History and possibility: An interview with Noam Chomsky

Vaughn A. Cartwright and Emmanuel J. Tellez

On July 29, 2010, Vaughn Cartwright and Emmanuel Tellez interviewed Noam Chomsky, prolific author and activist, on behalf of the Platypus Review*, to discuss the history of the Left and the state of radical politics today. What follows is an edited transcript of the interview.*

Vaughn Cartwright: In our society, it behooves intellectuals to avoid radical opposition to capitalism and the state. This was as true in the 1960s when you wrote your famous essay, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," as it is now. In that essay you argue that intellectuals collude in a mass deception that serves the interests of institutions and the state. Have intellectuals fully discharged their responsibility by breaking with this collusion by telling the truth, as they understand it? Does "truth-telling" have the potential to radicalize people today?

Noam Chomsky: Well, the title of that article was intended to be double-edged. There is an official responsibility of intellectuals to be servants of power. That's not just in the United States, but everywhere. But there is also a moral responsibility which is quite the opposite. In fact, you can only fulfill your moral responsibility by rejecting your official responsibility. It's rare to find exceptions to this at any time in history. Remember that history is written by intellectuals, so they come out looking pretty good. But the ones the historians talk about are mostly the dissident intellectuals. They didn't look good at the time, but were persecuted in one way or another. Later, maybe centuries later, they are vindicated. That goes back as far as you like to go. There are very few counterexamples.

Emmanuel Tellez: But in that essay you also say there is an information glut in which the truth can simply get lost, so that telling the truth is not simply a matter of truthfully reporting experience.

NC: Well, partly, there's an information glut, but it's also something that Orwell actually described rather well. You all read *Animal Farm* in elementary school, but chances are you did not read the introduction to the book, because it wasn't published. While it may not be one of Orwell's greatest essays, it is worth taking a look at. In it, he says the book is basically a satirical account of the totalitarian enemy, but that the English shouldn't feel too complacent, because free England is not so different. In England ideas can be suppressed without the use of force. He gives a couple of rather weak examples, but then expands on his point in a few lines which more or less capture everything. Part of the reason, he says, is that the press is owned by wealthy men who have every interest in suppressing certain ideas. But the other reason, which I think is much more important, concerns education. You go to the best schools and have instilled into you the understanding that there are certain things that it just wouldn't do to say, think, or see. That's what you find all the time. Currently, for instance, there's this big furor about the Wiki leaks, which are interesting, but not explosive in my opinion. At the same time as the Wiki leaks furor rages on in the newspaper, there is a story that goes entirely unreported in the United States. It was reported in England, but even there it didn't arouse much interest. It was a story about a study reported in one of the medical journals that investigated the aftermath of the Battle of Fallujah, the Iraqi city the U.S. attacked in November 2004. The story reports dramatic increases in infant mortality, cancer, and leukemia in Fallujah, exceeding even those reported by survivors of the atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Amy Goodman reported it on *Democracy Now!* but it wasn't in the newspapers—because that's the kind of thing you're not supposed to hear or say.

ET: People can know that atrocities were committed in Fallujah, but without any way of situating the bare facts, the response seems limited to moral outrage. Arguably, don't we have more truth and less understanding today than we did when you wrote "The Responsibility of Intellectuals?" How do we account for the persistence of the crisis in the face of readily available "dissident" information? Is the moral responsibility you speak of sufficient?

NC: The Internet now allows dissident voices to be heard and offers a wider range of perspectives and information as well. But for the large majority of the population that doesn't mean much. People do not have the time or background even to know what to look for, and we should not underestimate the effectiveness of the dedicated programs of atomization of the population. Anyone in the sciences knows that what you can do alone is limited, and easily strays into error. Serious work generally requires interaction among a community of researchers. The same is true in trying to understand something about what is happening in the world. One of the reasons for the intense hostility to unions on the part of business and other power centers is that they are a democratizing force, offering ways for working people with limited resources and opportunities to join together to develop their own ideas and a sensible framework for interpreting what pours out in an incessant flow from the ideological institutions. That's only one of the many devices employed to create what is an ideal society from the perspective of the masters: one in which the basic social dyad is you and the tube. So the term "readily available" is accurate in a narrow sense, but availability in principle does not suffice for understanding and action. Moral outrage in itself is not worth much unless it leads to significant action, as it often has, and does now, too. That's how the world slowly and haltingly becomes a better place, though not without regular reversals.

ET: What I have experienced, as far as telling people the truth, is that it actually makes people feel less powerful. In other words, the resistance is deeply psychological and not merely acquired by training, so to speak.

NC: That's true. It should make people feel that there is more they should do when, as mentioned before, toxic effects in Fallujah are worse than the fallout from the atom bomb.

VC: I'd like to turn the question of internationalism and the Left in the 20th century. Internationalism is a crucial aspiration for the Left. Marx suggested that there is little chance for one country to overcome capitalism, war, and other profound limitations on human freedom without the spread of social revolution throughout the world. Internationalism designates collaboration among politically organized workers across national borders. But, beyond this, what role should internationalism play in the Left today? Is internationalism even necessary for overcoming capitalism? The question seems particularly pressing at a time when U.S. imperialism claims for itself the mantle of internationalism and the defense of human rights and has done so, it must be said, with a certain plausibility.

NC: In the United States it would be possible to do without international support. In Bolivia, on the other hand, you need international support. It's a matter of power. Every labor union, as you know, is called an international, but none of them are international, they're all organized along national lines. But there are, in my opinion, emerging signs of the first ever true International. The first four were not genuinely international, I don't think. The First was strictly Europe-based, and was more or less destroyed by Marx, who didn't like the fact that the French anarchists were getting too powerful. The Second International collapsed in the First World War. The Third International was an offshoot of the Russian state. The Fourth International was what it remains, marginal. But the World Social Forum is a real international and it has prospects. Maybe they won't be realized, but it succeeds in bringing people together from all over the world, huge numbers of people from every walk of life. It usually meets alongside Via Campesina, an international peasant organization, and includes environmentalists, farmers, and activists of all kinds. It is constructive, too. I have been there a couple times. They have serious discussions and by now they've branched out all over the world into regional social forums. There was just one in Detroit. I heard from people just this week that there's one in Boston. From these beginnings, it could grow into a real bottom-up international, not something created from the top to fulfill some power project.

As for successful international activities, take the case of Bolivia, which may in fact be the most democratic country in the world today. Its majority indigenous population basically took over and elected somebody from their own ranks to take on serious issues. It began with the water wars in the year 2000. The World Bank, the treasury, and the Bechtel Corporation were trying to privatize water, which may sound nice in some economics seminar, but it means people end up having no access to water. There was a lot of protest that grew into a virtual insurrection. And there were a couple of very media-savvy people there who managed to turn it into an international event, one that happened to coincide with the big protest in Washington against the World Bank, as I recall. It succeeded in linking up with the demonstrations in Washington. They also had demonstrations in other countries, at Bechtel corporate headquarters, etc. This was all timed with the peaking of the actions in Cochabamba, Bolivia. The international combination of events made a big difference. Bechtel fled the country and the World Bank pulled out. It's interesting to see the reactions—I was just down in Southern Colombia last week and in one of the peasant villages the government's also trying to privatize water. But the government has learned from the Bolivian experience. So, the government is not doing it publicly anymore. They are trying to pick off small regions one at a time.

VC: The First, Second, and Third Internationals united parties which, in one sense or another, advanced some

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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.

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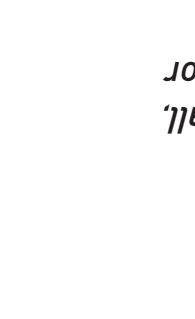

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form of labor politics. It was in this context that the struggle between Marx and anarchism took place—both Marx and Bakunin advanced forms of labor politics. The World Social Forum, by contrast, does not claim to embody a labor international, but operates as a minimally organized "movement of movements," which, at most, might claim unity in defense of the rights and claims of the poor and underprivileged. Given the move away from labor politics, do you agree that the World Social Forum represents an evolution in political internationalism?

NC: That's partially correct but not completely so, at least if by labor you have in mind the industrial proletariat. Bakunin by no means restricted his concerns to these sectors of the laboring classes. Marx, particularly in his later years, was very much interested in Russian peasant society, and studied intensely the vast flood of information produced by Narodnik investigators. He also seems to have shared in part their beliefs about the revolutionary potential of the peasant masses. But it's true that contemporary social movements, as illustrated by the World Social Forum, have carried further concerns for the rights of people who are oppressed, including those who are not poor. The women's and gay rights movements, for example, extend well beyond. These are all healthy tendencies in principle, though they can be counterproductive too if crucial class issues are marginalized.

VC: In a 1987 interview you did with James Peck published in *The Chomsky Reader*, you said that, "[Given imperialism's effect on developing nations] it is hard for people with libertarian commitments to support Third World struggles. I'm not saying that the reluctance is justified, but it is understandable." So, in cases where leftists in a developing nation hold a political philosophy incompatible with those of many First World leftists, what approach should be taken?

NC: South Vietnam is a good example. The U.S. actually attacked South Vietnam, that was the main target of the assault, and it won the war there. It destroyed the National Liberation Front. What began as a peasant-based movement with a lot of local participation got smashed and the North Vietnamese army took over installing a kind of Stalin-style dictatorship. That was a big victory for the United States. What they were worried about was precisely the libertarian tendencies of the NLF, and they were destroyed. Something similar happened in the anarchist revolution in Spain, which is the peak of libertarian success in important respects. There, the communists, fascists, and liberal democracies combined to make sure they destroyed that revolution. They recognized a political virus that might spread. In the Spanish revolution there was a strategic proposal that conceivably might have worked to get around this. Italian anarchist intellectual Camillo Berneri thought that in Spain they would never succeed in winning the war, so he urged a dual strategy of guerrilla warfare. He also urged support for the revolutionary struggle in Morocco, the country from which most of Franco's troops came. There was revolutionary struggle of a kind going on there, and he argued that the anarchists in Spain ought to be supporting that in order to undercut the social base of the Franco armies. That movement was not very radical, seeking basic land reform and the like. Needless to say, the French and the English were strongly opposed. This I think would have been a good strategy, but it would have depended very heavily on international solidarity in the major imperialist states.

ET: So, you would say that leftists in other countries were largely opposed to the libertarian project being advanced by many in Spain at the time?

NC: Most leftists at that time were communists. They were the ones crushing the revolution in Spain. They were more opposed to the revolution than anyone else and for good reason. There was a good deal of violence against the anarchists. The communists were the party of the police. It is the same reason Lenin destroyed the soviets. Communists don't want popular rule. Both Lenin and Trotsky wanted centralized control.

ET: How, then, would you make sense of the failure of the anarchist's direct appeal to the Spanish workers in the 1930s?

NC: I don't think this is an accurate portrayal. Industrial Catalonia was a centerpiece of the anarchist revolution, before it was crushed—right there, in fact.

VC: Going back to something that was brought up earlier, how do we evaluate anti-imperialist movements, given their political divergence? How do we make sense of competing anti-imperialist politics around the globe? Can there be a reactionary opposition to imperialism?

NC: Certainly, there can be. The clerical regime in Iran is anti-imperialist, but probably worse than the pro-imperialist regime it replaced. So, of course, you have to be careful when you try to defend some population from attack, since they're usually under attack by their own government as well. One's analysis must have finesse, so you're not supporting the internal destructive forces. You can oppose the Iraq war, but not support Saddam Hussein, though these are not always easy paths to tread.

ET: So what are the criteria for evaluating such instances?

NC: There isn't any algorithm, you just have to work it out in each case. But that's what human life is like, you have to make decisions in uncertain situations. You may have some principles, but you might not know how they apply.

ET: But then what are the principles of the Left on this matter? What ideas are central to leftist politics and in what way have they changed over the course of the 20th century? How do you see yourself as a part of that transformation?

NC: Well, the terms of political discourse have been so debased that it's hard to use these words. For example, the Communist Party was called "the Left," though, in my view, they were utterly right wing. When the Soviet Union collapsed, I wrote a short article that none of the left journals wanted to publish, in which I said it's a small victory for socialism. One of the main anti-socialist forces of the 20th century was destroyed. There was, of course, a libertarian left, which criticized the Bolsheviks from the left. These included some Marxists. There are shared ideals, of course, but they are so general that everybody will say they accept them. But the question is: who really does? So you want freedom, you want justice, you want equality, you want opportunities, you want to eliminate hierarchy and domination, and so on. Those all should be ideals of the Left, but you could probably find Glenn Beck espousing them too.

ET: Given the slide into barbarism and oligarchy in post-1989 Russia, does your positive judgment of the collapse of the USSR still stand? How do you make sense of the steady waning of socialist and left politics during the post-Cold War era?

NC: On the latter question, there has been a waning of "left politics," but not, I think, of socialist concerns and aspirations. True, the gross caricature of socialism in the Soviet system has lost its allure, thankfully, but again that seems to me a *small* victory for socialism, as I wrote at the time. The waning of left politics is a much broader phenomenon, long preceding the collapse of the USSR, and hardly affected by it, I think. Across the mainstream spectrum there was a very harsh reaction to the democratizing and civilizing effects of the activism of the 1960s. Liberal internationalists—basically, those who formed the Carter administration—called quite openly for reversing what they called the "excess of democracy" as the majority of the population became organized and active in entering the political arena and pursuing their interests there, and also ensuring that institutions responsible for "indoctrinating the young" pursue their tasks more forcefully. Towards the right end of the spectrum a much harsher stand was taken against dissidence, in hopes of restoring obedience and conformity.

VC: Do you see the Left advancing a particular economics, for instance state planning? Or some particular relationship between how food and other goods are produced and politics?

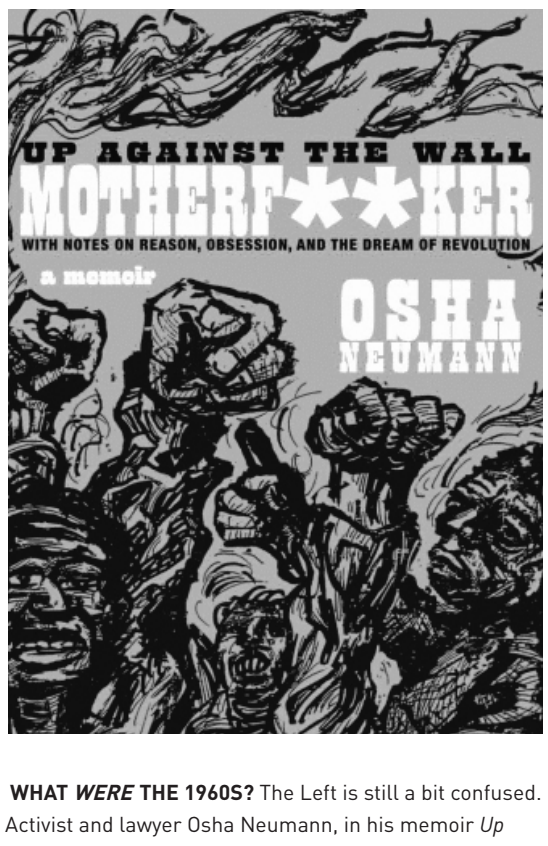
NC: Oh, absolutely. Food sustainability is extremely important. In fact, we don't have to talk about that abstractly. It's very concrete. Take, say, Haiti. Why is Haiti such a total disaster? Part of the reason was that there were a couple of countries, first France but particularly the United States, that in the last 30 or 40 years very consciously tried to destroy the agricultural system. This was justified on principles of "comparative advantage," which for Haitians means making baseballs, knitting garments, and stuff like that, not producing their own rice. That's better served by highly subsidized American imports which are forced on them. It all goes back to French colonialism and the end result, of course, is that the Haitians can't feed themselves. But if there is an earthquake, it is a monstrous catastrophe. What we see elsewhere is no different. Take India, which is highly praised for its neoliberal reforms. I've been to the research labs at Hyderabad, and they do look better than the ones here. On the other hand, since the neoliberal reforms started, average food consumption in India has dropped considerably, because the same programs that were building those fancy labs in Bangalore are eliminating support for the rural poor. There are tens of thousands of peasants once engaged in agricultural production, production of fruit, and so on, who now flow into the cities, which in turn results in all sorts of horrors. These are real problems. It is a problem right here, too. I mean, why should we be importing food from thousands of miles away? Food isn't produced in an accessible way. There is too much organization and it's not sustainable. Whether it is a rich country like here, or a poor country like India, food is a serious concern.

ET: Among other things, Platypus is interested in reconsidering the history of the Left in light of the present. This perspective prioritizes the role of the historical consciousness of the Left. In what way does history matter, and how does historical consciousness play a role in your work?

NC: It certainly matters. We are the products of the historical process. If we don't understand history, we don't understand ourselves. I mean, if you live in the United States, for example, you should know that this country was founded as an empire. George Washington called it an "infant empire." The goal of the most libertarian of the founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, was to have the superior Anglo-Saxon race eliminate the red, send the blacks back to Africa, and eliminate the "Latins" (his term), because they are inferior, and then populate the whole hemisphere. He and his associates got pretty far in that project too. It's a settler-colonial society, the absolutely worst kind of imperialism, one that deliberately exterminated the indigenous population then expanded abroad. Now the U.S. is a world dominant power, spending as much on the military as the rest of the world combined, fighting two wars, all kinds of things—if you don't know that, you don't know who you are. And you don't know why the world looks at you the way they do. So, if you want to function as a civilized person in the existing world, you'd better correct the false historical consciousness that's been imposed on you and try to find out the truth about history, including the truth about your own privilege. I mean, did you know that the average per capita income in India is about 2 percent that of the United States, and that of China is only 5 percent, according to World Bank figures, which are probably underestimated, but not by much? People talk about these countries attaining our material level, but simple arithmetic will tell you that's impossible. Which means our material level has to turn to something civilized. Maybe a better life, but certainly a life that won't be measured by the number of commodities you can consume, or how much fossil fuel you can use. There has to be a big change in our lives if the world is going to have any kind of decency. | **P**

Book Review: Osha Neumann, *Up Against the Wall, Motherf**ker: A Memoir of the '60s, with Notes for Next Time.* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008.

Philip Longo



WHAT *WERE* THE 1960S? The Left is still a bit confused. Activist and lawyer Osha Neumann, in his memoir *Up Against the Wall, Motherf**ker*, suggests that the 1960s not be thought of as a single coherent movement, but rather as a collection of movements gathered under the umbrella of "liberation." The civil rights movement overlapped with the anti-war movement, but they were not fully aligned. Similarly, the politically earnest Students for a Democratic Society often came head-to-head with the counterculture and the seemingly more radical tactics of Neumann's own group, the Motherfuckers.

Yet, despite his gesture toward distinguishing among different strands within "the sixties," Neumann himself falls into the same trap as many New Left revisionists in documenting his time in "the movement." The Motherfuckers participate within a mass structure of feeling, "a wet dream of possibilities" during a period of "unrelenting urgency." Neumann's sixties are marked not only by political struggles within the Left, but also by a kind of vague collective consciousness. This mutes Neumann's political narrative and renders it difficult for him to disentangle particular political currents and goals from one another. Looking back, he describes the period as marked by the confluence of revolutionary movements and feelings in a "strange amalgam, [in which] the image of the revolutionary transformed by the revolution fused with acid fueled visions in which all things melted and morphed, all permanence dissolved and nothing withstood change" (162).

While Neumann's book provides an interesting glimpse into the history of the political movements of the 1960s and a possible case study in activism, the elusiveness with which he treats "the sixties" contributes to the confusion of the book's second part, the "notes for next time." Rather than helping us out of the seemingly intractable dilemmas facing the post-1960s left—how do we understand the period so we can learn from it and build on it or, alternatively, discard it and move on?—Neumann's book reenacts the Left's ambivalence toward the decade and its failure to reconstitute an emancipatory leftist politics. Like many a 1960s memoirist, Neumann is still unsure what to make of his experience, how to disentangle history from what merely happened. Reluctant to throw the flower child out with the bathwater, Neumann, like the Left, becomes stuck in a cycle of recrimination and nostalgia.

As Neumann tells it, joining the radical activist group the Motherfuckers was part of a rebellion against his upbringing. The son of intellectual émigrés Inge and Franz Neumann who fled the Holocaust and found refuge as professors at Columbia University, Osha (originally named Thomas) grew up in the New York émigré circles occupied by other German Marxist and Frankfurt School intellectuals, like his father's friends Herbert Marcuse and Otto Kirchheimer. When the author was 14, his father, who authored *Behemoth*, the classic Marxist analysis of the Nazi state, died. Shortly after, his mother married Marcuse. Growing up in the extended orbit of the Frankfurt school, Neumann writes, "I concluded that my birthright was an all encompassing theory, Marxism, which sought to determine, in each historical period, the forces which represent humanity's hope for liberation and a just ordering of human affairs" (15).

Having the author of *Eros and Civilization* and *One Dimensional Man* for a stepfather made adolescent rebellion difficult. Still, after an admittedly apolitical tenure at Swarthmore and graduate studies in history at Yale, Neumann began to turn away from his leftist inheritance towards what he describes as the passionate embrace of sex and art. Becoming preoccupied by his own "irrational" sexual passions, Neumann saw in revolutionary activism a mirror and outlet for all that seemingly defied the rational theorizing of his parents' circle. As he puts it, he could not reconcile "reason's strict demands to prioritize thinking over doing with the unruly energies of my corrupt, insistent body" (17). Art, sex and activism became his rebellion against the "theoretical" bent of his family. Neumann's rebellion, unlike that of some of his peers, was not an ideological struggle or awakening, but rather a full-throttled embrace of praxis over an irrelevant and crusty theoretical tradition.

And full-throttled it was. After dropping out of Yale and moving to the Lower East Side in Manhattan to become an artist, Neumann became involved with the Angry Arts Week against the Vietnam War in 1967. Arrested during an event where a poster of a maimed Vietnamese child was unfurled during Sunday Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral, he describes himself as having a "mystical experience" in jail. But rather than changing his life course, this experience seems to have confirmed the direction in which he was already heading. Chanting in jail along with his fellow demonstrators, he felt his new insight allowed him to turn his back on "rationality." If instrumental reason could not stop the bombs in Vietnam, and had in fact created them, his jailhouse epiphany suggested that the only way to fight back was to embrace the irrational. And so he threw off the dialectic in favor of direct confrontation.

In 1968 Neumann joined the new underground "affinity group," Up Against the Wall, Motherfuckers, which grew out of the Angry Arts Week and Black Mask, another revolutionary artist group founded by anarchist Ben Morea. The Motherfuckers took their name from a famous line in the poem "Black People!" by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones):

> You know how to get it, you can get it, no money down, no money never, money dont grow on trees no way, only whitey's got it, makes it with a machine, to control you you cant steal nothin from a white man, he's already stole it he owes you anything you want, even his life. All the stores will open if you will say the magic words. The magic words are: Up against the wall mother fucker this is a stick up![1]

Though the group was primarily white, drawing from the drop-outs and street kids of New York's Lower East Side, much of their tactics and style were lifted from the Black Panthers. Describing themselves as an "affinity group devoted to liberation and revolution through any means necessary," they adopted a stance of extreme militancy. Ideologically they were hard to pin down. If the SDS could be thought of as attempting to lay out the ideological framework for the rebellion, the Motherfuckers, lacking the patience for their hesitancy and abstract theorizing, saw themselves as the soldiers.

At times deliberately incoherent in their actions and views, the Motherfuckers understood themselves as rebelling against "The System," a phrase that denoted "more than the economic and political institutions by which the rich wage unequal war on the poor, stealing the fruits of their labors, and despoiling the earth in the process." In theory "The System" meant "the totality of reality as shaped by, dependent upon, and supportive of those institutions... presidents and penises, the Pentagon and our parents, desires and disaffections, torturers and toothpaste" (66). In practice, as Neumann would later admit, "The System" referred to anything that was not, or did not agree with, the Motherfuckers.

The most interesting part of the book is Neumann's inside view of power struggles and confrontations with the Lower East Side police, the occupation of Columbia in 1968, the 1968 Chicago Convention, and the "liberation" of the Fillmore East theater, a venue for the new multi-media psychedelic rock concerts so popular at the time. In these sections, Neumann presents some astute reporting with commentary, disavowing many of the more violent and ineffectual forms of protest. Looking back, Neumann calls much of the Motherfuckers' politics vague both in its ecumenical anti-authoritarianism and its "infantile" rebellion. To this extent the book represents Neumann's attempt to work through the consequences of this criticism: "It is easy to dismiss this politics as nothing more than childish tantrums, and to profess a baleful acceptance of the status quo as more 'mature.' It's more difficult to disentangle, delicately, as one would a bird caught in a net, the genuinely radical and uncompromising elements in this politics from those which are self-defeating" (93). This statement is certainly compelling, if only because it reveals the book's greatest weakness: Neumann is unable to perform the operation he prescribes.

The memoir portion makes up the first half of the book. The second half is comprised of essays on the legacy of the 1960s, the 1999 WTO protests, and an engaging essay on the academic left's fetishization of what it calls "theory." Yet these "notes for next time" are suggestive at best. Other than his gradual return to an embrace of "Reason" (albeit coupled with action), Neumann offers little in his assessment of what lessons we would have to learn to follow through on the ambitions of the best 1960s radicals. Nor does he compellingly argue that such a historical critique and re-appropriation is even desirable. Rather, Neumann simply assumes that any reconstituted left must be modeled on the 1960s movements, albeit with some revisions:

> We purged as an infantile aberration the extravagant imagination of unlimited possibilities that inspired our most heroic—or foolhardy—acts of disobedience. But the vision doesn't really die. The wet dream of possibilities imagined by the counterculture of the Sixties is real, even now, as we struggle to avert an equally real nightmare: fascist regression, the triumph of unreason, the death of nature, the extinction of hope. Our flame smolders underground, waiting for the wind that will fan it back to fury. (165)

In critiquing the methods of groups like the Motherfuckers, Neumann misses a chance to take on

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Communism and Israel

Initiative Sozialistisches Forum

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COMMUNISM, ACCORDING TO MARX, is the "riddle of history solved." The riddle consists in the fact that the division of the human race into those who dominate and those being dominated, exploiters and exploited, has been exacerbated to such an extent that, caught between complete reification, on the one hand, and the transition to the "association of free individuals," on the other, revolution seems imminent even as it recedes ever farther into the distance. Marxists of all persuasions, instead of denouncing the riddle in its tragedy, instead of submitting it to critique, persist in rationalizing it and as such are complicit in its ideological distortion.

Israel is the *Shibboleth* of the yet-so-close revolution, the uncomprehended shadow of its failure. It is the *Menetekel* that involuntarily both illustrates the minimal categorical conditions of communism while simultaneously demonstrating the beastliness of which the bourgeois national state is capable. Those who have failed to grasp the hatred against this state—embodied in anti-Zionism and antisemitism, both of which harbor a will to eliminate those who live there as well as the Jews who live in scattered cosmopolitanism around the world—have not understood the essence of antisemitism: the unconditional hatred of the idea of mankind living in free association. They fail to grasp communism as the riddle of history solved.

Israel's existence is the bane of the Left. This is primarily because this state and this nation cannot be regarded in the terms of the anti-colonial revolutions or movements of national liberation, unless one wants to understand as such the (undoubtedly) terrorist activities of Menachem Begin's Zionist Irgun against the British prior to Israel's founding. Israel, the "tautological nation" as it is termed by *Bahamas*, magazine of the anti-German left, is an anomaly in general: It fits no scheme in the philosophy of history and expresses no recognizable political interest, whether of the bourgeoisie and their intellectual henchmen or of the Left and its theorists.

How hopeless the interest of the Enlightenment and emancipation of mankind seems nowadays! How futile, seemingly built on sand, is the possibility of overcoming socially-imposed and individually-hardened immaturity! Nor is this chiefly demonstrated by those whose entire business and purpose it is to immortalize the wrong society. From them, that is, from capital's apologists, its sociologists, its beneficiaries and ideologues, one can expect nothing but what they daily proclaim as "theory" in the paper *Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung* [FAZ]. Take for example the 11th of March, 2002: "To believe in capitalism means finally nothing else than to believe in man." Or in laundry detergent. This is as true as saying that belief in feudalism is, in the last instance, belief in God. It does, however, have the wicked side-effect of turning the capital relation into an anthropological given. By this logic, mankind lives within capital like the ants live in their colonies: ingenuously, free from alienation, and spontaneously. And yet, even despite their apologetic interest, the *FAZ* is more intimately acquainted with the total negativity of existing conditions than is the Left, which purports to want to reform or revolutionize them.

The Left's invocation of concepts like "society," "class," and "interest" seems positively pathetic. This is evident not only if one peruses the writings of this movement, exemplified in the rags of the *IZ3W, Wildcat*, or, for the more hardened, *Analyse und Kritik*. Indeed, one need only attend closely when their icons, from Green Party founding member Jutta Ditfurth to Green Party co-chair Claudia Roth to Left Party "communist" Sarah Wagenknecht, speak about the fascism of the Nazis. Wagenknecht, for example, confidently avers that "there exists no genetic and no historical disposition that drove 'the German nation' necessarily and inescapably into fascism and to Auschwitz. Even behind the most ludicrous barbarism stood rational, not national, interests. After all, war and genocide were highly profitable. 'Death by labor' secured rates of exploitation of near 100 percent." This left's imagination of a world beyond capitalism and fascism is, consequently, expressed in the question posed in the invitation to Germany's 2002 Federal Coordination for Internationalism Conference (BUKO): "How do we find something better than the nation?" Posed as such, the only answer can be that something already fits the bill: the *Volk*.[1] Were it otherwise, instead of the search for new identities the Left would have to speak about the abolition of nation, state, and money.

This left is no less ghastly when it raves on and on about Israel. This is true despite the fact that antisemitism's connection to a will to abolish the bourgeois-society-cum-state of the Jews, i.e. to abolish Israel, is so manifestly evident: So-called anti-Zionism constitutes nothing less than the geopolitical reproduction of antisemitism. Anti-Zionism is the form of appearance antisemitism must assume in the world market and in world politics after Auschwitz. Anti-Zionism is antisemitism gathered up from the earliest capitalist societies and disseminated to the world at large. Thus is Israel the Jew among the nation-states, as is made clear by the United Nation's condemnation of Zionism as a form of racism. The moral condemnation of the human cost of constituting bourgeois statehood is directed solely at Israel, which crystallizes what the world of the *Volksstaaten* would have us forget—that the centralization of political violence over life and death by no means constitutes the natural organization of mankind but is, rather, a definite expression of domination and exploitation. This, despite the fact that Israel is the only state in the world that can claim for itself an indubitable legitimacy, a fact that, as must be stressed again and again, renders the critique of Israel's statehood absurd. For it is the asynchronous state, the one that came into existence as a reaction to the failure of the promise of the national bourgeois revolutions. As such, it is both a belated act of self-defense against the mass murder of European Jews and a response to the Stalinist betrayal of communist world revolution.

The well-intentioned left rejects antisemitism, yet it cannot come to terms with Israeli policies against Palestinian attempts to found a state. What makes it so difficult to spell out the critical foreign policy implications of the antisemitic will to annihilation? First, there is the Left's ignorance regarding bourgeois statehood, and second, their pacifism inspired by revolutionary anti-militarists from Mahatma Gandhi to Auguste Blanqui. To take the case of Ariel Sharon: He is misrecognized as the return of chauvinism-gone-wild, in the style of ultra-conservatives Franz Josef Strauß or Edmund Stoiber. The pacifism behind this confusion is unwilling to deprive itself of the right to criticize, if not the Israeli state as such, then at least the policies of the Israeli government. It recedes thereby to the standpoint of a pacifism reminiscent of early Green Party partisans Petra Kelly or Thomas Ebermann, or peace movement old-timer Horst-Eberhard Richter in the early 1980s. This strand of pacifism, as the catchphrase goes, recognizes "Israel's right to existence," but reasons that it must *certainly* be allowed to criticize Israel's governmental policies. Such a view only recapitulates the social reformism to which such pacifism has always been committed. They act as if their "critique" of Israel's policies does not sound from newspapers of all political affiliations every morning! It is the antisemitism that claims to reject all *real* antisemitism and that provides for the meretricious conscience that Germans reek of nowadays: "But, sir, my best friend is a Jew..."

This reformism seeks to legitimize itself by identifying itself with the Israeli peace movement and its American supporters, including figures like Uri Avnery, Norman Finkelstein, Felicia Langer, and Moshe Zuckermann. Such people mean to Israel what the reformist and anti-militarist *Deutsche Friedensunion (German Peace Union*) meant to the German Federal Republic of the early 1960s. The identification of this particular German pacifism with the Israeli peace movement rests naturally on the fact that no one has heard from them a single sentence about the state of capital, or, for that matter, about a materialist conception of mass destruction. Thus Zuckermann, who fancies himself in the critical theory camp, drifts into multi-culturalism despite himself when he relies on terms like "second Holocaust" to elucidate Israeli policies.

Prevailing left "analyses" of Israeli policy elide the significance of the country's character as an asynchronous state of the Jews. Israel is a reaction to the betrayal of Enlightenment and world-revolution and an attempt of self-defense or asylum against the fascism of the Nazis. In addition, however, the common patterns of bourgeois role allocations—the monopoly on violence held by the bourgeois state and carried out by the people tasked with its governance—do not apply to the state of Israel, given the conditions of its formation. That "critics" of Israel's government policies ignore such considerations is apparent, among other things, in the fact that they show empathy for the fascist mob and institutions that reward suicide bombers simply because they are a consequence of occupation and exploitation, but when it comes to Israel's attempts to smash the military infrastructure of their enemies, these critics speak of the "extermination" or "annihilation" of the Palestinian people. Just like the stupid question of whether one should not be allowed to call those crooked speculators for what they are without being charged with antisemitism, the question pondered by leftists of whether fascism would not be possible in Israel as well because there is, after all, an Israeli bourgeois society, conceals a wrong-headed and warped misrecognition

"Communism" continues below

Communism, continued from above

of the most politically salient characteristics of the state of Israel. It is wrong-headed because what needs explaining is precisely how Israel could be and remain a parliamentary democracy. It is warped because in Israel, between the unbearable old conditions (the threat of annihilation) and the not-yet-achieved new conditions (the society *sans* domination), we find exactly the epitome of what was once known and inscribed on red banners as the "dictatorship of the proletariat," the organized political force for emancipation through revolution. Considering the founding idea of the Israeli state with respect to the question of the "dictatorship of the proletariat," and against the backdrop of the Left's myths of the state, any judgment passed on the actions of Israel's government must also reflect the peculiarities of Israel's statehood.

Nobody claims that Ariel Sharon is the Lenin of Israel. What is at stake here is that Israeli statehood derives historically and structurally from Israel's essence as a force for emancipation constituted by parliament and congealed into its *pouvoir de l'Éta*t. It is therefore impossible to distinguish between rule and the execution of rule in the same way as one would ask whether Social Democrat Schröder or Christian Socialist Stoiber are more suited to safeguard the common good as Chancellor of Germany. Whoever distinguishes in this way with respect to Israel not only proclaims their own lack of comprehension of the Jewish state, but also adopts at least a moderate anti-Zionism in the vein of the popular 2002 Easter Marches of the peace movement throughout the country, where activists proudly displayed Palestinian national pennants, or of the pathetic Italian anti-globalization movement Tute Bianche, that called for a boycott of Israeli goods, or, again, of the vainly militant workerist group *Wildcat*, which seriously believed it could submit Israel to a "class analysis." All this nonsense represses the fact that Ariel Sharon, however unintentionally, is nevertheless closer to communism than his critics; for, like an Israeli version of Buenaventura Durruti, the only way open to Sharon as a general was to fight in the anti-fascist struggle. This is so because communism as a stateless and classless world society demands, if it is to succeed at all, something impossible: Revenge for the dead, for the victims of barbarism, even as it demands justice for the living, that everybody be treated in accordance with their own character. Only in this manner can communism be realized as envisioned in the maxim, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." From this perspective, Israel is the armed attempt to reach communism alive. Presumably this should be understood by leftists who not too long ago raved about the dictatorship of the proletariat, who threw themselves at the feet of the late capitalism of the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic, China, or Albania, and who trumpeted the national-völkisch liberation movements of the Third World. Today it seems as if all these bizarre identifications coalesce around the unconditional support for the Palestinian people against Israel.

After the collapse of Marxism-Leninism, there is no longer any "scientific communism" to speak of. It has been replaced by a no longer scientific, but instinctively and intuitively practiced, capacity of the Left for occultism on a world-historical scale. It is the ontological postulation, which, as in Marxism-Leninism, allows for an unproblematic interplay of partisan misconstruction and empiricist analysis: Each slavishly affirmed fact is understood as the pure manifestation of an essence unfolding itself. Every good ideologist is therefore a bad Hegelian, who short-circuits the sense for the non-identical. Surely, every tenacious ideology consists of this tight intertwining of spontaneous, intuitive illustration mediated by a plethora of facts on the one hand, and, on the other, of the rationalization of these facts into a non-contradictory schema, consisting of anything from recycled Stalinist lines concerning Nazi-fascism to recycled phrases from Claudia Roth's latest speech to the Green Party. Because ideology lacks coherence it is immune to critique; because it excludes individual experience it cannot possibly initiate a learning process. Since the ideologues stifle thought at the root, they end up substituting for it with calculations of interest. Freud's psychoanalysis attempted to grasp this aspect of ideology in its deliberate paradox of the "unconscious conscious." Marx, in his critique of fetishism, was after the same aspect of ideology with his analysis and exposure of the relationship of commodity form and form of thought.

This "unconscious conscious" may be imagined as a sleep-walker, who navigates a way towards his goal after making every possible misstep. In Europe, however, the unconscious conscious is thoroughly antisemitic. Everybody, whether Catholics or feudalists, absolutist monarchs or bourgeois revolutionaries, party communists or Nazi fascists, whether fully aware, in a trance, or in a manic rage, contribute their mite to this thoughtless thinking, which is gaining merciless force.

In contrast to this, the Zionist philosophy of history is of an entirely different make, and here the historically particular role of Zionism shows: History, in this case, is not coming into its own as the realization of an inner essence, but as the historical relation between past and future catastrophe. The Zionists act as if they had committed themselves to the historical realization of Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In this negative philosophy of history, historical materialism is related to Zionism, even while it refuses, in spite of the facts, to make the Zionist thesis of the "eternal antisemitism" its own.

The hatred for Zionism has manifold reasons—that is, excuses. It might be interesting to list them, but it is not salient here. This is not about what cruelties and terror happen when the Israeli army penetrates the territories of the Palestinian National Authority, however depressing those cruelties may be. Such are the facts of war, which nobody ever claimed would be an Amnesty International campaign. What is at stake here is the relationship of the facts of the tears, blood, and death, to their interpretation. No reasonable human being, upon seeing the indubitable suffering of the population of Dresden in the wake the bombings at the hands of the Royal Airforce, would conclude that Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris's practical anti-fascism constituted a historical injustice. Similarly, it is not simply a question of what cruelties Syrian, Iraqi, or Iranian dictatorships commit against their own populations, or what these might mean as regards their military strategies towards Israel. Nor is this about the "fanatical" settlers. Rather, it is a question of the historical legitimacy and philosophical dignity of Zionism as the Israeli national ideology, which motivates the statehood of the bourgeois society of the Jews after Auschwitz. In this respect Ariel Sharon understood more of the Enlightenment and the ramifications of post-1933 negative dialectics than do the querulous advocates of the human rights of the "Palestinian people," a phrase which comes to mean whatever it must in order to satisfy the commands of their very own projections. Jewish nationalism is the egotism of a people that can no longer trust in the invisible hand to translate egotism into common good. That the militant Enlightenment today takes the form of Ariel Sharon and the tanks of the Israeli Army, that this is now its only historically possible form, baffles and angers those who only retain what Bloch, with reference to Lessing, called "the shams of Englightenment" (Aufklärícht). It is sufficient for them to struggle for a disastrous "right to self-determination of the peoples" whether proletarian-socialist à la Lenin, bourgeois-democratic à la Wilson, or völkisch-Nazi-fascist à la Hitler. While the Jews might very well be a "Volk," Israel is at least a society.

No Nazi-fascist was ever truly convinced that he derived legitimacy for his demands from the Teutoburger Forest, just as none of his democratic heirs ever really thought their legitimacy derived from the "lessons of history." Similarly, no socialist was ever convinced that it was the famous "liberation of labor," and not simply the right to the spoils, that motivated their politics in the interest of the working-class. And in no way do Palestinians gain any right from the fact that they were the first in Palestine. To a society to which hunger is no reason for production, suffering cannot be sufficient grounds for solidarity. Whether one speaks of Charitas, Amnesty International, or the Friends of the Palestinian People, with regard to the Israel-hatred of the antisemites and the Islamo-fascists of this *Völk,* it is ideology that agitates in the name of the immediacy of suffering. It is ideology that strives to make sense of evidence it cannot bring itself to question. The Zionist and practical anti-fascist Ariel Sharon has come closer to solving the riddle of history than the German left, whose supposed anti-fascism exhausts itself either as the "rebellion of the decent," à la ex-chancelor Gerhard Schröder, or as solidarity with the Palestinian people. | **P**

Translated by Tony Smith.

1. Translator's note: Literally, the German word for "people." However, in the context of the 19th and 20th centuries, for Völkisch movements the term has denoted a fantastic dissolution of social contradictions into a national, organic, whole. For a critique of Völkisch nationalism, see for example Jerzy Sobotta, "Rosa Luxemburg's Corpse: The Stench of Decay on the German Left, 1932–2009," *Platypus Review 16* (October 2009), <http://platypus1917.org/2009/10/10/rosa-luxemburg%E2%80%99s-corpse>.

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the political ideals of the movement. In collapsing fascist regression, the triumph of unreason, the death of nature, and the extinction of hope all into one giant bogeyman, Neumann rehearses the Motherfuckers' gesture of collapsing all sources of unfreedom or inequality into "The System. " In short, by attacking the *methods* rather than the *analysis* of their historical situation, Neumann seems to believe that all that the Left needs in the contemporary moment is quite simply to pick up where the New Left activists left off. While decrying senseless violence and "infantile rage" Neumann clings to a sense of historical possibility that arose out of the 1960s—surely, a necessary thing today. However, by clinging so fervently to this dream deferred, Neumann becomes blinded by his own nostalgia and recriminations.

This surplus of nostalgia and recrimination is the legacy of the ineffectual left today. Another, related legacy is our current incoherent politics, unable to distinguish between "presidents and penises" or "the Pentagon and our parents"—that is, unable to effectively understand our own historical moment. We are still unable to distinguish between the various sources of unfreedom, where they intersect and where they do not. By insisting on the "The System" as the enemy and a renewed and revised activism to combat it, Neumann's analysis, like that of the contemporary Left as a whole, leads to the type of random and ineffectual activism we ultimately regret, but at the same time cannot quite let go of. | **P**

1. "Black People!" Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), in *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 224.

I can't go on, I'll go on: A response to "Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary'" in *October* and "What is Contemporary Art?" in *e-flux*[1]

Chris Mansour

All the things you would do gladly, oh without enthusiasm, but gladly, all the things there seems no reason for your not doing, and that you do not do! Can it be we are not free? It might be worth looking into.

— Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

IN WALTER BENJAMIN'S MAGNUM OPUS, *The Arcades Project,* capitalist modernity is in several instances depicted as a "hellish" existence.[1] He describes this condition as history continuing to truck along in its course, but only doing so *regressively*.[2] Hell, in short, is "transiency without progress."[3] Here, Benjamin is not voicing a Romantic sensibility; he does not bemoan modernity for having trampled over the once "harmonious" and organic way of life supposedly experienced in premodern times. Nor did Benjamin understand modernity theologically, as an age simply of despair or damnation, even if he often used theological terms in expressing this understanding. Rather, Benjamin saw that modernity had achieved an unprecedented qualitative leap in human history—one that could actually further social freedoms for all of humanity in ways hitherto unimaginable. So if modernity offered this progressive possibility, why did he describe it as hellish regression?

Benjamin's imagery of the modern as Hell is set in counterposition to the ultimately conservative idea that social progress comes about evolutionarily through the total proliferation of commodity production. It was assumed that world conditions would improve naturally within, and as part of, capitalism's own dynamics, without human intervention in the form of a politics seeking to grasp those dynamics. Benjamin rightly saw this bourgeois ideology as history resorting to myth, and directed his energy towards fighting the idea that the modern world has reached, or could reach, a kind of "heaven on earth" in the context of its current material configurations. Progress, for Benjamin, was not a matter of stabilizing commodity production and relations (which consequently deflects addressing the contradictions of capital head on), but of *overcoming* commodity production and relations *in* and *through* their inner potentialities. This would be nothing short of a total immanent revolution, entailing capital's simultaneous fulfillment and negation. To the extent that the revolutionary potential of overcoming capitalism is not recognized and seized upon within the energies and tensions of capitalism itself, humankind instead regresses, as social domination is reconstituted in new forms. In this way, capitalist modernity creates for itself a "Hell on earth."[4]

We are still haunted by Benjamin's work in that the hellish condition of "transiency without progress" in modern society has only deepened. The only—and major—difference is that most people are entirely disillusioned by the bourgeois myth of progress, especially after the horrors of the 20th century that were carried out in its name. We are instead wading though a time in which those who pride themselves on not "buying into" bourgeois ideology have also largely given up the struggle to emancipate humanity from its grip. Historical progress as a theoretical and practical problem is treated with pessimism and, at times, with downright hostility. This paralysis is rooted in the misguided assumption that modernity's promise of creating a better world rests in ruins to the degree that it is no longer applicable to today's problems. According to this view, modernity (and even postmodernity) is, for better or worse, a bygone era, and we have been lobbed into a different paradigm with a whole "new" set of parameters.[5] The term encapsulating such a worldview is "the contemporary," or "contemporaneity," and since roughly 1970, it has sealed together and fixed in place our system of cultural production like industrial glue.

This glue, however, leaves behind a murky residue that obscures the very nature of its bond. The term "contemporaneity" lacks consensus to properly sustain itself even as a purely descriptive historical category. Addressing this insufficiency has become something of an itch recently, with a number of attempts to demystify what "the contemporary" encompasses. Over the last year, two major publications, *October* and the online journal, *e-flux,* have made available a series of short essays from various contributors trying to answer the questions, "What is the contemporary?" and "What is contemporary art?"[6] In the responses there are many ways "contemporaneity" has been defined, but even when taken all together, they point to a persisting inability to make sense of the present and our relationship to modernism. Despite this inability, the *disposition* towards "the contemporary" in the replies to both questionnaires has been either reluctantly ambivalent or exceedingly sanguine.

For instance, "the contemporary" as a historical moment is characterized as a "cacophonic mess,"[7] with component parts that are "not clearly distinguishable"[8]; contemporaneity lacks an overall "road map" to guide any sort of historical positioning.[9] Yet, what follows from such claims is the belief that these indecipherable conditions do not indicate confusion and helplessness, but in fact provide more "freedom" to move in the present.[10] The "cacophonic mess" of the present gives the authors "enormous hope," "lacking a road map" is taken to be a "strength rather than a weakness," it is incumbent upon us to hold a "positive vision" of contemporaneity's "chaos and complexity,"[11] and so it goes. What is left unexplained in almost all cases is how the dynamic anarchy of the present could actually lead to more favorable social conditions, whether politically, artistically, or both. In the abstract, anarchic conditions seem to allow greater room for uninhibited spontaneity, as there are no rules or strict standards placed on artistic creativity. Yet, this dissolution of rules has not led to a new contemporary renaissance, to the sort of eruption of human artistic practice that one would expect if unfreedom were only a matter of the rigidity of the rules and standards at a given moment. However, in many cases the authors who replied to the questionnaires take a one-sided approach to the concept of disorder, seeing anarchy simply as a form of freedom in the present and failing to consider how its opposite—order and organization—is at the same time a necessary factor in the historical process of artistic development. To these art historians and theorists, it is as though "contemporaneity" radiates possibilities for a better world regardless of the fact that no one seems ready to answer what conscious role we could play in the realization of those possibilities. Despite the plurality and pluralism of the responses, the utopianism of the replies to the questionnaires consists more in the unelaborated expression of desire and in declarations of "hope" than in a plausible assessment of current circumstances.

The reason such utopianism fails to bridge the gap between contemporaneity's discontents (the "is") and an ideal future (the "ought") stems from an epidemic allergy towards revisiting the modernist project to inform present practices. Ultimately, modernism is treated as a corpse whose death was both welcome and deserved. With this comes the fantasy that contemporaneity is an utter and complete "break" with modernism, based on the discontinuities between the past and present. Such an approach towards history results in a refusal to consider that the past may still weigh upon us today, even if the burden of this weight is diffuse and impalpable. Rather than a corpse, modernity should be seen as a project that failed in its own time and according to its own terms, but which therefore remains *incomplete*. The "break" with the past, then, is more apparent than real. Capitalism—the fundamental social condition defining modernity—persists not in spite of, but precisely *through* its structural transformations.

Jeff Wall, *Milk* (detail), transparency in lightbox 1870 x 2290 mm, 1984 (Tate Modern).

To grasp the vicissitudes of contemporaneity, it behooves us to recognize how current artistic productions can express (latently or manifestly) continuity in change, and change in continuity. This dialectic straddles the historical gap between our modernist past and our contemporaneous present, which may open up possibilities to push beyond contemporaneity's historical impasse. To focus only on the discontinuities between moments in time, on the other hand, means that the present becomes one-dimensional, holding no possibilities to move beyond the status quo. Nor does this understanding of history honestly engage with the ways in which we have inherited past struggles. This stops us from seeing the best facets of modernism as serious

"Contemporary" continues below

Contemporary, continued from above

efforts in need of redemption, and gives us a skewed impression in learning about the past.

Accordingly, many of the responses in *October* and *e-flux* promote the view of contemporaneity as a complete disconnect from modernism. A caricature is then created out of modernity in order to make it seem like a bygone era. Several contributions castigate the modernist project for subsuming everyone under "grand narratives" that are driven by "Eurocentric" or "NATO" ideologies.[12] What is unconsciously favored instead is an affirmation of the world as it currently exists, complete with rhetoric that sees in contemporaneity "a plurality of presents" and a "heterochronic" atmosphere. It is believed to be an alternative view in opposition to modernist discourse, which was supposedly conjured up by Western countries in order to stifle viewpoints other than its own. Even the attempts to "return" to some form of modernism fall into the trap they seek to avoid. "To understand [contemporaneity's] various vectors," says art historian Okwui Enwezor, "we need to *provincialize* modernism, that is, spatialize it as a series of local modernisms rather than one big universal modernism."[13] Though Enwezor ostensibly calls for the continuation of the modernist project, he does so only on the problematic basis of local flavor, which presumes that taking certain provinces in isolation will create a multitude of authentic histories liberated from any kind of universal hegemony. Such a view protests the process of globalization in its current form—that is, the conditions whereby art can only make headway when packaged and displayed as articles of the culture industry—but it circumvents the issue of what questions and possibilities of artistic freedom are raised *by* globalization. Rather than critiqued as a form of *alienated* universality, globalization is simply rejected, and universality dismissed tout court.

In its best ideals modernism did not seek to force the world to mirror European or NATO cultural tropes, but to transcend the unfreedom historically specific to capitalism, understood as a *totalizing* force that continuously entangles the world in a web of necessity, whether the provinces of the world saw themselves as actors in this process or not. Thus the particular needs to be understood as a part of the whole. Or, more concretely, "provincial" histories need to be understood as affecting—and being affected by—the totality of world-historical events, which are intimately bound up in the dynamic of capitalism. Indeed, there are "many presents" in the present moment, but these do not develop in total remoteness, without overlap and correspondence. "Provincializing" modernism atomizes history during a time when our actions, no matter how localized they may appear superficially, have broad effects on a universal scale. Enwezor's nominalism ultimately abstracts what he considers the real, concrete form of history: It ends up being a guise for a disinterested cultural relativism that cannot analyze how the husk of particular histories are governed by an overarching force beyond its own control—a force that *is* a concrete event. Such a confining vision fails to grasp its object of inquiry, much less to understand how artistic practice has developed on a universal scale *as part of* the particularity of each artwork.

The spell of contemporaneity not only flattens the dialectical tension between the locality of an artwork's context and its positioning in a historical totality, but also renders unintelligible the interplay between an artwork's fleetingness and its lasting socio-historical significance. Under the condition of contemporaneity, art ceases to be an activity that builds upon a historical trajectory: a project, in the words of Clement Greenberg, which is meant to "live up to the past."[14] Or, as Boris Groys

Vito Acconci's instructions for his artwork *Step Piece* (1970) have one stepping onto and dismounting an 18-inch stool, at the rate of 30 steps a minute, until one is too tired to continue. This is repeated every morning for several months.

puts it, in what has become something like the mantra contemporaneity lives by, "The present is a moment in time when we decide to *lower our expectations of the future* or to abandon some of the dear traditions of the past in order to pass through the narrow gate of the here-and-now."[15] Groys goes on to note that we live in a time of "indecision," and claims we are in a "prolonged and even infinite delay" because we have come to mistrust the aspirations of modernism. In light of the failure of modernism's best ambitions, this mistrust is merited, but nonetheless insufficient to move us beyond a delay that threatens to become infinite. Lowering our expectations of the future means that art ceases to be a platform for imagining a utopian future, only allowing it to make a fleeting impact on cultural history. In an atmosphere that no longer contextualizes working through the past to clear the way for a better future, artworks struggle to be anything more than discrete objects in this or that trend, regardless of the artist's or critic's intent.

Seeking to understand the relationship of art to history in modernity, Baudelaire said the artist "makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distill the eternal from the transitory."[16] What makes modern art stand the test of time, according to Baudelaire, is its ability to recognize how art in its ephemerality has the power to interpret anew the way the present builds upon its past, as well as visualize how certain elements of the past remain with us. We can certainly question the concept of the "eternal" in Baudelaire's formulation, but the basic idea of searching out how certain conditions remain in place within altered circumstances is apt, at least as the beginning of an approach to the contemporary situation. The risk that contemporaneity will become an "infinite delay" seems rooted at least partly in the inability to envision art as developing from the past. Art, meanwhile, can relate to the past only through superficial references stretching across an ironic distance. Falling below the threshold of Baudelaire and Greenberg following him, critical discourse on contemporaneity has become one-sided, seeing developments in the art world only as a procession of fashions that emerge and subside more or less senselessly. Everyone waits for the "next big thing," yet, each time it comes, and to the embarrassment of everyone, its relevance deflates as the next coming attraction grabs our attention.

It seems that we have stumbled into the conditions of contemporaneity not by choice, but accidentally, in the sense that the art world has failed to make any lasting impact in a culture of distraction. We have found ourselves in the present not by overcoming the problematics of modernism, but because we have been unable to make sense of what has not yet been exhausted in the modernist project, despite its ultimate failure. Modernity is not alive, but it is also not dead. It might be most fruitful, then, to consider whether contemporaneity is just old wine in a new bottle. Rather than a break with the past, might the contemporary be better understood as a continuation of the problems and goals of modernism, but under transformed conditions?

If we actually do make history, but not in the conditions of our own choosing, "contemporaneity" is the most extreme scenario in which the will to take the helm of consciously directing history has been eclipsed, such that our practical activities, rather than directing events, are merely reactive. Objectively, it is always possible to discern alternate paths and recourses that could be taken. Here, the obstacle that blocks us is our own subjectivity: the hyper-focus on the present shuts off learning from the past in a way that can shape a future beyond the fetters of capitalism. The rubric of "the contemporary" skews historical consciousness to the point that the present itself, even in its multiplicity, is obscured, and art becomes as fleeting and inconsequential as last year's fad. We have lost a sense of how art is a historical expression of the human condition, and we have lost an understanding of how art could segue into the imagination of a better future, without—or, indeed, in spite of—voicing a *particular* program or demand. If we fail to recognize that there is nothing novel about "the contemporary," and that our historical moment is still very much conditioned by capitalism, any attempt to further freedom is likely to repeat the failures of the 20th century, but in a further degenerated and unconscious way. As Benjamin might word it, to recognize this form of regression would, like a lightening bolt, blast us out of the aimless historical continuum held under contemporaneity's ruse. Emancipated from mistaking appearance for reality, perhaps harmonies could then emerge from within the cacophonic mess. | **P**

1. This article is indebted to Jan Verwoert's allegorical essay, "Standing on the Gates of Hell, My Services Are Found Wanting," in *What is Contemporary Art?*, eds. Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle (New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), 196–210. This book originally appeared as a two-part issue of the online journal *e-flux*. It is my intention to theorize Verwoert's position with respect to the stakes of contemporaneity's historical moment.
2. See Walter Benjamin, quoted in Susan Buck Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 97:

> [Modernity as Hell] deals not with the fact that 'always the same thing' happens (a forteriori this is not about eternal recurrence) but the fact that on the face of that oversized head called earth precisely what is newest doesn't change; that this 'newest' in all its pieces keep remaining the same. It constitutes the eternity of Hell and its sadistic craving for innovation. To determine the totality of features in which this "modernity" imprints itself would mean to represent Hell.

3. Ibid, 96.
4. This what Benjamin referred to as "dialectics at a standstill."
5. As Hans Ulrich Obrist puts it, we "have come to suspect modernity to be our antiquity." Obrist, "Manifestos for the Future," in *What is Contemporary Art?,* 60.
6. See Hal Foster, "A Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary': 32 Responses," *October* 130 (Fall 2009), 3–124; and *What is Contemporary Art?*
7. Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle, "What Is Contemporary Art? An Introduction," 8.
8. Jörg Heiser, "Torture and Remedy: The End of –isms and the Beginning Hegemony of the Impure," in *What is Contemporary Art?*, 81.
9. Jaleh Mansoor, response to "A Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" 105.
10. Zdenka Badovinac, "Contemporaneity as Points of Connection," in *What is Contemporary Art?*, 155.
11. Nicholas Bourriaud, quoted in James Meyer, response to "A Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" 75.
12. Cuauhtémoc Medina, "Contemp(t)orary: Eleven Theses," in *What is Contemporary Art?*, 12.
13. Okwui Enwezor, response to "A Questionnaire on 'The Contemporary,'" 36. Italics mine.
14. Clement Greenberg, "Modern and Postmodern," *Arts* 54:6 (February 1980). Also available online at <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/postmodernism.html>.
15. Boris Groys, "Comrades of Time," in *What is Contemporary Art?*, 24. Italics mine.
16. Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter in Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon, 1964), 12.