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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*.

The *Platypus Review* is funded by:

The University of Chicago Student Government
Dalhousie Student Union
Loyola University of Chicago
School of the Art Institute of Chicago Student Government
The New School
New York University
The University of Illinois at Chicago
The Platypus Affiliated Society

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The Platypus Review

Issue #76 | May 2015



- 1 Neoliberalism and its discontents
Walter Benn Michaels, Toby Chow, Margaret Power, and Donald Parkinson
- 2
- 3 The American left and the “Black Question”
From politics to protest to the post-political
Toby Chow, Brandon Johnson, August Nimtz, and Adolph Reed, Jr.

76

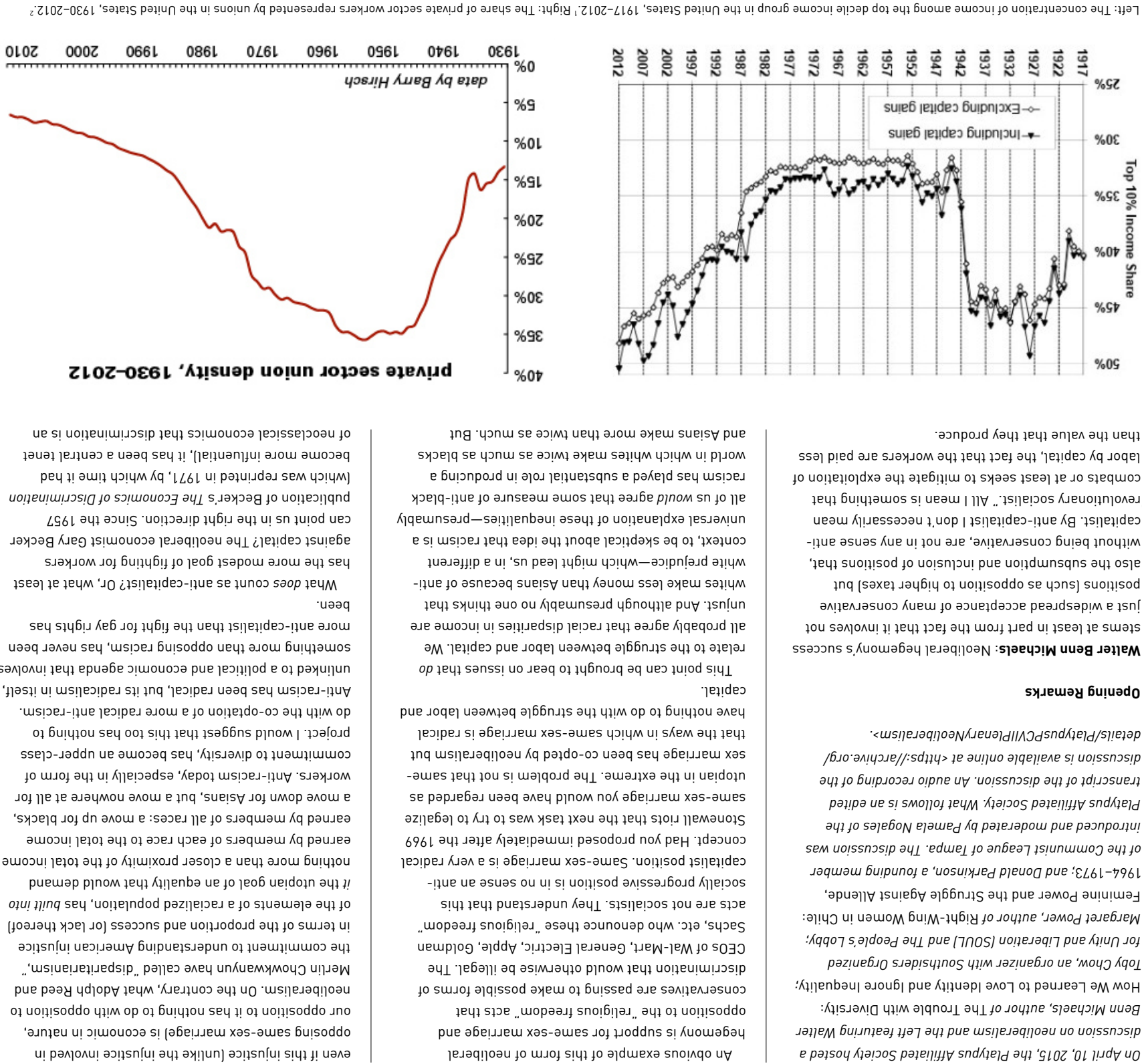
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“Neoliberalism” continues on page 2

like Scott Walker and Bruce Rauner are determined to on behalf of workers. That’s why right-wing neoliberals or even the war against racial discrimination—is really they are fighting—the war for same-sex marriage war. But it’s also true that, limited though it is, the war attraction. It’s true that unions can fight only a limited right from the start. But this weakness is part of their they are not radically anti-capitalist, unions are co-opted profoundly vulnerable to being co-opted, and insofar as takes place, to bargain for a better deal. So unions are ameliorate the terms according to which exploitation hand, unions’ mission is not to end exploitation but to neoliberalism seeks to universalize. On the other to fight against the competitive market in labor that are the way in which workers can organize themselves struggle against capitalism. On the one hand, unions history of unionism when it hasn’t been clear that There has probably never been a moment in the Obviously there are lots of problems with unions, have declined.

and partly because of the fact that—workers’ wages remained stagnant. Corporate profits have risen as—risen even though workers’ wages have declined or percent of the population. Workers’ productivity has trending percentage of income going to the top ten private sector over the last century mirrors the upward-show that downward-trending union density in the for capital, or at least they were. The graphs below Labor unions, unlike marital unions, are a problem progressive social change.

is inseparable from the commitment to genuinely That would be the point at which neoliberal ideology would not be any different from heterosexual unions.” between couples,” in which case “homosexual unions marriages should be “basic contractual arrangements to marital unions. Becker has been arguing for years that unions—for the same reason. Of course, when it comes white males). They oppose unions—or at least labor empowers certain groups of workers (in this case, oppose racism precisely because, in their view, racism affordable that taste becomes. Economists like Becker taste, but the more competitive the market, the less for white men despite paying the extra cost of that uncompetitive market one can still succeed with a “taste” to satisfy his preference for white men, in a relatively force available to him and thus pays premium wages unwilling to hire blacks or women restricts the labor economic liability in competitive markets. The employer



An obvious example of this form of neoliberal hegemony is support for same-sex marriage and opposition to the “religious freedom” acts that conservatives are passing to make possible forms of discrimination that would otherwise be illegal. The CEOs of Wal-Mart, General Electric, Apple, Goldman Sachs, etc. who denounce these “religious freedom” acts are not socialists. They understand that this socially progressive position is in no sense an anti-capitalist position. Same-sex marriage is a very radical concept. Had you proposed immediately after the 1969 Stonewall riots that the next task was to try to legalize same-sex marriage you would have been regarded as utopian in the extreme. The problem is not that same-sex marriage has been co-opted by neoliberalism but that the ways in which same-sex marriage is radical have nothing to do with the struggle between labor and capital.

This point can be brought to bear on issues that do relate to the struggle between labor and capital. We all probably agree that racial disparities in income are unjust. And although presumably no one thinks that whites make less money than Asians because of anti-white prejudice—which might lead us, in a different context, to be skeptical about the idea that racism is a universal explanation of these inequalities—presumably all of us would agree that some measure of anti-black racism has played a substantial role in producing a world in which whites make more than twice as much. But and Asians make more than twice as much. But

On April 10, 2015, the *Platypus Affiliated Society* hosted a discussion on neoliberalism and the Left featuring Walter Benn Michaels, author of *The Trouble with Diversity*; How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality; Toby Chow, an organizer with *Southsiders Organized for Unity and Liberation* [SOL] and *The People’s Lobby*; Margaret Power, author of *Right-Wing Women in Chile: Feminine Power and the Struggle Against Allende*, 1964–1973; and Donald Parkinson, a founding member of the *Communist League of Tampa*. The discussion was introduced and moderated by Pamela Nogales of the *Platypus Affiliated Society*. What follows is an edited transcript of the discussion. An audio recording of the discussion is available online at <<https://archive.org/details/PlatypusFPCVIIIPlenaryNeoliberalism>>.

Opening Remarks

Walter Benn Michaels: Neoliberal hegemony’s success stems at least in part from the fact that it involves not just a widespread acceptance of many conservative positions [such as opposition to higher taxes] but also the subsumption and inclusion of positions that, without being conservative, are not in any sense anti-capitalist. By anti-capitalist I don’t necessarily mean “revolutionary socialist.” All I mean is something that combats or at least seeks to mitigate the exploitation of labor by capital, the fact that the workers are paid less than the value that they produce.

Neoliberalism and its discontents

Walter Benn Michaels, Toby Chow, Margaret Power, and Donald Parkinson

The American left and the “Black Question”

From politics to protest to the post-political

Toby Chow, Brandon Johnson, August Nimtz, and Adolph Reed, Jr.

The Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a discussion on the politics of anti-racism and the American left on April 11, 2015 in Chicago. The speakers were Toby Chow, an organizer with Southsiders Organized for Unity and Liberation (SOUL) and The People's Lobby; Brandon Johnson, an organizer for Chicago Teachers Union (CTU); August Nimtz, author of Lenin's Electoral Strategy from 1907 to the October Revolution of 1917 [2014]; and Adolph Reed, Jr., author of Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era (1999). The following is an edited transcript from the discussion. An audio recording of the event is available online at <https://archive.org/details/PlatypusPCVIITheAmericanLeftAndTheBlackQuestion>.

Introduction

Beneath a consensus of avowed anti-racism, the American left remains conflicted about whether and how to politicize race. This panel seeks to shed historical light on today's political impasses, asking: How has racism changed throughout U.S. history, and to what degree has racism been overcome in America? Our neoliberal and post-political present has been shaped by key periods of political conflict over race and racism, from the failure of the post-Civil War Reconstruction era through the entrenchment of Jim Crow through the abolition of legal racial segregation with the Civil Rights Movement. If we have overcome the forms of legalized racism that plagued American society before the 1960s, this victory has nevertheless failed to translate into the meaningful improvement of living conditions for the vast majority of black people in America. Instead, the general downturn since the early 1970s has been managed in a way that has worsened conditions for most black people in the context of a broader stratification and brutalization of American society. This situation demands a strident refutation of the pseudo-problem of “class versus race”; we ask today's left to consider the implications of Adolph Reed's formulation that “racism is a class issue.” With a view to how a politics of freedom would approach race and racism, what lessons can be drawn from the most significant periods in the history of the American left, such as the populist movement, the pre-WWI Socialist Party, the 1920s–30s Communist Party, and the 1960s–70s New Left? If the problem of racism has been bypassed but not overcome, leaving in place the structural conditions that have shaped racism historically, how might we recognize these structural conditions and thereby render race and racism politically tractable?

Opening remarks

Toby Chow: The history of the Left is not really my strong point, so I am going to focus on how to render the problem of race politically tractable. From Adolph Reed, Barbara Fields, and others, I have taken a very important lesson to heart, which is that racial categories emerge out of and reinforce patterns of economic subordination. So we need an analysis of race and racism in terms of capitalist political economy. For example, Fields notes that there is a common story about slavery which she wants to debunk, which is that first white Europeans and Americans saw black people, then whites had racist ideas about black people, and because of that, whites felt free to enslave them. So first comes race, then comes racism, and then comes slavery. Fields argues that as a historical account this gets things completely backwards. The systemized enslavement of people of African descent led to anti-black racism and the category of a black race—first came slavery, then came racism, then came race. We need to understand race as a category of political economy. Now, the ways in which racial categories have produced and reproduced themselves has changed over time; the stereotypical role of blacks in political economy has changed radically. At the time of the emergence of the category of a black race, black slaves were a central labor force responsible for creating much of American wealth. Today the reproduction of racism suffered by blacks has to do with the fact that blacks are disproportionately superfluous as a labor force. The contemporary problem of the black race and the racism faced by black people today cannot be understood independently of this fact.

This is not an attempt to reduce race to class, so I hope I don't get heard that way, and I am also not talking about understanding the “intersection” between race and class. Rather, race cannot be understood independently of class, and vice versa. In order to deal with the black question, or the problem of race in general, we need to deal with capitalist political economy. Now, people on the Left who come to this realization are often tempted to say that, in order to deal with race and racism, we need socialist revolution. Capitalism created race and racism, and capitalism sustains race and racism, so we need to abolish capitalism in order to abolish racism. That would be great! However, I want to push back on that strategy. We need to carefully distinguish the task of overcoming neoliberalism (which is the current phase of capitalism) and the task of overcoming capitalism itself. The Left currently faces the task of resolving the crisis of neoliberalism and overcoming neoliberalism; however, I do not think that there is currently any chance that we will overcome capitalism in that process. We face the task of bringing about a post-neoliberal society, and if we do this right, then we could achieve a much more egalitarian global society with a more inclusive economy, both in the U.S. and across the world. But it will still be a capitalist society.

Neoliberalism, despite its embrace of the ideals of diversity, multiculturalism, and anti-racism, has perpetuated racial inequality, and in some ways even deepened it. How has this happened? One way to look at it is through a helpful distinction made by Nancy

Fraser between personal and impersonal forms of subordination—she applies this to the question of gender, but it also applies to other categories of ascriptive identity. Neoliberalism has allowed for significant, if still limited, progress against subordination stemming from personal prejudice. At the same time, however, neoliberalism has intensified impersonal forms of subordination, which operate through market forces. These forces have disproportionately negative impacts on women and minorities of all kinds, in markets of all kinds—the labor market, the housing market, and so on. An example of how this plays out: During the 1960s, the black poverty rate in America was cut from about 55 percent to close to 30 percent, and this was at a time when America was full of racists. Under neoliberalism, when ideals of diversity and anti-racism are mainstream and totally accepted by all neoliberal elites, the black poverty rate has hardly budged—in fact, it has *increased* since the turn of the century. This cannot be analyzed as a result of racist bosses everywhere; it is, rather, the result of the unforgiving pressures of the abstract forces of the “race to the bottom” neoliberal labor market.

Most people in this room are probably very critical about identity politics, and rightly so, but from an organizing perspective, I feel the need to recognize that many people who want to get involved in a movement to make the world better get especially excited about the idea of doing something about inequality according to race and other identity categories. It is important to figure out how to link issues of economic inequality (and how this is exacerbated by neoliberalism) to the concerns that people have around the subordination of identity groups. From my experience with SOUL, which is based in the largely black South Side and south suburbs of Chicago, we have worked to connect the dots between the structures of racial inequality and the economy. In some cases this is easy, some of the social ills that are stereotypically associated with urban black communities such as unemployment are obviously economic issues. But also when it comes to issues such as gun violence, police violence, mass incarceration, it is not so hard to show that these issues have a class dimension and this necessitates involvement in a left economic populism that can contribute to overcoming neoliberalism.

Brandon Johnson: One of the challenges those of us who see the world in a more just, equitable way face is relating with the folks that we believe we need to spark to improve their lives. That relationship sometimes is difficult because we come from different perspectives. So I'll talk as someone who is a working class black man teaching poor children, and as someone who grew up low-income, not poor. There's a difference: We ate everyday, but we didn't like what we ate. Poor folks are guessing day-to-day what they're going to eat. We often assume the folks who are living with these conditions only see a certain way out, and that way out is ours, because we have all the answers—if we could just relate it to the destructive practices of capitalism, then black people will be free. But the harsh reality is that often times there is trepidation around the ideas that are being promoted, because black folks don't always get down with ideas or ideals that do not automatically relate to their immediate space. They don't, or we don't. When you're hungry and homeless, but supposed to come to school prepared to discuss the four causes of the American Revolution—how that's going to relate to my economic come-up? Trayquan is not making that connection. So, while I'm having a conversation with Trayquan's mother about why it is important to come to school, to come prepared—because this preparation is ultimately going to help galvanize our larger race so that we can improve our economic conditions—I'm also trying to convince this mother through a system that uses a measuring tool that is inherently racist.

When black folks reject Left principles, it is not because they just don't like Left ideology, but that we've been presented with opportunities to “come up” before. Over and over there are these hopes that are presented to the community—hopes that if these ideas and principles are embraced, then their life will get better. Yet, as Toby has already indicated, the unemployment rate in black Chicago looks like the Great Depression.

The Left in the black community is heard, but not seen. Black folks are aware of the economic state that we're in. We are very conscious of it. But what often happens is that you have these moments where there is a little bit of a spark, and that energy is supposed to be used to catapult us into a sustained movement, but it doesn't happen, because the Left tends to disappear. We're good at book studies, we're good at having social groups, we're good when it comes to synthesizing and analyzing the conditions within black America. But what we're not good at is being able to have a conversation at a door with a mother who needs to know that their two-thirds of corporations are not paying their fair share to the state. She also needs to know that there are millions of dollars at the disposal of our city and a slush fund of our tax dollars that can be used to reinvest in our community. But often those of us on the Left do not have the patience to be in the community long enough to address some of those immediate needs.

Black labor continues to be under attack across the country, and the conditions in our communities continue to worsen. Black educators in Chicago have been decimated; we've lost half of our black teachers within the last ten years. The Left must not only have real conversations, but also really promote and push substantive policies that actually deal with the harsh conditions that black workers are experiencing right now. The Left must make sure that those who are most impacted by these harsh policies are actively engaged during the organizing.

August Nimtz: I want to thank Platypus for inviting me, and especially for the opportunity to link up with my comrade Adolph, here. He and I go back a long time. We have roots in New Orleans, with all the lessons around race, class, and color that come with that particular experience. I am in complete agreement with his formulation that racism is a class issue—the history of the United States makes it very clear. I think one of the most instructive moments is Reconstruction, and the overthrow of Reconstruction. There is a formulation in the description that I would object to a little—the failure of post-Civil War Reconstruction.” It didn't fail; it was *overthrown*. It was a bloody counterrevolution. The way we use the term “failure” sometimes has the connotation that this was a failed experiment in democracy, so we have to be very clear. It was a counterrevolution, because what we saw beginning to happen was labor in white skin and laboring in black skin starting to come together—the ruling class was very fearful of that. Therein is a very important lesson for all of us today.

We are in an unprecedented crisis. This is a crisis of capitalism of historic proportions. Nobody in this room has seen anything like this before. Even some mainstream bourgeois economists refer to what we're in as “secular stagnation”—that is going to be around for a long time. It takes its toll on the working class in all kinds of ways, and the working class in brown and black skin are really taking it on the chin. The black median household income on the eve of the crisis was around about 6,000 dollars. Now it's less than 5,000 dollars. White median household wealth is around 100,000 dollars—19 times that of black median household income. In a few months the Federal Reserve Board will increase short-term interest rates. We don't know exactly when that's going to happen, but it will effectively lock in the unemployment rates, which means it will get worse. Of course we must understand that this is an institution that no one in this room has the right to vote on. I like that example because the way the Fed operates gets to the fundamental incompatibility between democracy and capitalism. That's the crisis, and the question is how we get out of it. Only with the overthrow of capitalism is it possible to overcome this crisis in a way that will actually be in the interests of working people.

I spent all day yesterday at a conference on the voting rights, as this is the 50th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act, which was signed in August of 1965. It is under attack. There are efforts on the part of various states as the result of a Supreme Court decision to begin rolling back sections of the Voting Rights Act. It deserves to be fought for but in a way that is probably different than many liberals defend the Voting Rights Act, and I want to see if I can make a case for looking at the electoral process from a revolutionary perspective.

The biggest obstacle that workers in black skin face—the same challenge that workers in white skin and brown skin face—is what I call the stranglehold of bourgeois lesser-evilism, the belief that we can resolve this crisis through the electoral process. To think that the electoral and parliamentary arenas are an end in themselves is to be afflicted by what Marx, Engels, and Lenin once called “parliamentary cretinism.” Real politics takes place outside the parliamentary and electoral arenas, in the streets and on the barricades. I know of no example in history where fundamental change has come about through the electoral-parliamentary arena. I think the most consequential election ever was Lincoln's re-election in 1864, and that was decided on the barricades—Sherman's march to the sea. That's what made it possible for Lincoln to be re-elected. I've tried to supplement “parliamentary cretinism” with another concept, “voting fetishism.” By this I mean the mistaken belief that when you vote for either a policy or for a candidate, you somehow are exercising power. That's a mistake, and it can be very costly and sometimes deadly. When you vote, you are registering a preference. You are not exercising power. Power is something that has to be taken.

For Marx, Engels and Lenin, you use the electoral arena, the parliamentary arena, as a *means* to the end, in order to figure out when are the best chances for taking power, in order to count your forces. Use it to get out revolutionary ideas, measure your strength, and determine the moment when it is right to actually take power. That's the program of Lenin's “revolutionary parliamentarism,” and I want to make a case for it as an alternative to bourgeois lesser-evilism.

Adolph Reed, Jr.: For just a quick trip down memory lane, August, if you recall, “Impartial Administration of Justice is the Foundation of Liberty”—that's the bullshit that's emblazoned on the Courthouse down in New Orleans. That was burned into my brain by age fourteen, and I spit it at every time I rode past it on the bus.

Anyway, I want to start off with a handful of aphorisms. Barbara Fields would be quite happy to know that she's being invoked in the ways that she is here. Fields has also said that race is a language through which the class contradictions of American capitalism are often expressed, and that's a nice, pithy way to think about this. She also said more recently that the way many people these days talk about slavery—especially in cultural studies and English departments—you would think that the purpose of slavery was the production of white supremacy, not cotton.

In Dubois's second autobiography, *Cotton of Dawn*, published in 1940, there's a chapter in which he has an apocryphal conversation with an apocryphal visitor from a foreign land who is trying to understand what race is in America. They go through all the technical specifications that support racial classification. He dismantles every one of them. Finally, he tells an unbelievably frustrated foreigner, “The black man is a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia.” Eight years later, sociologist Joseph Sandy Himes, brother of



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the fall of 1965 speaking at the beginning of the Chicago Freedom movement. The campaign slogan “End Slums” can be seen in the background.

Chester Himes, in a really interesting essay called “A Sociological Redefinition of the American Negro Group,” says that to be a Negro is to be available for treatment as a Negro. A final saying, from a good friend, colleague, and comrade of mine, Willie Legette: The only thing that hasn't changed about black politics since 1965 is how we think about it and talk about it. — That may be the most crucial aphorism of them all.

There is no Left in America today. A lot of people embrace left politics and a left social vision, but there is no Left, if what you mean by Left is a social force that has the capacity to intervene in shaping the terms of political debate. If we started off from that presumption—what the Left is and what it needs to do and be—then the first task is to try to figure out how to build a Left. However pessimistic or undesirable that may sound, it would help us if we take a little of our collective effort to think about this.

I would like to trouble a different aspect of the panel's account, which has to do with the formulation of racism being “transformed.” If you stop and think about it for a second, what it does is reify racism, because it dehistoricizes people. I know it's a common formulation—even among people who consider themselves to be giving Marxist accounts of racism—but there is a fundamental tendency to ontologize racism as a category, and by that I mean, to treat racism as a thing that has the capacity to do shit. Thomas Holt, the historian from the University of Chicago, did this book on the color line in the 21st century, and all the way through he does this—he is following Stuart Hall, which I think is seldom a good idea. For instance, he talks about how racism has transformed itself from the 17th century up to last week. Well, if racism is “transforming itself,” then racism must be a thing that has some kind of consciousness. What if we take a step back from the presumption that suffuses American political debate, from the center wing of the Democratic Party to whatever flavor of Trotskyist it is that you have to deal with at the moment: the presumption that racism is a *sui generis* kind of injustice.

Another data point in support of my claim that there is no Left is that our situation is such that the theater of a left debate is on MSNBC or AlterNet or in academic departments. Even in the cases like Ferguson or other instances of police brutality or racialized inequality, the debate quickly moves from the injustice itself to a conversation about whether it is racist. All the participants in this kabuki theater have an interest in maintaining discussion on those terms. It is so familiar, and that is how we've come to organize. The different strains of the Alinskyite position—that you go to people where they are, and you develop them and let the issues emerge, and as they develop, more good stuff will happen—these have all run their course. It has run into the dead-end of the NGO-ization of black politics, at a minimum, and the consolidation of a professional managerial stratum of race relations. So everyone has an interest in—I wouldn't call it a diversion—but in doing what feels good, which is discussing class issues and class contradictions through this second-hand metaphor.

We can see a pattern in moments of left insurgency in the U.S. The moment in the mid-1940s, for instance, when left penetration was at its greatest in American policy making—when the full-employment bill passed the senate, when FDR passed the Second Bill of Rights—capital mobilized and defeated the labor forces. I realize now that the defeats are not what is most important. What is most important is the compromised, second-best options that emerged and consolidated after the defeat. The second-best compromise was fundamentally culturalist: culturalist populism, with a shift in the normative foundation of the struggle for black rights. There was a moment like that in the mid-1960s, where the victories of the Civil Rights struggle had been won, and where now, as Bayard Rustin made clear, it doesn't even make sense to call it a Civil Rights movement anymore, because the struggles that black Americans faced were fundamentally class struggles. To cut to the chase, Black Power and its sequelae were the culturalist compromise. Culturalism is not an alternative to class politics. Culturalism is a class politics—but it is a politics of a class different from that which a vast majority of us in this room are fighting for.

The best way to avoid a debate about class reductionism is to stress what capitalism is and how it makes sense to think of it. Capitalism is not just class relations or production relations; capitalism is a social and cultural order that solidifies, consolidates, mediates, and is reproduced through social relations.

I stopped working with the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC) after I read a critique of the PRCC's anti-gentrification politics that was published in the first issue of the Platypus

Neoliberalism, continued from page 2

using the term “identity politics.” The huge immigrant marches that took place in Chicago in 2006 were led by Mexican, Polish, and other latino populations. The ability and the organization of people demanding their rights as immigrants—as human beings—led many of the same marchers to organize a workers' takeover of Chicago's Republic Windows and Doors factory in 2008.

DP: When people criticize identity politics they're not necessarily criticizing the fact of addressing the issues of marginalized identities. They're criticizing the idea of “standpoint epistemology,” the idea that there is no common struggle for human liberation but only the subjective, personal struggle that the marginalized individual faces, and the idea that no one else can really understand this oppression because they don't share the same standpoint. This post-structuralist concept has become more common on the Left. The New Left had identity politics, but in a concept of “the people”—the idea was that all the different identity groups could share a common solidarity together. Today's more post-structuralist or “intersectional” identity politics denies the possibility of solidarity; you can have fragmented, subjective, individual struggles but no common struggle for human liberation. Class is the axis, the glue that makes common struggle in solidarity possible. Without class as your central axis of analysis you end up with this neoliberal fragmentation.

How do we solve the crisis of neoliberalism? I doubt World War III is going to happen although it does seem like imperialist tensions are heating up. The only way to solve the crisis of neoliberalism is going to be communism. The idea that we can return to a Keynesian welfare state or find more balanced methods of global investment is just as utopian, if not more utopian, than the hope for communism. Capital is more globalized than ever before. This makes the necessity of international proletarian solidarity more important than ever. You see this now in Greece. Grexit is not going to happen without massive capital flight, without massive economic suffering. There isn't a solution to the Greek crisis without the development of some kind of international workers' movement. This movement has to be patiently built out of nothing and it has to be based on independent working class politics.

Q & A

It would take a revolution to force corporations to be more responsible. Toby, why do you believe it's more possible to achieve responsible corporate investment than to achieve socialism?

In France, the Socialist Party, now the government, is not socialist at all, and their anti-racist vision entails putting more black people in government. We have to critique this idea of representation. But the radical left in France often reduces the race question to the way that the neoliberal left treats race, as if the only point to be made about anti-racism is that it can be co-opted by neoliberalism. Is it possible for an anti-capitalist left to include concerns about racism and imprisonment of people of color into their emancipatory politics?

TC: Why is socially responsible long-term investment more feasible than communism? Communism isn't on the radar of people in low-wage countries like Bangladesh; they want higher wages, more investment into the conditions of their workplaces, less pollution. If we're going to create bonds of solidarity with them we need to work on goals that they understand. These goals can be achieved through greater public control of investment. We could use politics, the power of the state, to seize control of idle capital and to push it towards some form of investment that is more attentive to the common good. Corporations won't change their investment strategies without being made to, but we're in a moment where the whole system is in a crisis. This presents an opportunity to find pressure points where relatively small actors can have an outsized influence on the direction of the whole system.

We did this during the Great Depression, the last crisis of global market society. Business interests were discredited but the Left despised about the weak and scattered state of the labor movement. Then the 1936–1937 Flint sit-down strike against General Motors (GM) happened. The United Automobile Workers (UAW) targeted a key point in GM's national supply chain and used that as leverage for national demands. That resulted in huge gains for the UAW, but it also triggered wave after wave of victories for organized labor against very large and powerful companies. Companies then internalized strong wages, benefits, and stability for workers as a normal way of doing business. The way multinational corporations do their business now isn't how it's always going to be.

WBM: I don't use the term “identity politics.” I'm not in sympathy with those who are for it and I'm not in sympathy with those who are against it. It's more useful to think about the question of anti-discrimination. Anti-discrimination is absolutely valuable and it's not about identity politics, but our commitment to it does not itself produce a left politics. Apart from the far right, there's a neoliberal and non-neoliberal consensus on the importance of anti-discrimination. Various forms of criminalization are among the worst forms of discrimination, but discrimination includes even the glass ceiling land whether the man is making 400 times more than the worker or the woman is making 400 times more than the worker should not be of great concern to us, but we should oppose discrimination in any case). The lesson we've all learned from the last 30 years is that an anti-capitalist politics does not logically follow from anti-discrimination. Anti-discrimination is as logically compatible with a completely unequal neoliberal realm as with a completely egalitarian one. Anti-discrimination isn't the “left” part of our politics. Anti-discrimination needs to be part of what we do, but if it's at the center of what we do, we are embodying left-neoliberalism.

I stopped working with the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC) after I read a critique of the PRCC's anti-gentrification politics that was published in the first issue of the Platypus

Review and after I realized that the PRCC's umbrella of non-profits is wed to the Democratic Party's political machine. However, when I was still working with them, I once asked a young man being groomed for leadership in the PRCC how he defined himself politically. He replied, “I suppose I'm a nationalist.” Margaret, how exactly does the PRCC's educational work point to socialism? Leftists today often justify educational and social movement work on the grounds that it prepares socialist consciousness, but the PRCC seems to produce only nationalist consciousness, which Toby sees as the worst possible response to neoliberalism. Walter, had the young man replied, “I suppose I'm a worker,” would this be preferable? Your view risks a workerism that falls short of socialism.

Milton Friedman used the rhetoric of freedom, which used to be the language of the Left. Is freedom at issue for the Left under neoliberalism?

MP: Nationalism has to be understood in context. During the Popular Front period the Communist Party in Puerto Rico aligned with the U.S. Roosevelt government and the Nationalist Party opposed it. By nationalism, many Puerto Ricans mean a rejection of U.S. colonization of their island and the creation of a different kind of society—one run by Puerto Ricans, not by the United States. Does that mean capitalism or socialism? It's a little ambiguous at this point, but concerns about nationalism can't be separated from the context of colonialism.

TC: We do need to take up the concept of freedom again. I anticipate freedom from the intense competitive pressure and time pressure that neoliberalism has imposed.

DP: As Lenin said: freedom for whom, to do what? Freedom is a very ambiguous concept; I'm not against using it, but we have to be very careful about how we use it. Neoliberal ideology uses concepts of decentralization and autonomy.

PN: What is freedom for the Left?

DP: That's the question. When we talk about freedom we have to be concrete about what we mean: freedom for people to not have to sell their labor power to survive, freedom to be able to pursue human flourishing in its fullest extent. The Left has given up on the concept of freedom of speech, which should be taken back from the right. There's a tendency to associate communism with the worst forms of tyranny because of the history of what was called communism in the 20th century. The Left could take back words like democracy and freedom to prove what we really stand for, but we have to be careful not to reaffirm the dominant ideology.

WBM: Long before Milton Friedman, people on the right argued for their freedom to hold slaves. Their property had to be confiscated by the federal government. Freedom has never been an unambiguously left concept in U.S. politics and it probably never will be.

I have never encountered any university that didn't claim to teach critical thinking. The problem of education is not reducible to the content of the education. My point is not that education is bad, but to ask, what makes education so central now? The “left” way of doing nationalism is intersectionality. It has nothing to do with nations but it produces the same subjective effect. Intersectionality is the opium of the neoliberal left and there is an ideological problem with that. I take the point on workerism in an abstract way, but what does standing for communism even mean in any political field that I'm involved in?

PN: That's why Platypus exists.

WBM: Yeah—and that's what I think of Platypus. But Toby's vision of pushing international companies a little harder to dialectically turn them inside-out and make them forces for good sounds like a science fiction novel. I'm describing a pragmatic workerism. In my recent experience as an organizer, some people understand that they're workers and some don't, but if you can bring them all into seeing how they are workers, into seeing how the pressure under which they're functioning is derived from the way they're workers, you can begin to form a sense of what a working class is, even with people who have different working conditions and incomes. If what you're doing doesn't have a direct relation to improving people's conditions as workers in a political economy based on exploiting these workers then you're not doing a left politics. That doesn't mean it's not a good thing; it means it's not a left politics. If you just stick with that all the way through then you end up with workerism. On the other hand, that gives you something to do other than clapping to keep Tinkerbell alive, other than making a wish to make communism come true or to make GE turn out to be a force for good after all.

Toby, you said that workers are asking for higher wages, stable jobs, and safe working conditions, so it's unrealistic to ask for socialism—we have to “meet people where they're at.” But precisely these demands formed the basis of the agitation for the abolition of wage labor that made socialism popular in its 19th century heyday. Donald sees your vision as conservative precisely because it falls below that imagination, that earlier threshold of possibility. Most leftists see the business-labor compromise that emerged out of the Great Depression as a conservative heading-off of the project of abolishing wage labor through socialism.

During the 20th century, key parts of the Left aimed at communism and the bourgeoisie was expropriated throughout a significant portion of the planet. Then Stalinism collapsed, and that collapse has a lot to do with the hegemony of neoliberalism. The concrete existence of other types of economic organizations, however undemocratic or oppressive, clearly had an influence on the development of capitalist society and on what the bourgeoisie felt it could do politically.

I want to question the very concept of “anti-capitalism.” In the old Marxist sense, capitalism is precisely the opportunity for socialism in that the possibility of socialism is immanent to capitalism. This connects to Donald's point about independent class politics: Politically, the idea of working class politics is different from labor union organizing. During the First World War, Lenin wrote the following:

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!⁶

DP: I agree that capitalism creates the conditions for communism. Communism wasn't a possibility in 1900, but with the breaking-down of independent household production, the spread of the world market, and the creation of a world proletariat, human emancipation became a possibility for the first time in history. A lot of anti-capitalism today is reactionary anti-capitalism. We need to bring back the Marxist insight that capitalism is progressive. At the same time, we need not support capitalism *per se* but recognize that it creates emancipatory possibilities in the self-activity of the proletariat. Marxism isn't just about the liberation of wage workers; it's about the liberation of humanity from all forms of oppression through wage workers uniting as a class to engage in a political project for human emancipation.

TC: Why is a more humane global economy more plausible than communism? Short-term investment opportunities have dried up, which is why there are trillions of dollars sitting idle. There are many opportunities for long-term investment that could plausibly be profitable for corporations, and these involve incorporating people living in slums into the mainstream of the economy, which is good. This won't turn GE into a force for good but it will create new opportunities for the Left.

As an organizer, I don't know anyone who demands the abolition of wage labor apart from indoctrinated Marxists. I've been in meetings of workers, and if you don't meet people where they're at, if you start talking about the abolition of wage labor, they'll ask you to please leave because they have work to do to make their lives better.

The Lenin quote made me think of women working in garment factories in Bangladesh. There's a tendency on the Left to reject any claim made by neoliberals, but the neoliberals are right to say that people in low-wage countries like Bangladesh work for these factories because they find this work preferable to the other opportunities open to them. They didn't need to be pushed there. As a result, these women are terribly exploited. They desperately need better working conditions, higher wages, and safer factories. The organizing they're doing is a huge source of potential for the Left. We need to figure out what to do about it.

MP: What is the connection between capitalism and socialism? Most of us are influenced by the Enlightenment idea that there is progress in history, and Marxism reflects that notion, but it's hard to say

American left, continued from page 3

I've been arguing for some years now that the best way to view race—as with gender, “feeble-mindedness” in the 1920s, and many other categories—is as one species in a genus of ideologies concerning ascriptive differentiation and hierarchy. By that I mean hierarchy as what you supposedly “are” instead of what you do. In that sense, it is not race or class, and it is not race or capitalism. Race is one of the means—the technologies—of reproducing hierarchy that all class societies have: English Victorian societies, for instance, were absolutely convinced that the English working class was *racially* different from the aristocracy.

Q & A

I want to go back to the point that it would take a socialist revolution to overcome racial inequality. I think a lot of people in this room might agree with this point, so why is it that #BlackLivesMatter did not become a moment of opportunity for the Left in America to mobilize around this question, even when a lot of people were in the streets? It seems like this has been a lost opportunity for the Left.

AR: Frankly, I don't think the opportunity ever was there. I think this speaks to another problem that we have: There is a difference between demonstrations and strategic political action. One of the problems with #Occupy—and with anything that's got a hashtag in front of it—is that people have trouble recognizing the distinction between the pageantry of protest and a strategic political action. Often, people don't want to acknowledge that there is a difference. There's a solipsism about this kind of politics. I remember seeing demonstrations in Berkeley after the Eric Garner verdict, and what struck me were the shots of young people lying down in the front of Amtrak trains and taking selfies.

Another anecdotal experience: In my grad class we were discussing an article on the logic of how social movements form and pursue power—how they consolidate and reformulate themselves—and a student says to me that he's got a problem with this model, because there is no space in it for viewing hip hop as a form of politics. I then calmly try to give him an account of how people came to see hip hop as an expression of politics in the first place—what was happening inside academic life, how insurgent politics outside of the university were in retreat, and so on. I got through all of this, and then he said, “but those young people who embrace this really do believe it's a politics.” So it seems the standard, “if you believe it, then it is true” is now where we are!

My point here isn't that young people are stupid and self-absorbed. This is, rather, a testament to the fact that there is no organically rooted left politics. When I was 21, I was stupid. But I turned 21 in 1968, so there were grown people around me fighting struggles, and back then we didn't say to our more experienced comrades, “Shouldn't you be asking what we think?” No, we wanted to learn, and we knew we didn't know shit.

because there has not yet been a socialist society in the world. We don't know if capitalism will lead to socialism. We do know that attempts to build socialism both in peasant-based societies as well as in industrialized working-class societies haven't worked. Lenin's idea that the proletarianization of women is progressive because it leads them towards the struggle against capitalism for socialism stems from the anti-peasant concept within Marxism, from the idea that peasants cannot possibly produce a socialist revolution. The problem is that nobody has produced a socialist revolution.

WBM: If you try to uniteize now you aren't going to recreate the Detroit compromise of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. You can't possibly do it. This is the whole point of internationalization under neoliberalism, whether that's progressive or not. Stalin (wrongly) thought that socialism can work in one country, but *no one* ever thought that you could have neoliberalism in one country. Internationalization is real now, so an effective union movement would have to be an international movement. It would have to produce not just bonds of solidarity but structures of operation which were as international in their way as corporations are in theirs. Unionization now is not the *return* to unions. The internationalization that Toby described, with international corporations negotiating with international unions, would make for unions and workers' organizations very different from anything we've had before, although these organizations were appropriately imagined in the International. **JP**

Transcribed by Nikos Manousakis, Alex Gonopolskiy, Reid Kotlas, and Danny Jacobs.

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Neoliberalism, continued from page 1

destroy unions. That’s why left-neoliberals like Barack Obama and our mayor, Rahm Emanuel, don’t care much about defending them. Indeed, left-neoliberalism, with its unwavering support for charter schools, especially in Chicago and New York, has probably been the most effective opponent of the union movement today.

When it comes to the question of political organization, the Left—that is, the Left that is not a neoliberal left—ought to take a lesson from the right. The right wants to destroy unions for a reason. The Left should want to build them for the same reason.

Toby Chow: I’m involved in organizing at Southsiders Organized for Unity and Liberation and at The People’s Lobby. My views don’t necessarily represent those of these organizations. In these organizations we have adopted the goal of overcoming neoliberalism but not the goal of overcoming capitalism or creating a socialist or post-capitalist society. These two tasks are distinct, although they’re related.

Neoliberalism is in a state of crisis. Neoliberalism has been a form of global capitalist society based on intensifying market forces through deregulation and privatization, upward redistribution towards the wealthy, and global capital flows. It involves a regime of capital accumulation based on cheap growth, short-term investment, and a global race to the bottom among workers and governments. This is how neoliberalism has been, but neoliberalism is now in a state of terminal crisis and this creates opportunities for the Left. How do we seize the moment?

We need to look beyond small-scale, short-term victories. This is especially important for the pragmatic left: labor unions, community organizations, human rights organizations, and so on. We also need to avoid pursuing utopian fantasies of a completely new society. We must instead attend to the possibilities for a systemic transformation that are currently being generated by neoliberalism and its crisis. These possibilities do not currently include the overcoming of capitalism. However, we do face the possibility of contributing to the creation of a much more just global society in a way that resolves the crisis of neoliberalism.

Under neoliberalism we have seen the proliferation of multinational corporations and of transnational bodies like the IMF and the WTO which are in charge of managing the global economy. These are currently—and correctly—seen by the Left as a threat to democracy and a driving force behind inequality, but we now have the opportunity to work through these forces, to create a more just post-neoliberal global society that is more egalitarian, more inclusive, and more capable of dealing with more long-term global threats like climate change. We can create such a society by working to transnationalize the labor movement and the public sphere.

First we need to work towards improved global standards for wages and working conditions. We can achieve this by taking the source of strength of multinational corporations—namely, their vast geographical reach—and turning it back against them. We now have vast supply chains which link workers across continents from the U.S. to Bangladesh; in the process this creates a comprehensive but delicate global division of labor. Currently this global division of labor is used to foster a global race to the bottom, but it also provides the Left with the potential to transform the working class populations in different countries from competitors to comrades. We have seen glimpses of this potential in the global response to the recent factory disasters in Bangladesh, where workers and activists began to cooperate transnationally to make demands on those who manage the global economic system. This points to the possibility of making demands that can genuinely reverse the global race to the bottom, which would also address one of the aspects of the neoliberal crisis: the problem of effective demand.

People on the American left tend to lament the state of the labor movement, but the labor movement only looks very weak if we ignore China, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and other countries. In the past few years we have seen very large, militant labor mobilizations in a number of emerging markets. A recent strike at a factory in Ho Chi Minh City that produces products for Adidas and Nike involved 90,000 workers. This is the labor movement that we have been waiting for, and we need to figure out a way to create real bonds of solidarity with these workers at a transnational level. At The People’s Lobby we’ve started forming relationships with organizers of Bangladeshi garment workers but we’re keenly aware that we don’t have all the answers.

We also need long-term and equitable global investment from a post-neoliberal future. The current system utilizes the power of the state and corporations to produce cheap growth through short-term investment, leading to the cannibalizing of the institutions that make life livable. By now this strategy of growth has run its course and the global elite sit on trillions of dollars of idle wealth. Enormous sums of capital flow into socially useless speculation. At the same time there is a global drought of capital in ghettos, slums, and impoverished rural areas. We have billions of people around the world living off of the scraps of the productive global economy. They are starved for investment, yet the mind of the neoliberal investor—which is obsessed with short-term payoffs and can’t think of investment in any other way—sees only barren ground. The next step to create a more progressive and inclusive society must be based on productive long-term investment that would include those who are excluded from the global economy as workers and consumers. This kind of growth would, by its very logic, reduce inequality, raise the standard of living of those who suffer the greatest deprivation, and extend social recognition to those who are currently completely marginalized. This will require increased public control over investment and progress towards a transnational public sphere.

This vision cuts against the grain of a lot of common sense on the Left, which tends to view globalization as enemy number one. Corporations and transnational economic bodies certainly are our opponents as we seek to create a more just society, but we should also be careful to recognize the progressive potential that exists in the global economy. Above all, we need to turn our back on all forms of economic nationalism: the call

to protect American jobs, the demand that American corporations be more patriotic, the demonizing of the Chinese and other so-called foreign competitors, etc. Economic nationalism exists on the right, but unfortunately, it’s also all too common on the Left. Movements against the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal can be very ambiguous: There are moments that point towards transnationalism, but there is also a great deal of economic nationalism. What makes this economic nationalism so bad? First, it means passing up on opportunities for transnational solidarity. Workers who are divided by race and by gender become easy prey for the bosses. Likewise, workers who are divided along national lines will not be able to challenge the bosses of the global economy. Second, economic nationalism is a path to disaster. A comrade wrote the following on the blog *Permanent Crisis*:

The politics of economic nationalism is the worst possible political path, far worse than the indefinite persistence of neoliberalism would be. Economic nationalism is the reactionary response to the economic dysfunction of neoliberalism. It would remake a global economy now marked by transnational flows, in which competition is primarily conducted between private companies, into a zero-sum struggle among states (and militaries) aiming to secure adequate markets and resources that they alone can exploit. That’s the short version of what led to World War II.³

Rather than destroying the ground on which we stand, threatening to undo the progress we’ve made under neoliberalism towards a borderless world, we must transform this terrain to overcome the limits that neoliberalism imposes upon the progressive promises that exist within globalization. This would not take us out of capitalism; that’s not currently possible. However, capitalist economic development can take a distinctly progressive form. An economic regime with widely shared prosperity is the true soil of radicalism because it provides a standard of living that allows huge numbers of people to look beyond the present and to imagine something entirely different, such as a post-capitalist future.

Margaret Power: When people say “Third Worldism” they often mean the identification with and support for the struggles of oppressed people in the non-industrialized nations of the world. The implication is that the people in the First World abandoned the struggles in their own nations to jump on a romanticized bandwagon of Third World revolutions; in the process they failed in their responsibility to organize revolutions in their own nations. This is not a view that I hold. In the age of imperialism, this division of the world between the First, Second, and Third Worlds is artificial, since the world is one and the struggles of its peoples have been and will continue to be contingent upon each other, although of course they exist and respond to very different conditions. By learning of the conditions and struggles in other nations we come to better understand our own.

I lived in Chile during the military dictatorship and I was active in the resistance against the dictatorship. Women’s liberation and gender relations were non-issues within Chile. When writing *Right-Wing Women in Chile*, I was interested in the following questions: Why did the majority of women in Chile vote against Allende and the Popular Unity government? Why did the majority of women in Chile support the military dictatorship? Part of the answer had to do with the failure of the Left: The Left prioritized the workers, which at that point were men, and it failed to prioritize (or even examine) women’s conditions, situations, needs, or desires.

It was in Chile that neoliberalism first took hold, in Chile that Milton Friedman and the Chicago Boys—and there were some Chicago girls—first put into practice the ideas and policies of neoliberalism that hold sway in much of the world today. In 1970 the socialist Salvador Allende was elected president of Chile. In response, the U.S. Government and the Chilean bourgeoisie determined that they would not permit the transformation of Chile into a socialist country. Instead they overthrew the democratically-elected government and installed a military dictatorship that lasted 17 years. Although neoliberalism has come to power in other places and in other ways, Chile gave us a taste of what it would take to impose neoliberalism. They were able to do so because the military coup that overthrew the Popular Unity government violently eliminated supporters of the government and terrorized Chileans. The Chilean armed forces then ruled for the next 17 years, ruthlessly and skillfully doing all they could to destroy the opposition. In addition, a number of Chileans opposed the attempt to build socialism in Chile and joined with the military. These were Chileans of all classes. What could have been seen simply as imposition of foreign programs was thereby converted into policies embraced by a sizable number of the Chilean population. Of course, the U.S. government threw its massive weight and resources into ensuring the success not only of the dictatorship but of its neoliberal economic policies as well. The violent defeat of the Chilean left sent shockwaves around the world. It ushered in neoliberalism in Chile and paved the way for the implementation of neoliberalism in much of the rest of the world.

“Identity politics” is often used to characterize—and, to some degree, disparage—people who point out that some aspect (or many aspects) of the specific forms of oppression they suffer are ignored by a left that prioritizes working class politics. This stems from a traditional Marxist viewpoint that defines the struggle along the narrow class lines, solely in terms of one’s relation to the means of production. Certainly, a person’s relation to the means of production is a critical factor that defines who they are, their role in society, their relation to others in politics—but it is *only one element* that defines us. We are all composed of multiple identities and relationships. Most of us, if not all of us, actually both oppress and are oppressed. Instead of defining some forms of oppressions and struggles as the key ones and others as mere expressions of identity politics, I suggest that all of these struggles help us to understand, and therefore

oppose, the multifaceted ways in which capitalism and imperialism operate. They also help us to understand the intersectionality of struggle. Far from serving to splinter, divide, or weaken the Left, they can and should serve to unite and strengthen it.

One example of what some might term “identity politics” is Chicago’s Puerto Rican Cultural Center, with which I work very closely. It’s located in a predominantly poor, working class neighborhood. In the 1970s the dropout rate was 71 percent. Poverty, gangs, and a lack of jobs characterized much of the community, and in many ways this is still true today. However, when Puerto Ricans began to organize against these conditions, they set up an alternative high school, initially with less than 20 students, now with over 200 students, most of whom will graduate and go on to college. Every student is taught Puerto Rican history and to be proud of themselves. To those who define this as either narrow nationalism or the exaltation of the individual, it is important to point out that only when a person has a positive sense of himself or herself can they envision a better world, can they view themselves as an actor, can they reject the definition that the capitalist and imperialist system has imposed upon them (as marginal, as unimportant, as unnecessary), can they become equipped with the tools to create the new world by defeating this system. What have mistakenly been called “identity politics,” in other words, are political programs and ideologies that transform the marginalized and the oppressed into political actors capable of contributing to the broad-based, multi-issued global vision of the Left, in this country and around the world. That is the kind of Left we need to successfully oppose not only neoliberalism but all expressions of oppression.

The totality and durability of neoliberal hegemony’s success are highly questionable. Chile’s massive student movement of the last few years offers eloquent testimony of this. This movement isn’t just about the needs of students. It’s a direct challenge to the whole neoliberal system, and it involves not only students, but also parents and the community, centering on education as a key component of neoliberalism. In the same way, the Occupy movement in this country and the nationwide protests against the police and against the torture of black and latino men and women also indicate that neoliberalism is actually not hegemonic, that neoliberalism will not prevail in the long run, although it may look a bit gloomy in the short term. We have learned a lot in the last 50 years. Material conditions for most people in this country and around the world are simply deplorable. We need to build organizations, to offer people positive visions of a different world, and to transform our ideals into reality.

Donald Parkinson: Two major misconceptions about neoliberalism are repeated on the Left. The first misconception is that neoliberalism is just an anomaly from capitalism as usual. The Keynesian welfare state, the postwar structure of capitalism of the 1945–1973 period, was the *real* anomaly of capitalism. Neoliberalism is more of a return to the phase of capitalism from around 1870 through roughly 1914. The other misconception is that neoliberalism is essentially an ideological phenomenon. Neoliberal ideology comes out of a *structural* change in capitalism; it is a result of the Keynesian welfare state falling apart and the crisis tendencies of capitalism reasserting themselves. The capitalist class embraces neoliberal politics because it is necessary for them to reproduce themselves as a class.

Neoliberalism is different from earlier periods of capitalism in that it sits on top of a defeated class movement. By 1945, the capitalist class had undertaken a project to integrate the working class into capitalism. This project began during the Popular Front period when the workers’ movement developed cross-class coalitions and embraced nationalism. This created a situation in which the working class was able to be integrated into the nation-state. After World War II this became extremely obvious. This isn’t to say that the working class became completely liquidated—that it was completely destroyed—but as an *independent political subject* the working class was liquidated in the post-1945 period. Because of this, capital was able to discipline the working class through the market in a more violent way than before, and this is what we are seeing in neoliberalism. Because it does not have its own independent political institutions, because it has been integrated into the state, the working class is not capable of fighting against this.

The New Left emerged in the Keynesian welfare state period of capitalism. There were two strains of the New Left. One strain, influenced by Marcuse, tried to find a new revolutionary subject that could replace the proletariat. They looked to student movements and to Third World movements, and there was a real material condition that caused people to embrace these movements: The working class was choosing loyalty to their national states far more than they were during earlier periods. Working class integration into capitalism wasn’t complete—there were wildcat strikes, there was class resistance—but there was no programmatic organization of the class. Another tendency of the New Left was an economicist, workerist tendency, visible in groups like the Workers World Party and the Progressive Labor Party. They stressed the need to go to the working class, to go to the factories, but they embraced a very rigid understanding of class. When many of the New Left students in the 1970s went into the factories to try to organize workers, for example, they cut their long hair and stopped smoking pot because they wanted to be like the workers.

The New Left existed in the shadow of the Popular Front era. There was much continuity between the Popular Front era of leftism and the New Left era: a naturalization of nationalism, an embrace of coalition-based politics, an embrace of single-issue politics, a rigid and economicist understanding of class, etc. Was the working class liquidated by this point? What about the strike events of May 1968 in France? The fact is that French workers went back to work for minor reforms on the orders of the French Communist Party. The class struggle hadn’t ceased to exist, but it didn’t become politically independent. Cross-class politics had become naturalized.

Thatcherism was a strong attempt to discipline the working class to the market, to cut living standards down. This affected the Left, which gave up on being against capitalism. This can be seen in the Left’s

embrace of economic nationalism and in the anti-globalization movement. The people who talk about open borders these days are not so much the Left as they are the neoliberals, who have co-opted the idea of internationalism. “Anti-globalization” tries to counterpose the sovereignty of the nation-state to the globalizing force of the market, but it doesn’t understand that overcoming capitalism has to be a global project. This is related to the idea that we need a return to the welfare state. Even Marxists will say that before we overthrow capitalism we need to rebuild the Keynesian welfare state. Meanwhile, localist, “anarcho-liberal” tendencies in the Left oppose a universalist project of human emancipation in favor of local projects of self-initiative, fetishizing decentralization. Also, a lot of leftists became cheerleaders for capitalism. You see this in *Spiked*, the Anti-Germans, accelerationism, in the idea that we need to embrace the progressive aspect of capitalism because the Soviet Union fell and nothing good can happen now so capitalism is the best game in town and we need to embrace it. The Left has absorbed the neoliberal credo of TINA, “There Is No Alternative.” These ideas became more and more popular, while the idea of a movement that unites the working class to address all forms of oppression and transform human society as a whole became less and less popular. This is how neoliberalism co-opts the Left.

Surrounded by this wreckage, the only option is to patiently rebuild class politics. This means rejecting cross-class politics. We got into this mess because the Left chose to unite with the bourgeoisie instead of actually developing working class politics independent of the bourgeoisie. This also means taking forms of gendered and racial oppression seriously, because if the Marxist left can’t address these issues then the neoliberal left will have hegemony in discourses about racial and gendered oppression. Taking these issues seriously doesn’t mean that we need to embrace Third World nationalism and some of the more bourgeois forms of identity politics.

Responses

WBM: Here’s an example of neoliberal hegemony: The more unequal society becomes, the more people talk about *education*. Margaret put a nice spin on the importance of education in the Puerto Rican community in Chicago, and I hope it’s true that graduates are coming out of this high school and combating capitalism! But, the standard account is that you want more kids to graduate from high school and go on to college so that they can compete for jobs in our economic labor market. Approximately 21 percent of the jobs in the U.S. right now require a four-year college degree. If we universalized going to college, 100 percent of people would have college educations and 21 percent of people would actually get to use them and get paid according to their value. Then, if you were a home healthcare worker, you could earn 19,450 dollars per year and you could think about the benefits of your higher education while changing bedpans. People in neoliberal societies like to talk about the importance of education because there is nothing egalitarian in the commitment to universal higher education from an economic standpoint. On the contrary, the whole point of this commitment is that it will legitimize the inequalities that it will then produce. This underscores the importance of unions, which are not committed to equality of opportunity and, above all, are *not* committed to inequality of result.

TC: The Marxist left needs to understand how ascriptive racial and gender identities are shaped and reproduced by forces of political economy. Identity politics treats the subordination of members of ascriptive identity groups in terms of personal prejudice, bigotry, chauvinism, etc. This is not a sufficient analysis of oppression. We need to recognize that impersonal market forces play an essential role in how these identities are constructed. I’ve learned a lot from Adolph Reed, Barbara Fields, and Matthew Fraser. Working class politics can address the subordination of people in ascriptive identity groups, but this is hard. On International Women’s Day I was on social media discussing the Bangladeshi garment workers’ movement. Something like eighty percent of workers in that industry are women. They’re highly exploited and abused and they work in death traps. People on social media replied that I was talking about a workers’ issue, not a women’s issue. This is an obstacle that we need to get beyond, but it is possible to show how working-class politics is relevant to the sorts of concerns that are now lumped under “identity politics.”

Pamela Nogales: By way of combatting historical amnesia: International Women’s Day was set up by Clara Zetkin, a communist, in 1911.

MP: You have to look at the *content* of education. The Puerto Rican Cultural Center’s high school is based on Freirean education policies. Among its inspirations is Juan Antonio Corretjer, a leader of one of the major left organizations in Puerto Rico. To say that they’re just getting students into college so they can be part of neoliberalism betrays a misunderstanding of what is going on there. Students are taught to be critical, to think of themselves as actors in a profound transformation of their community and their society. Whenever I’m feeling that nothing is going on I take inspiration from this.

The Chilean left, which was a deeply Marxist left, considered the revolutionary subject to be the worker and the worker in Chile was male. Only 19 percent of women worked outside the home, and of that percentage, most worked as maids in middle- and upper-class houses. Socialism was envisioned primarily as benefitting the male workers, who would possibly bring women along with them—women would get the benefits that were being extended to men. That was fairly typical for much of the Left. This is less the case today, in part because women have become a much larger proportion of the working class. The unions and movements that are exerting leadership in this country are no longer composed of white men but of immigrants and women, the most exploited and dynamic sectors of the working class today. You can’t understand this