The occupation of art's labor An interview with Julia Bryan-Wilson

Chris Mansour

Protesters in Zuccotti Park, New York, autumn of 2011.

On November 28, 2011, Chris Mansour interviewed Julia Bryan-Wilson, Associate Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art at the University of California, Berkeley and the author of Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era *(2009). Mansour and Bryan-Wilson talked about the history of the Art Workers' Coalition and its political relevance today, in light of the increasing involvement of artists and artistic strategies in the Occupy movement. What follows is an edited transcript.*

Chris Mansour: How did you come to study the artwork of what you call the "Vietnam War Era" and its relationship to the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC)?

Julia Bryan-Wilson: In the beginning—when I was still a young graduate student—I was drawn to a performance by the Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG) that occurred in the lobby of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1969. It was a bloody, visceral action that called for the immediate resignation of all Rockefellers from MoMA's Board of Trustees. At the time I was thinking about performance art as a form of protest, and how bodies in space—occupying space—might register certain activist concerns. Digging further into GAAG, I learned more about how they functioned as a direct action offshoot of the AWC. I wanted to do a project about the AWC, perhaps plumbing its history and laying out what really happened, because there had at that point only been scattered accounts, and most of them were by people who were involved themselves, so there was not much critical distance.

To me the AWC was a compelling, if short-lived, organization. I was also very intrigued by how many artists and well-known figures within the circle of contemporary art criticism participated in it. So it was not just people like Carl Andre and Dan Graham, but also critics such as Gregory Battcock, who was the editor of significant anthologies about "minimal art" and "idea art." Some critics like Lucy Lippard and what were referred to as "low level curators" also saw themselves working within and amongst the AWC. But my focus shifted the further I delved into my research, and increasingly moved away from a strictly chronological account of the AWC towards larger questions of the politics of artistic labor in this moment, a moment when labor itself was radically transforming because of a shift to a postindustrial age. To me the intriguing question became not, "What happened to the AWC?" but rather, "How did understandings of artistic labor change in the wake of the formation of the AWC?" Also, how was artistic labor and broader political activism in mutual dialogue for a few key figures, such as Lippard or Hans Haacke? With my book, *Art Workers*, I never set out to write the comprehensive history of the AWC, but instead to think about the redefinition of artistic labor through figures who are very influential in contemporary art history, whose work has never been substantially talked about in relationship to this activism.

CM: The main redefinition of artistic labor, as you elucidate in your book, starts with the distinct division between art and craft during the Renaissance, as articulated by the art historian Michael Baxandall. But art as a form of labor really comes into its own with the formation of capitalism as a social form. You reference a lot of Marx's writings on art as labor in your book to make this case. You also mention the Artist Guild in England in the 1800s, the Artists' Union in the 1930s, and so on. How did these diverse conceptualizations of art as a form of labor influence the AWC, and how do you see the AWC's understanding of art as a form of labor as differing from older aesthetic concepts?

JB-W: Those involved in the AWC had many different, and quite uneven, levels of sophistication regarding Marxist theory. Some of them knew nothing about Marxism, and were kind of going along with the flow or absorbing things that were ever-present in the atmosphere of the times. Others, like Carl Andre, were rather more serious students of Marxist theory. Of course, Marxist theories are also contentious and contradictory with regards to how art might or might not function as a kind of labor under capitalist forms of production. Even for Marx himself there is some friction regarding the role of patronage, creating a commodity for a potential market, and how making art might be understood as "free" or unalienated labor. So when artists turned to what was often half-understood Marxist theory in the late 1960s to call themselves workers, it proved to be fairly unstable ground.

But the people in the AWC did have some historical precedents regarding the relationship of art and politics: They knew something about the Russian Constructivists, who called themselves "art workers." They also knew a lot about the WPA moment and the Artists' Union in New York, because some of those involved were still around. But the AWC was founded in a totally different cultural context than the Artists' Union in the 1930s. The WPA employed artists under the rubric of a state- sponsored program. Artists in the 1960s–70s were working with strongly anti-governmental precepts, and it was difficult to make the WPA type of artistic labor fit their vision, since that was, in their minds, akin to making Social Realist murals under the guidance of a corrupt state. Those in the AWC wanted to be free to make recalcitrant art like Minimalism and Conceptualism. But they still wanted their work to be considered a form of labor.

CM: You also note that the members of the Artists' Union—who were employed by the government—were substantially wage laborers, whereas a lot of the artists in the AWC and those affiliated with it supported freelance workers. So was it the case that the kind of political mobilization that the AWC had to seek out was qualitatively different in nature than the Artists' Union given the structural changes of capital?

JB-W: It had to be different. The issue, which I even see today, is that there were calls to "occupy, organize, and unionize." However, one question the AWC could never quite resolve was, "Who are the employers that you are directing your demands to?" When artists were wage laborers in the 1930s, there was actually a target: the U.S. government. So the artists could actually go on strike and withhold their labor if they wanted. Artists had some collective agency, in part, because there was a body to which they were clearly accountable. A rather more volatile question is, "How is art productive in society?" If artists today withhold their labor, whom does it impact, exactly? The 1930s, the 1960s, and 2011 are crucially dissimilar. I hope the current Occupy movements continue to take into account the meaningful differences between these historical moments.

CM: What are the fundamental advantages and disadvantages you see in the strategies enacted by the present-day Occupy Museums movement? Is their historical imagination really following the footsteps of the AWC, or are the similarities unfolding haphazardly, or coincidently?

JB-W: For one thing, the AWC started in 1969 primarily around the issue of artists' rights in museums. It is important to know that the kernel of its idea came from artists who felt their work was being put in contexts

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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.

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that they disagreed with, and that they were not being compensated fairly for how their work was displayed and distributed. It therefore started with concerns about the procedures and policies in places like MoMA, which was of course a highly powerful institution even in 1969. However, the AWC moved quickly into hosting a series of open hearings where hundreds of people aired complaints precisely about the question of the relevance of museums, and about how to formulate a kind of political-artistic practice. People had extremely divergent ideas about this. Some people wanted the museum to wither away, others wanted alternative methods of art distribution to flourish, others wanted to infiltrate museums, and others just wanted "their piece of pie" and were happy if their work was shown at places like MoMA. So these disparate views were one of the fundamental contradictions that led to the AWC's demise.

On the other hand, museums were absolutely central to what the AWC did, including the question of racial diversity, which was one of the primary items on the list of the AWC's demands. The AWC called for greater representations of African American and Puerto Rican artists. A little bit later, the AWC also realized that gender inequities should be a focus of their activity. It also pushed for artists to be on the board of trustees of the museum, and advocated for greater transparency of museum procedures, and so forth. Part of my argument in *Art Workers* is that the artists of the AWC were a major part of instigating a broad institutional critique of how museums were run and managed. Given the centrality of the Vietnam War and the acceleration of anti-war activism at this time, it was easy for the AWC to realize that these issues were interconnected, in part because there were very powerful connections between museum trustees and the military-industrial complex, notably the Rockefellers.

rhetoric of the group is "anti-hierarchy." Do you see a lot of similarities between 1969–71 and Occupy Museums?

JB-W: Those similarities are some of the hopeful things about Occupy. I don't think we need a rigid voice from on high to say what the crucial issues are, what the goals should be, or to lend it more shape. Right now, the inchoate form of it is the most exciting aspect, because it's a space of potential and openness. Partly, what we're seeing is a new calibration regarding historical shifts in the economy, and I think artists feel the move towards precarity palpably—especially adjunct art teachers, or artists having to scrape together bare minimum wages to support their practice. At the same time, we need to maintain a thorough analysis of how art is different from labor. First of all, there is no one type of work and no one type of worker; these are not monolithic constructs. Simultaneously, art is itself a category that is fragile and tenuous. It is challenging to place someone who sells hand-thrown ceramics at a craft fair and is not part of the larger fine arts industry together with someone who is in the Venice Biennale: the markets are different, the value structures are different, the gendered valences are different, etc. So there is a huge range here, from what might be called the "low" to what we think of as the "high," in levels of production, levels of cultural capital, levels of access, and the question of free time. We have to be careful to not collapse all these things, even as it is helpful to consider the moments of vital connection between all modalities of making. The moniker "art worker" has always been contradictory. Art, in some regards, maintains a distinction from other forms of labor because of its unruliness. So let's not pretend that there is a total symmetry there. In fact, one of the helpful things about the phrase "art workers"

The Artists' Union on strike.

The AWC focused a lot of their demonstrations in the space of the museums, such as protests within the MoMA or strikes outside on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, trying to shut down the Met for one day after the U.S. bombings in Cambodia. But the history that has not been talked about as much are the moments that the AWC tried to think not only about art issues. Artists at that time also tried to strike with the postal workers, and marched for abortion rights, issues that were not actually in the purview of the art institution or the art world, but, rather, were about building broader solidarities. Those moments are intriguing, and, in some ways, these actions arguably diluted the art workers movement, but also invigorated it in important ways.

CM: When or why did political ideologies start to clash? You mentioned the instance when Robert Morris was interested in showing solidarity with the construction workers, but his interaction with them indicated a difference in ideologies. Could you elaborate?

JB-W: These questions are alive today: Think of the Occupy demonstration in solidarity with the Teamsters when art handlers at Sotheby's went on strike. These issues of labor and how art is a productive force in the economy are still central. But activist organizing around economic questions cannot be merely about asking, "When do I get paid?" That question is extremely narrow, and it is one that exposed the limitations of the Art Workers' Coalition. Obviously the issue of compensation and value is critical, and everyone should be valued for the work that they do. But if it comes down to just making lists of demands about individual needs, the critique is a lot less compelling, and not necessarily about how we re-envision society, inequality, and economics in the widest possible sense. What was interesting about the AWC was the sense that there were broader struggles that mattered alongside and in concert with the art industry—for example, the Vietnam War, and questions of race, class, and gender.

CM: This seems to raise the age-old problem of reform and revolution, and highlights the differences in ideology that encompassed the AWC. Do you think the AWC's downfall stemmed at least in part from the fact that it never really came to adopt a broad vision of how it sought to change society?

JB-W: There were all kinds of *ad hoc* committees and splinter groups forming, in part because the AWC failed to develop a self-critique of how it conducted its own business. There were a lot of black artists and white women who felt like it was becoming a platform for grandstanding by white male artists.

No less than in 1969–71, those questions about ideology and reform versus revolution are critical today. In addition, some of the people in the AWC were on the cusp of becoming famous, and as they began getting more institutional support, they felt less urgency regarding the questions of exclusion that had once compelled them.

CM: We could bring this back to what we see going on with Occupy Museums because a lot of the political might be that it contains within it some kind of explosive juxtaposition, some reminder that those words are held in tension, and I don't want to see that antagonism get smoothed over.

In the past, there was more clarity on the stakes of what was being fought for and who the logical targets might be. For example, it's curious that some people in Occupy care so much about museums or biennials, when museums or exhibitions are not necessarily where the production of culture is at its most visible or vital. The art world has really expanded, and there are so many other alternative sites where these issues are being addressed and debated. Museums used to be a central forum for questions of democratic ideals; they were seen as political institutions that have a trust or mission to a public—a pubic defined in its broadest and most optimistic terms. But hasn't that ceased to be so, for the most part? At this point the imbrication of corporate interest and art institutions is the air we breathe. Museums are no longer seen as sacred or vaunted institutions; they are hybrid spaces like any other, riven with compromise.

There are still pertinent questions that need to be asked regarding labor in the art world, of course. For example, it is crucial that people are now publicly asking what it means to be an art handler, to have your labor go unrecognized, when that work is critical to the function of the institution. And there is a push to think about art schools producing incredible student debt loans. I am not sure museums are the places where those questions will be answered. Museums are of course critical reservoirs of culture—I am not advocating that we ignore them or give up on them—but there are a lot of other spaces currently being activated that could also be addressed.

CM: This touches on the issue of what kind of culture is being produced and in what context. Today, for instance, the e-flux crowd seeks to politicize artistic labor by thinking of art in terms of "cultural production," with artists as "cultural producers," and this approach seems to have found a lot of traction in general. Arguably, this new vocabulary has broadened the category "art worker" in order to include forms of cultural production that are not relegated to the arena of fine art. How apt do you think the term "cultural producer" is as a means to politicizing artistic—or cultural—labor? Does trying to politicize all forms of cultural production in this way cast the net too wide, or is this a politically important move for today's conditions?

JB-W: As much as Dadaists and others tried to dismantle it in the 20th century, art is still a category that has a lot of built-in assumptions about taste, class, privilege, gender, and so on. So to widen art, to turn it into "cultural production" as a further expansion of artistic labor is, on the one hand, an important move that understands that culture gets produced in all kinds of forms. Cultural production could include musicians as well as teachers, and so is interestingly broad. Yet it doesn't have the same kind of political charge that "art workers" has. As I said, if we can recognize that "art workers" as a phrase is loaded with tension, rather than taking it at face value, then it has a certain traction. I think the term "cultural producer" does a different service, as it reminds us that culture is a specialized model of production.

The self-descriptor "art worker" has recently been given a new life among some artists who rally around the 99 percent. I am fascinated by how that phrase disappears and then reemerges in moments of crisis. Because of the Occupy Art and Labor sub-group, the collisions between art and work have a fresh resonance. So it will be curious to see what people do with the idea of the art worker, where it goes, how people make distinctions between artistic labor and the "creative class," which is also a category that has gotten a lot of attention recently.

CM: Artists like Carl Andre and Robert Morris were entrenching their art in something like a performance of social life that reveled in stereotypes of the working class. For example, Andre wore overalls and dressed like a "working class" laborer, while Robert Morris incorporated a lot of working class machinery and construction methods into his art production. What were these artists trying to convey?

JB-W: It was one of the basic shifts of the New Left to define itself in opposition to what they perceived the Old Left was about: rank and file, union politics, and organizing blue collar laborers. The New Left had a different focal point, which was more about students, continuing the work of the Civil Rights Movement, and questions of identity. I think people in the 1960s understood, rightly or wrongly, that working class folks were no longer the subjects of revolutionary change—because they were mollified by high enough wages, because of mass infantilism through popular culture, and so forth. That's the pessimistic and cynical view. There are all kinds of condescending texts you can read that were written in the 1960s, in brutally ugly terms, about who blue collar people ostensibly really are, and how they are no longer the figures to care about in terms of political organizing.

Art workers were navigating this complex terrain. In some ways, manufacturing was becoming less important in the U.S. economy—and terms like postindustrialism, immaterial labor, service work, and knowledge production were coming into focus. Some people in the AWC had nostalgia for the working class, because they were personally familiar with it, and their own affinities problematized any clarity they might have had *vis-à-vis* their own class status. This romantic affiliation with the working class is part of what made the moment so complicated. The idea that the artist is a working class man is a longstanding trope with the avant-garde, stretching back to Courbet, for example, or David Smith as a member of the United Steelworkers of America.

In the 1960s, however, there was growing confusion regarding who the working class actually was. Carl Andre in his overalls is a visible registration of the change of guard from the Old Left to the New Left. He's wearing his overalls, and he has this formal affiliation with the working class through bricklaying, but at the same time he is adamant that his work is artisanal. He wants to align himself with the working class, but at the same time he understands that his art has nothing to do with that kind of labor. Similarly, this sort of tension led to the break within Robert Morris's work circa 1970. He created a massive installation that was made with construction materials, in concert with construction workers. But then in the middle of his exhibit's run, there were the well-publicized "hard hat riots," where construction workers appeared pro-war and repressive, and Morris closed his exhibition down early as part of the Art Strike. The hard hat riots seemed to prove that the working class was promoting regressive demands. To me this illustrates the contradictions of that moment: Inserting whatever you think of as working class procedures into your art doesn't necessarily make you one of them.

CM: In the 1970s, after the deflation of the New Left's student movements such as the SDS, many students believed it was important to redirect their political attention towards more classic concepts of working class politics. However, if we consider what artists and art institutions were interested in politically, issues surrounding multiculturalism and identity politics really shaped the art world following the New Left in the 1970s. Can it be argued that this trajectory was even more of a divergence from grounding the art world's politics on class issues?

JB-W: It points to a rupture in a structure that was already somewhat untenable. Some in the AWC urged a feminist perspective or demanded racial inclusivity in art institutions, such as building an African-American wing of the Museum of Modern Art—which never happened. At the time, those political goals seemed a lot more achievable than they might now. Most people in the AWC were never comfortable with the idea of fomenting revolution alongside, say, postal workers. Most of their concerns actually revolved around institutional inclusivity. In fact, most postal workers, and what we might simplistically call the working class in general, did not want to have anything to do with the artists. There were aborted and failed attempts at solidarity by artists to include the working class proper in their struggles. When protesting at the Met, for instance, artists called out to construction workers to join them, but the construction workers never did. The workers felt that the artists did not speak to their own concerns, that the artists' political demands were not the same as theirs—it was never apparent how each group's burning issues related to each other. These moments of thwarted solidarity happened again and again, which brings up the issue of who is mobile enough to assume multiple identities, to move in and out of the category of "worker" at will. There is a privilege embedded in the decision to adopt that category as a performance rather than to see it as a category that exists within the capitalist system, one that hails certain subjects quite specifically and fixes them in place. It is like a costume that Andre could easily step out of. His level of cultural privilege and access is starkly unlike someone who is normally a mason.

CM: The other interesting thing about those whom you refer to as the Vietnam War era artists is their interest in trying to distance themselves from the avant-garde model, which also sought to politicize art. It is curious to see them shift away from modern avant-garde approaches, but nonetheless maintain an interest in drawing from its canon. For example, the Minimalists associated with the AWC were influenced by Constructivism. Why do you think there was this push–pull relationship towards avant-garde approaches during this era?

JB-W: The term "avant-garde" during this time fell out of favor in part because it was heavily associated with Clement Greenberg's ideas of Abstract Expressionism.

The Guerrilla Art Action Group (GAAG), the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC), and the Black and Puerto Rican Emergency Cultural Coalition protesting at the Museum of Modern Art, May 1970.

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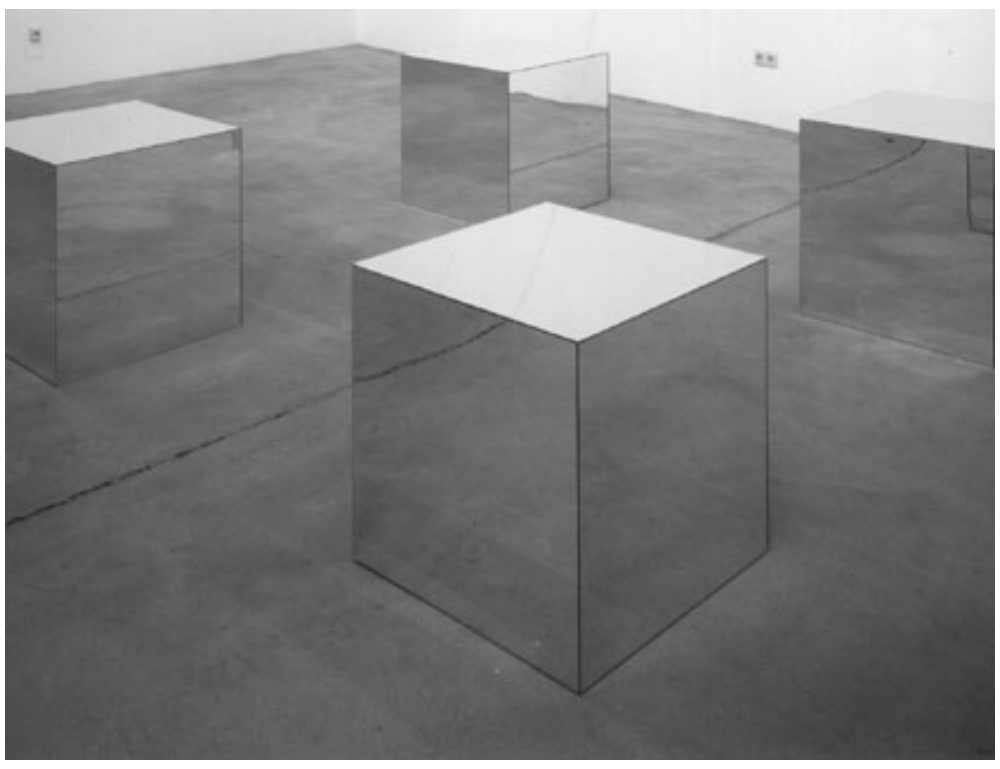

Robert Morris, *Mirrored Cubes*, acrylic glass mirrors on wood (four units), each: 53.3 x 53.3 x 53.3 cm., 1965.

By the late 1960s, there was an Oedipal desire to react against that category. The Minimalists and Conceptualists, for instance, really wanted to disavow the idea that the avant-garde was purely elite and removed from popular culture. Even though Conceptualism seems high-minded or esoteric today, its original impetus was meant to be populist and democratic. The idea was to get art out of the museums by recirculating it, having it easily available, and allowing art to be made by basically anyone. Greenberg's idea of the avant-garde cast a long shadow that these artists wanted to step out of. A bit later, in 1973–74, scholars affiliated with the AWC—Max Kozloff and Eva Cockroft—wrote exposés about how Abstract Expressionst works were used ideologically by the U.S. State Department during the Cold War, seeking to triumph the superiority of freedom of expression in the U.S. against the Soviets. Ironically, most people recognize a painting by Pollock as legitimate art, over a postcard by, say, the conceptual artist On Kawara, even though Lucy Lippard and others claimed that conceptual work had the potential to be more populist and democratic than Abstract Expressionism at that time.

According to some arguments, there was no real avant-garde in the second half of the 20th century. Benjamin Buchloh, among others, theorizes the "neo-avant-garde," positing that art in the last few decades is a form of return to an earlier moment, iterations with slight differences. Greenberg might have speculated that the cultural conditions that would make a true avant-garde possible have faded away, as there is no longer a distinct patron class and so on. In his essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" from 1939, Greenberg talks about the paradox that the ruling class supports the avant-garde, as artists are attached to the elite via an "umbilical cord of gold."[1] That structure has been so re-organized that it no longer makes sense to talk about the avant-garde in the present—it is a historical category and that historical moment has passed.

CM: It seems that the minimalist artists and conceptual artists were in some ways an avant-garde gesture themselves in trying to advance beyond the historical avant-gardes. Many of the arguments about the relationship of art and politics gained a new life for these practices. Lucy Lippard in her later writings said that art should be ditched altogether in order to mobilize it for political gestures and spreading information, which was precisely opposed to the modernist notion of keeping art autnomous from direct political activity. What was the relationship between art and politics during the Vietnam War era?

JB-W: The AWC did include artists like Leon Golub and Nancy Spero who were coming from the political figurative tradition in a recognizable way. But the AWC also consisted of artists who were deeply invested in abstraction and more obdurate, advanced forms that did not have a directly legible political content, even though they very much proposed a new ethics of spectatorship, which has been their lasting legacy. The classic example is Robert Morris's mirrored cubes from 1965. When you see them, you see yourself looking at them and in relation to other people looking at them in a specific space. This is distinct from modernist ideas of viewership, where you were supposed to be taken away from yourself or use the work as a window into another world, or where you were glimpsing the artist's subjectivity. Such conceptions of viewership have been theorized by Michael Fried in his essay "Art and Objecthood," where he explains his notion of "presentness." Fried thought that this kind of viewing experience with minimalist art was very agressive. It kept you very much aware of duration and the temporal aspect of spectatorship. I think Fried is right in claiming that minimalism creates these experiences, but I disagree with his negative judgment about it. This change in viewership is exactly what is transformative about minimalism. It paved the way for conceptualism and institutional critique, which recognizes that art is activated in distinct times and places and does not transcend its own context. It insists that the viewer bring something to the experience of art.

What I tried to do in *Art Workers* was to open up a lens to see how the works were part of the larger economic and political sphere. For instance, I researched where many of the materials minimalist artists used came from. Some of the magnesium plates that Carl Andre used for his floor sculptures were made by Dow Chemical, and Dow was under a lot of scrutiny in the 1960s for its terrible labor practices, and its connection to making napalm. Those factors of process and manufacturing can be highly veiled. They do not make themselves legible when you look at the art, but they are the necessary conditons for the art to come into existence. Such material conditions are important for art historians to investigate. We need to probe the sometimes literal, physical factors that go into the art's making, as part of global and socio-economic practices bound to capitalism. In one way Andre's floor sculptures drastically brought art down by elimiating the pedestal, providing viewers the ability to walk upon its surfaces, etc. All of these things are potentially transformative for the way art is typically made and displayed. You cannot, at the same time, look at his floor works and immediately claim them to be an overt protest to the Vietnam War. They do not work ideologically in that way. But, on the other hand, you could say they are political because they propose a certain kind of leveling and viewership, and because they take part in an economic material system in which the Vietnam War was deeply implicated. |**P**

1. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 10. Available online at <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html>.

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Platypus Review itself, trying to decide how they can insert their perspectives into Occupy. Their influence is already there, and so is Marx's analysis. But it simply does not dominate. When socialist papers make the statement that there needs to be a place for Marxism within Occupy, it seems like they are trying to subvert what is at its bottom an essentially plural movement. Occupy is based on a *methodological ethos*, not ideology. This is essential for the constitution of a new time narrative. Therefore, the Left should not get so caught up on the fact that the word "left" itself is not being used.

After the corporate era ends, and perhaps even after the fall of nation-states, the words "left" and "right" will still be useful since the cultural norms and views shaped by former politics will still be present. The common anarchist "post-ideological" claim that they are neither left nor right does not entirely make sense to me. However, it is possible that this will help clear the ground for a pluralistic reconstruction taking place within Occupy. In the same way that the French Revolution gave us these new terms, "left" and "right," Occupy may do the same.

After the corporate order falls, we will not reach the end of history. We will not come to something that we can somehow call "history" any more than we can call the period we live in today, history. We will meet new problems, have new ideas, and discover new ways of thinking. All major shifts of a new era take from the preceding era its ideologies and mixes and molds them into something new. Occupy is coming out of an era with material conditions that no longer fit the dominant narrative of struggle. It has answered the Platypus question of when a "significant left" will return, although perhaps not in the way many Marxists are happy with. It is self-evident that Occupy is rooted in ideas associated with what is called the Left. The movement does not identify itself with the term "Left," but this should not trouble us. Perhaps the term's abasement will aid in the feeling that something new has come.

It is worth considering Occupy as another major turning point in history. In response, we need to let go of alien narratives and work within the new paradigm shift. Perhaps only now, in and through Occupy, can we free ourselves from the zombie of the New Left. |**P**

1. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/>.
2. C. Wright Mills, "Letter to the New Left," *New Left Review*, I/5 (September–October 1960): 18–23.
3. See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

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In historical retrospect, Trotsky's view of the inevitability of the "road from capitalism through socialism to Communism," is more similar to that of Stalin and Mao than it is different from them. By embracing a Trotskyist paradigm of history and of the path to Communism, Rubin has uncritically adopted one version of the Leninist concept that differs in detail only, but not in essence, from that of Stalin and Mao, and—for that matter—with that of Marx and Lenin, too. That version is "socialism," what Marx called the "lower stage of Communism."

I suggest that this is the most serious theoretical failure not only of Trotskyism, but of all the Communist movements of the 20th century. Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Mao, and all those in their movements were convinced that socialism would be the first stage in the march towards Communism. It was a good guess. But we can now see that it was mistaken. As one saying, reportedly of Cuban origin, runs, "Socialism is the stage between capitalism and capitalism." Socialism, that is, leads to the reversion to capitalism, despite the best intentions of the best Communists.

Rubin's Trotskyism asks the reader to accept a myopic view of history. If, for example, the year 1933 "summons up two names," these would be Hitler and Stalin, not Hitler and Roosevelt. Stalin, along with Lenin and Mao, are the great Communist leaders of the 20th century. By the 1930s Trotsky led clandestine groups within the USSR and a small dissident Communist faction outside it. After the early 1920s Trotsky was no "fiery revolutionary," but an ineffectual political actor and writer. His attempts at Marxist theory were undermined by his growing obsession with Stalin, who had bested him in the leadership contests of the 1920s. Frustrated, Trotsky came to adopt the anti-Marxist "great man" theory of history, with himself as the "great leader" and Stalin as the "great villain." It is historically ironic that this stance was essentially no different from the anti-Marxist "cult of personality" around Stalin, which Stalin opposed, though not strongly enough.[10]

In the "Critique of the Gotha Program" Marx outlined a trajectory, one that Lenin adopted, of passing through a "first phase" or "lower stage of Communism," a.k.a. socialism (*ersten Phase der kommunistschen Gesellschaft*), which preserves "bourgeois right," to a "higher stage" (*höheren Phase*).[11] Stalin and Mao did not "betray" this vision, as Trotsky believed—they achieved it. This path to Communism failed.

Trotsky believed socialism could succeed, though under conditions—advanced industrial capitalism—that did not prevail everywhere. He asserted that the revolution could only be finally successful if one or more industrially advanced capitalist countries also experienced a revolution. Yet, first Stalin, and then Mao, showed that socialism could be attained in one country, through the combination of industrialization, collectivization, and mechanization of agriculture, even if that country had a predominantly agricultural, peasant economy. This, together with their recognition of the primacy of ideology over economic development in the modern world, was Stalin's and Mao's contribution to Marxism.

Yet it turns out that socialism does not lead to Communism. Instead it leads back to capitalism. And Communism, that utopian vision, is what the world's working class needs today as it always has. Marxists—we ourselves and others—must devise a new roadmap of how to create a Communist society once the revolution to overthrow capitalism has been victorious.

We can only do that through joining mass practice with theoretical work informed by an understanding of the history of the Communist Movement of the 20th century. To that end we must abandon the comforting delusion that the problem of how to build Communism has already been solved, whether by Trotsky, by Mao, by Lenin, or by Marx. Today this is the "tradition" that "weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." |**P**

1. Richard Rubin, "1933," *Platypus Review* 17 (November 2009). Available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2009/11/18/the-decline-of-the-left-in-the-20th-century-1933/>. Also see "The Legacy of Trotskyism" in *Platypus Review* 38 (August 2011), available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2011/08/05/the-legacy-of-trotskyism-2/>.
2. See Bernhard Bayerlein's encomium on Broué on the latter's death: "Pierre Broué (1926–2005)," *Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung*, 2006, 461–63. Bayerlein is a leading German anti-Communist, scholar-propagandist, and falsifier. Broué worked closely with Bayerlein on several research projects. Trotskyist historical journals published by major academic publishers include *Revolutionary History* and *Critique*.
3. Pierre Broué, "Trotsky et le bloc des oppositions de 1932," *Cahiers Leon Trotsky* 5 (1980) 5–37; J. Arch Getty, "Trotsky in Exile: The Founding of the Fourth International," *Soviet Studies* 38 No. 1 (January 1986).
4. John Costello and Oleg Tsarev, *Deadly Illusions* (New York: Crown, 1993), 283; Dmitry Volkogonov, *Trotsky: The Eternal Revolutionary* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 378–79; Pierre Broué, *Léon Sedov: Fils de Trotsky, Victime de Staline* (Paris: Editions Ouvrières, 1993), 210–11; Grover Furr, "Evidence of Leon Trotsky's Collaboration with Germany and Japan," *Cultural Logic* (2009): 162–63.
5. Furr, "Evidence."
6. Getty, *Trotsky in Exile*; Sven-Eric Holmström, "Trotsky, Hotel Bristol and the Scandinavian Periphery," *Cultural Logic* (2009).
7. Trotsky, "Problem of the Ukraine," *Socialist Appeal* (May 9, 1939); Trotsky, "The Independence of the Ukraine and Sectarian Muddleheads" (July 30, 1939) in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939–40* (New York, 1977) 44–54.
8. Talvisota. Kronikka. (Gummerus: Jyväskylä, Helsinki, 1989), 45 and 46; O.V. Vishlev, *"Operatsiia Utka," Nakanune 22 iunia 1941 goda* (Moscow: Nauka, 2001), 131–32.
9. Robert McNeil, "Trotsky's Interpretation of Stalin," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 5 (1961): 89.
10. See Grover Furr, *Khrushchev Lied: The Evidence That Every "Revelation" of Stalin's (and Beria's) Crimes in Nikita Khrushchev's Infamous "Secret Speech" to the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on February 25, 1956, is Provably False* (Kettering, OH: Erythrós Press & Media LLC, 2011), 7–11 and 223–37.
11. Marx's "Critique of the Gotha Program" is available online, along with supplemental texts, at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/>.

The New Left zombie is dead! Long live Occupy!

David Haack

IN THE *EIGHTEENTH BRUMAIRE*, Marx disagrees with Hegel's famous quote about history when he writes, "Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce..."[1]

Occupy is not a return to the New Left, a *farce* of the sixties. Usually history becomes codified once the right academic authorities have made their case most palatable to other academic authorities. However, Occupy exasperates this by being a horizontal movement that has avoided so far being pigeonholed by meta-narratives. Occupy is a meeting and molding of older forms of thought, which is why it is so important that it remains open. It marks a paradigm shift that is, even after the eviction of the park, still reshuffling time narratives.

In this piece, "time narrative" is a story about a time period told while this time is present. This is not the story dominant within academia. But it is the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. A dominant narrative about a time is different from an *ideology,* which would be the dominant *belief system* of a time. An "alien time narrative" is therefore the story of a past time reinserted out of context into the present as if the two temporal points were continuous, and even though there is a disconnect between the original commentator and present conditions. From the post-World War II years into the first decade of the 21st century, we saw the longest alien time narrative over a period of time. This was a form of narrative warfare that worked so effectively to define the concept of the Left that it constrained the Left from going beyond the discourse it had carved out for itself nearly 30 years before. The discourse of what is known as the "New Left" in part set itself up for this problem by calling itself "new." Because of its self-proclaimed novelty, it was hard for someone to further claim that they were part of a "new" New Left. New Leftists used the word "new" to try to get beyond what they saw as the politics of the "Old" Left that had evolved before World War II. This break is best exemplified by the Port Huron Statement and American sociologist C. Wright Mills's essay, "Letter to the New Left" (1960).[2] But by creating this conscious break, this generation of leftists used language that allowed their narrative to be projected decades into the future when the conditions they were addressing no longer existed. One element movements from 1955 to 1975 all shared was a focus on culture and tactics, in addition to a demand for what Richard Rorty has called "a less socially sadistic culture." While the New Left achieved valuable ends, as these politics dragged on through the '80s, '90s, and into the '00s, it aged into a far less useful set of concepts and into what is now the zombie of the New Left.

The experiences from a vastly different time cover up the incongruencies even within the same subject. During the first decade of the 21st century, anti-war activists compared the Iraq War to the Vietnam War, thus allowing for the continued domination of the narrative of the baby boomers. This nostalgic invocation of experience led to a blind narrative of time-warped empiricism. The slogans of the anti-war movement of the '00s avoided allusions to the roots of the war in a permanent war economy. Often the word "economy" was removed, and only the word "war" remained. In this way, discourse from the past helped paint over what is most important: that there is indeed a permanent war economy.

In *Capital*, Marx tells us that, if left to itself, capitalism will lead to the consolidation of firms until they become larger and larger. The corrosive laws of competition will make life worse (relatively, not absolutely) for the majority. After 1973, with the transition from Keynesian to neoliberal capitalism, from rigid to flexible accumulation, we saw this formula mirrored. A middle class sank into the lower class. The result was that the period of working class "prosperity" was effectively over. A huge global proletariat emerged in what we in the West call "sweatshop labor," a phenomenon without parallel in the '60s.[3] While these changes occurred, further action was suppressed by the presence of the alien time narrative of the New Left.

Occupy Wall Street has freed us from the grips of the New Left and the paralysis that has prevented the arrival of a new movement aligned with the present. Occupy presents an opportunity to once again relate to our moment. This has occurred in two intertwined ways: tactics and culture. Culturally, all it took was for the Occupy movement to target Wall Street with populist rhetoric. The movement made the simple complex, and as a result it created a pluralistic and deeply egalitarian space. The simple phrases exemplary of this approach are "Occupy Wall Street!" and "We are the 99 percent."

These two slogans were enough to end the cultural focus of the last 40 years. A myriad of different sub-narratives appeared under them, awe-inspiring in their multiplicity. Occupy is not just another call for a less socially sadistic culture with the class dimension drained out of the analysis—characteristic of most of the New Left and the whole period after it. It has an economic and populist focus that has galvanized a cultural shift in America. This could happen because the dam that had kept the alien narrative in place was not strong enough to hold back the weight of the economic recession in addition to Occupy's novel tactics. Discourse and conditions finally met once again after a 30-year disconnect.

The different tactics aligned with these new conditions created a triangle: time narrative, tactics, and conditions. The tactics were wildly different than what the zombie New Left had supported. Instead of picking a day, getting a permit, and fighting a particular cultural battle (e.g., "End War," "End Racism"), Occupy did not seek anyone's permission, thus remaining deliberately illegal. And, despite all odds, people camped out and stayed in one place. This was not a one-day affair, rather it was far more permanent and drastic. It was in no way the same as the temporary college takeovers of the '60s or the "People's Park," a park re-appropriated from the University of California, Berkeley in 1969. The occupation of Wall Street was fundamentally different. By taking Zuccotti Park, OWS took a space that was open to the public, but owned privately—a great metaphor for neoliberalism right in the heart of the symbolic home of finance capital. In occupying Zucotti Park, OWS protested against finance capital, a kind of capital that has been empowered through the shift from rigid to flexible accumulation. In this way, Occupy is a movement that fits the times and has helped create time narratives that do as well.

Occupy's openness is also in no way a return to the '60s. Douglas Miller's *New York Times* Op-Ed best expresses what Occupy is not. With the New Left in mind, Miller writes that Occupy's horizontal process could lead to what he calls "extremists"—insert "Weathermen"—taking over. But the horizontal process does exactly the opposite. It discourages any unpopular faction's interests or narratives from being pushed through unilaterally and, furthermore, is more clearly worked out than '60s "direct democracy" was. People involved in the present movement are well aware of the issues from the New Left and understand that their failure then was largely a result of the lack of proper definition and process. From the start, Occupy did not make these mistakes. Occupy set up a system that, by having a clearly defined process, will avoid SDS's 1969 convention. This is why there is no need for a defining document explaining what Occupy is since this has already been done through praxis and a clearly defined process. Although the '70s saw the initial formation of something like a consensus process in response to the splits of the '60s, this process was never as clearly defined as it is within Occupy.

The Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, has written that Occupy has retained a "carnivalistic '60s element." On the first day in New York, September 17, this was certainly true, but as Occupy developed it started to lose this carnivalistic element as an overt feature while allowing for this strain of activism to develop internally. By merging with an already more serious and economically focused protest environment, this form of protest politics turned into a comedic release in a populist environment with a different tone to it.

The Occupy movement has, however, retained some elements of the '60s. These are the things about this era that I, and many others, see as overwhelmingly positive: Occupy continues to see fighting racism, heterocentrism, ageism, sexism, ableism, and cisgender privilege as important battles. In short, Occupy has left behind the negative elements of the alien narrative while upholding, and pushing even further, the positive demands fought for by the New Left.

One form of thought that has had a considerable influence on Occupy is anarchism, but this too has undergone a transformation in and through the Occupy movement. During the last ten years, anarchism has been mainly preoccupied with culture. This focus was an attempt to push politics even further in the direction of what the New Left established. The politics of this counter-cultural anarchism supported small-scale cultural production. Within the movement, anarchism shifted the focus to economic issues, thereby shedding its earlier counter-cultural form. The new focus of this form of anarchism is economic as well as populist. Populist appeals counter the fetishization of small-scale production to create the perfect balance of plurality and focus. This is why anarchism in Occupy did not do what all other politicized counter-cultures do, retract into themselves and shut out outside influence.

There have been some writers on the Left who see anarchism as the primary ethos in Occupy Wall Street. But really it was a coming together of progressive, "left-ish," economic reformism with anarchism that helped shape Occupy in its early days, coupled with David Harvey's and Henri Lefebvre's respective views. Marxists and unaffiliated socialists were also part of the movement from the beginning. A dialogue between Marxists and anarchists is as old as the ideologies themselves are, with both originating from post-1789 France. This dialogue is now going through yet another round of mediation and re-negotiation in and through Occupy.

This is why I think it is problematic when I see Marxist or socialist writers in socialist newspapers, or the

"Long live Occupy!" continues on page 4

Learning from the Communist Movement of the 20th century A response to Richard Rubin

Grover Furr

RICHARD RUBIN ARGUES that "the 1930s were a decade of defeat for the Left." His essay, "1933," in the *Platypus Review* issue on *The Decline of the Left in the 20th Century*,[1] is an idealist abstraction from real historical events, one founded on an uncritical acceptance of Trotsky as a significant historical thinker and actor and a corresponding Trotskyist caricature of the Soviet Union, Stalin, and Chinese Communism. Consequently, the real history of the Left in the 20th century is absent.

The 1930s were, in fact, a decade of historic advance in the USSR, China, and even in the USA. The forces for which the 1930s were a decade of defeat were mainstream bourgeois capitalism, social-democracy, and, of course, Trotskyism.

To say, as Rubin does, "The period 1933–1940 is the last attempt of classical Marxism to rearm itself against the double menace of Stalinism and fascism," is an atrocious falsehood, a capitulation to the anti-Communist logic of Trotskyism—a logic recognized and embraced since the 1930s by overtly pro-capitalist anti-Communists, who regularly cite Trotskyite historians and their works as "respectable" secondary sources. Trotsky played a vital role in the Revolution of 1917 and an important role in the Russian Civil War, but not after that in the Comintern. Moreover, contra Rubin, Trotsky and Benjamin were not figures "of their time, but also out of their time, figures *um neunzehnhundert*," rather these figures, whose deaths coincided in 1940, had no impact on world politics, the class struggle, or the future of the Communist Movement.

"Stalinism" as such never existed. It was simply an epithet that applied to the overwhelming majority of the international Communist Movement that rejected Trotsky and looked to the USSR and the Comintern for leadership in liberating the working class. Some small factions looked towards Trotsky, but these never amounted to anything. Tellingly, Rubin fails to consider what this insignificance implies about Trotsky or Trotskyism.

It was the USSR that "spoke to the utopian possibilities" of Communism. Between 1917 and 1960 the eyes of the world and the hopes of the working classes everywhere were on the USSR. Trotskyism was itself a "menace"—though on an incomparably smaller scale than Nazism.

In the grip of the Trotskyist myth Rubin says, "Trotsky understood Stalinism better [than the Stalinists]." It would be more accurate to say that, "Stalin understood Trotskyism better than the Trotskyists," as anti-Communism can also assume a "left" disguise. A number of anti-Communist "historians," such as Robert Conquest, Robert Service, Orlando Figes, Timothy Snyder, Oleg Khlevniuk, Robert Tucker, and Paul Gregory, to name just a few, embraced Trotsky or Trotskyists as allies. In the uniformly anti-Communist field of Soviet history, Trotskyist scholars and journals are respected, even honored.[2]

It is significant that Rubin effaces more recent research into Trotsky's biography and activities during the 1930s, such as the following:

- Trotsky's "bloc" in 1932 and thereafter with the Rights, Zinoviev and Kamenev, and other clandestine oppositional factions, exactly as he was later charged in the Moscow Trials.[3]

- Leon Sedov's embrace of the tactic of assassination—in Russian, "terror." Sedov, Trotsky's son, was his father's representative in continental Europe.[4]

- Trotsky's collaboration with Germany and Japan.[5]

- Trotsky's deliberate lies to his followers in his *Bulletin of the Opposition* and to the Dewey Commission hearings in 1936.[6]

- His advocation of Ukrainian independence in May and July 1939 when—coincidentally?—the Nazis *and* the Polish government were planning to separate Ukraine from the USSR to create a fascist nationalist state.[7]

- Schemes by both the Finns and the British in December 1939 to January 1940 to invade the USSR and install Trotsky in the "provisional government" to stimulate a civil war.[8]

Of these statements only Trotsky's alleged collaboration with the Axis is at all controversial. The rest have long been known to serious students of Soviet history. Taken together, the works cited above by Broué, Rogovin, Getty, and Holmström demonstrate that Trotsky's writings in the 1930s involved falsifications and deception. But who were these lies intended to deceive? His followers, who believed that Trotsky was telling the truth, for example, about the Moscow Trials, paid dearly with their lives in the USSR in 1937–38.

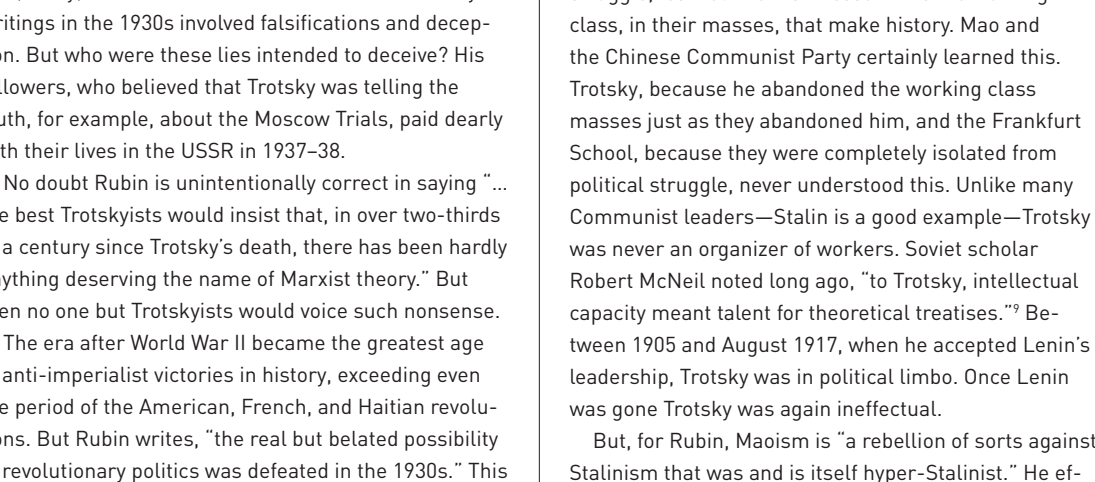
No doubt Rubin is unintentionally correct in saying "... the best Trotskyists would insist that, in over two-thirds of a century since Trotsky's death, there has been hardly anything deserving the name of Marxist theory." But then no one but Trotskyists would voice such nonsense.

The era after World War II became the greatest age of anti-imperialist victories in history, exceeding even the period of the American, French, and Haitian revolutions. But Rubin writes, "the real but belated possibility of revolutionary politics was defeated in the 1930s." This nonsense reflects Trotsky's economic determinist focus on the industrial West. Trotsky's, and Rubin's, theory cannot accommodate the real revolutions in China and Vietnam. The USSR did not decisively turn anti-revolutionary until Khrushchev embraced a demonized interpretation of Stalin that was not only similar to Trotsky's views, but was in part borrowed from him. Blind to the successes of the Communist Movement after the 1930s, Rubin can see only failure. In reality, we need to learn from both failures and successes.

Few ideas in Marxist history have been so refuted by reality as the theory of "Permanent Revolution." It amounted to an intelligent, though dogmatic, speculation when Trotsky originated it in the aftermath of 1905. Thereafter Trotsky wrote no more Marxist "theory" worthy of the name. Stalin and Mao certainly did, though of course it would be a serious error for Marxists to be uncritical of them, or of any aspect of the Communist legacy.

Neither Trotsky, who abandoned the working class masses, nor, obviously, the members of the Frankfurt School, who were completely isolated from political struggle, learned the main lesson: it is the working class, in their masses, that make history. Mao and the Chinese Communist Party certainly learned this. Trotsky, because he abandoned the working class masses just as they abandoned him, and the Frankfurt School, because they were completely isolated from political struggle, never understood this. Unlike many Communist leaders—Stalin is a good example—Trotsky was never an organizer of workers. Soviet scholar Robert McNeil noted long ago, "to Trotsky, intellectual capacity meant talent for theoretical treatises."[9] Between 1905 and August 1917, when he accepted Lenin's leadership, Trotsky was in political limbo. Once Lenin was gone Trotsky was again ineffectual.

But, for Rubin, Maoism is "a rebellion of sorts against Stalinism that was and is itself hyper-Stalinist." He effaces the historic contributions of the Chinese Communist Party to the Communist Movement in the 20th century by reducing it to "Stalinism." He follows Trotsky's Manichaean view according to which everyone who did not agree with him, Trotsky, was a "Stalinist."



Notable People from the Land of the Soviets, painted in 1939 by V.P. Efanov, 11 x 17 meters. It was displayed in the USSR pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City. It was destroyed in World War II.

Rubin admits that his vision "does not partake of Trotsky's revolutionary optimism," concluding "the optimism of classical Marxism was once historically justified, but now, alas, is not." Why call this optimism "Trotsky's"? Tens of millions of ordinary Communists the world over had such optimism!

"The Communist Movement" continues on page 4