the defeat of populism and the imposition of the Jim Crow order. There you had a fairly open politics, class-asymmetrical with respect to race in particular, but with black free people improvising and sometimes aligning with whites to engage in politics as a mechanism for making their lives better and for defining what making their lives better might actually mean. That got squashed, so that the activities of the likes of Washington were what was understood to be black politics until the mid-1920s through the 30s. As Judith Stein points out, there certainly were black people forming trade unions and fighting their employers and all that sort of thing before the mid-20s, but what was understood as "black politics" in this period was this elite enterprise, the professed aim of which was to articulate the interests of the popular black population—though it did this, of course, in ways consistent with what the dominant elites were prepared to hear. These race managers presented themselves as an organic leadership of that black population, and it's an under-appreciated fact that in large measure these claims to organic race leadership themselves hinged on the premises of Victorian race theory.

By the mid-1930s the Popular Front and mass direct-action politics had emerged. This was the active, dynamic, and partly constitutive strain of black political activity until the victories of the Civil Rights Movement and the emergence of black political regimes in big cities between the late 1960s and the late 1970s. What we've seen increasingly since then, at least since Reagan if not earlier, is a reassertion of a black Professional Managerial Class (PMC) as a tutorial leadership class. This hinges on "underclass" ideology, which disqualifies a significant section of the black population from having the authority to articulate its own concerns. What disappears from contemporary black politics is a working class. There's no space for an autonomous working class capable of articulating itself politically. This goes back to the 1990s and all that crap that comes out of the universities: the emergence of Cultural Studies discourse and people like Robin D. G. Kelly (alongside the vast majority of English professors) claiming that the black experience is opaque and unknowable to those outside and that it's only possible to gain access to it through skilled racial interpreters.

GB: Given the prevailing assumption that the black population forms a homogeneous mass, glossing over political distinctions, it has become very hard to disentangle left from right.

AR: A good operating assumption is that any person who has access to the public microphone is on the right. This includes all of the MSNBC stable. When I watched *Selma*,



Bobby Seale, co-founder of the Black Panther Party, and Jesse Jackson, one of MLK's lieutenants and future two-time candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, talk on March 12, 1972 at the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana.

"To unite the many" continues on page 3