The antinomy of art and politics: A critique of art as "cultural resistance"

Chris Mansour

*At the 2011 Left Forum, held at Pace University between March 18–21, Platypus hosted a conversation on the theme of "Aesthetics in Protests." Panelists Stephen Duncombe (Reclaim the Streets), Marc Herbst (*Journal of Aesthetics and Protests*), Chris Mansour (Platypus), Laurel Whitney (Yes Men), were asked to consider: "What are the historical roots that contribute to the use of current aesthetic interventions in political protests? In what ways do they expand or limit the possibilities for protests to transform the social order? How does experimenting with aesthetic and artistic sensibilities influence our political consciousness and practice?" The same theme was the subject of another event held at the New School in NYC on May 23, which featured Marc Herbst (Journal of Aesthetics and Protests), Chris Mansour (Platypus), A.K. Burns (W.A.G.E.), and Beka Economopoulos (Not An Alternative). A full recording of the discussion at the Left Forum can be downloaded from <http://www.mediafire.com/?lycrdpnnc9hyx9l>. The article that follows is a modified version of the opening remarks made by Chris Mansour of Platypus at both events.*

> *The very notion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political position.—George Orwell*

THERE IS AN INTERESTING PASSAGE in Herbert Marcuse's short book, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, which aims to flesh out how art relates to politics. In reflecting on art's role in revolutionary struggle, Marcuse writes,

> In its practice, art does not abandon its own exigencies and does not quit its own dimension: it remains *non-operational*. In art, the political goal appears only in the transfiguration which is the aesthetic form. The revolution may well be absent from the *oeuvre* even while the artist himself is "engaged," is a revolutionary.

Marcuse cites the example of Courbet, whose paintings signal the birth of modernism, and who founded a socialist club in 1848 and was then a member of the governing council of the Paris Commune in 1871. Yet, as counterintuitive as it might seem, Marcuse remarks that "[there is] no direct testimony of the revolution in his paintings… [and they contain] no political content."[2] The "weight and sensuality" of Courbet's still lifes—which were painted shortly after the collapse of the Commune—are far more "powerful" than any "political painting" could ever be.[3] Writing these statements in 1972—four years after the failed "revolutions" of 1968—it was becoming clearer to Marcuse that the politics of the New Left were losing their grip and its revolutionary energy was deflating. Likewise, the situation that Courbet found himself in after 1848 or 1871 was probably similar to, if not more tragic than 1968.

The separation between art and political activity that Marcuse was pointing to in Courbet may appear a bit strange to self-proclaimed cultural radicals or art-activists today. From Marcuse's point of view, art remains autonomous from any exterior motives other than it self, and art cannot—and should not—act merely as a functional device for putting forth political aims.[4] "Political" art, actually abdicates its status not only as an art object, but also as an object potentially producing a novel political effect. But, on the other hand, we can also see why this approach of treating art as autonomous seems especially fraught for a politically minded person; weighing in on art's formal qualities is ostensibly apolitical in nature and has no direct link to improving the qualities of social life. Construed this way, Marcuse's inclination is viewed as a retreat from politics during a time of political crisis for the Left, and any deep concerns over aesthetics are perceived to be staunchly conservative, as a distraction from the "real issues" at stake. It is this latter view that we should interrogate.

More and more cultural productions under contemporary art have been given some kind of political function and are understood as the wave of the future in progressive artistic practice. I would like to categorize the projects that seek to directly influence political life under the umbrella term "cultural resistance," irrespective of whether some of these projects are considered to exist in the realm of art or not. Regardless of what forms they may take, or what discipline they are considered to reside in, upholding a politics of resistance best summarizes all these practices—and it is this core politics that remains under-clarified but widely expressed.[5]

Cultural resistance seeks to dissolve the boundary between art and political life by making art socially responsible (or "operational" in Marcuse's terms). Historically, socially responsible art has taken many forms, from designed objects to artworks that incorporate direct commentary on political events, or even works that seek to become instruments in social life. Cultural resistance has its roots in the constructivist movement, which originated in the early stages of the October Revolution, and in the "committed" literature and theater of Brecht and Sartre in the early to mid-20th century. Whereas once the political commitment of art was contentious and sparked a whole series of critical debates between some of the most important Marxist thinkers of the day,[6] art as cultural resistance has now successfully created a niche for itself in the mainstream art world and is generally left unchallenged. The examples are endless: there is art activism seen in protest groups such as the now defunct ACT-UP or the Guerilla Girls; public stunts and media intrusions under the rubric of culture-jamming committed by Reverend Billy or The Yes Men, which seek to satirize mainstream culture tainted by consumerism; in the performance arts, a movement known as relational aesthetics or social practice set up platforms for social interactions beyond the alienation brought about by capitalism, as seen in the collective Critical Art Ensemble or the artist Jeremy Deller; and finally, there are interventionalist practices that carry out Situationist inspired détournements that are meant to symbolically subvert the capitalist system, seen in performances by William Pope.L or the "subvertisments" of *Adbusters* magazine.

A performative protest action by Reverend Billy and "The Church" in Times Square in New York City.

To survey these people and groups, one has to wonder why, at our current historical moment, so much political energy is put into aesthetic, often largely symbolic practices. Conversely, why must so much art, in order to justify itself as art, rely to such a large degree on a putative ability to perform political work? Despite its apparent place at the cutting edge, why is it that such practices oddly hearken back and even echo the quaint moralistic arguments about the social good art does, and how art is "good for the soul"? In short, what is actually at stake, for art as well as for politics, in intentionally blurring the boundaries between art and politics? Is art emancipated thereby? And are we? If we are going to assess the quality of such projects, it might do them better justice to analyze them on different standards, judging them on their aesthetics and their politics.

One, it cannot simply voice support for a particular political program, or if it does, reduces itself to little more than a one-dimensional slogan. So in trying to escape this sort of pigeonhole, cultural resistance art aspires to educate its audience, provoking them to experience a new kind of "attitude" towards life. But in seeking to invite its audience to share a certain attitude, cultural resistance art unwittingly reinforces what may be one of the most disturbing aspects of the status quo that it claims to be disrupting, namely, the fact that so much of politics exists only at the level of subjective "attitudes." It is thus hard to see how such art would adequately raise political consciousness in the service of overcoming the conditions that are supposedly being resisted.

On the one hand, in the attempt to convey the "truth" of social reality through acts of cultural resistance, political questions of how best to respond to the dynamics of capitalism are trivialized, flattened out to suit the predigested message to be delivered. Art as cultural resistance often takes for granted precisely what a reflective political approach would seek to raise as a problem that needs to be worked through. Reverend Billy loses all his satirical force when it becomes clear that his politics are really no more than persuading consumers to "see the light" by resisting the urge of materialism and conspicuous consumption. He preaches a politics of lifestyle to combat the alienated dreamworld of

"Cultural resistance" continues on page 4

Issue #39 / September 2011

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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Lenin's legacy today

Tamas Krausz

A HISTORICALLY ADEQUATE INTERPRETATION of Lenin's Marxism must begin with the recognition that Lenin's legacy is essentially a political application of Marx's theory of capital as a historically-specific social formation. It required further development in light of experiences under determinate historical circumstances, such as the development of capitalism in Russia, the Russian Revolution of 1905, the crisis of Marxism in 1914, the evolution of imperialism, the October Revolution of 1917, War Communism, and the New Economic Policy. Lenin's basic awareness of the concrete possibility of social revolution and the transition to communism grew more determinate in the course of his political practice after 1905. Because of this, Lenin's political and theoretical legacy, as a historical variant of Marxism, is unique and unrepeatable. On the other hand, the original experience of revolutionary theory and action, its "methodology" in practice, has played an undeniably colossal role in the history of the twentieth century. In our own time, under less than promising circumstances, there are attempts to "refurbish" Lenin's Marxism for the anti-globalization movement.[1] The main reason for this is that the Leninist tradition of Marxism is the only one that has offered, at least for a time, an alternative to capitalism. It alone has breached the walls of capitalism, even if today that breach seems mended. The world situation over the last two decades demonstrates that the global dominance of capital has engendered new forms of discontent. These did not obviate the need for Marxism as a theory and a movement. Indeed, they could not. Instead, in their search for alternatives, the discontented run into "Lenin's Marxism" at every turn. Thus, if we talk of Marxism, the stakes are higher than we may think, for this legacy—that is, the primacy of Lenin's Marxism—is not a thing of the past.

Concept and systemization

Though he knew everything there was to know at that time about Marx and Engels, Lenin did not simply excavate Marxist theory from beneath layers of Western European social democracy and anarchism. He applied it in his own way to Russian circumstances by tying theory and revolutionary practice together. In the process he contributed many original ideas to the theoretical reconstruction of the revolutionary actions and the movement as a whole in confronting reformist social democratic tendencies.

The systematization of Lenin's legacy began in his lifetime as part of the struggle over the inheritance of his mantle. What was characteristic of these "deconstructions" was not that Marxism was identified with Lenin's legacy, nor its embodiment in him, nor that Marxism was "Russified" and, later, "Stalinized" as a result of that struggle. Rather, it was interpreted simply as the theory and practice of revolution and class struggle, omitting the stages and method of development that made the phenomenon what it was. This reductionist approach simplified Lenin's Marxism to the ideology of political class struggle and eventually to an ideology that justified the Bolsheviks' preservation of power above all. The subsequent Stalinist period came to see Leninism as party ideology, the main and almost exclusive "vehicle" of Marxism, with the Communist Party, then its general staff, and eventually its leader alone functioning as its sole guardian. The soviets, the labor unions, and other forms of social self-organization, all of which Lenin thought to be central elements in the transition to socialism, were increasingly omitted in the "reproduction" of theory and ideology: everything became nationalized. Marxism-Leninism became the legitimation of this new state socialism. Only with the collapse of the Soviet Union did it become an "emperor with no clothes" as Leninism as the Soviet Union's legitimizing ideology sank into the dustbin of history. The result is a condition in which it is impossible to "excavate" the legacy of Lenin without steady determination and strict analysis.

The still powerful elements of pre-Stalinist Marxism were analyzed in the 1960s by Lukács and his anti-Stalinist followers (just as they had been earlier by Gramsci). The resulting "Lenin renaissance" permitted under Khruschev rose to a high philosophical level. By the 1970s many European and anti-Soviet Marxist Communist authors (from Rudolf Bahro to Valentino Gerratana, or even Ferenc Tokei or Bence-Kis) attempted to mobilize these views as a criticism of state socialism, and in the service of constituting an authentic socialist alternative. Such writers made it clear that the historical, political and theoretical–scientific power of Lenin's Marxism could not be reduced exclusively to power management or to the "welfare state" as the Soviet ideologues and their bourgeois adversaries had tried to do for the past several decades. These efforts formed part of an attempt worldwide to sketch a new, critical framework for Marxism. Marxists from a wide range of perspectives sought during these decades to forge a kind of "third way" between the preservation of state socialism and the restoration of capitalism—a way back to a Marxist politics that could lead to authentic socialism. In contrast to these attempts, which may be considered various expressions of individual and collective freedom, or participatory democracy, the arguments of the anti-Leninists, almost regardless of ideology, all derive from folding Lenin's heritage back into Stalinism. To this day they form vital elements of the discourse of anti-Leninist anti-capitalism.

The reservations voiced with regard to Lenin's Marxism are understandable, as it only became widely apparent after the collapse of the Soviet Union that this historically specific intellectual and practical achievement, which no longer served state legitimation, can resist liberal and nationalist justification of the system. At the same time, the internal logic of Lenin's Marxism can only be resuscitated through a new combination of Marx's theory of social formations with revolutionary anti-capitalist practice. Yet another subjective ground for the rejection of Lenin's Marxism on scientific grounds by leftist experts in academia is that Lenin's ideas philosophically resist fragmentation by discipline as the experience of many decades has shown. All its constituent elements point toward the totality, the indivisible process. Following Marx, Lenin knocked down the walls separating science from philosophy, and theory from practice. Lenin's theoretical work cannot possibly be separated from the movement overcoming the capitalist system. In this sense his Marxism is linked indissolubly to the workers movement in the 20th century as a surprisingly adept methodological tool for the apprehension of processes as a whole within different frameworks. Marx's philosophical and economic achievements may continue apart from any revolutionary workers movement, but not Lenin's. Until 1917 all his theoretical and political arguments were aimed at the workers movement and revolution. After 1917, as the founder of a Soviet state in the grips of the acute contradictions between holding on to power and the announced aims of the revolution, between tactics and strategy, Lenin tended to vacillate, becoming increasingly aware that the objectives of the revolution had to be postponed for the unforeseeable future.

The origins of Lenin's Marxism

Lenin's Marxism derives from different directions, each representing in its time an opportunity for changing society in a revolutionary way. These included the French Enlightenment and revolutionary Jacobinism as the inheritance of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, without which it would not be possible to transcend traditional society. Then there was the Paris Commune as the apex of French socialism. Among his Russian roots we find Chernishevsky and the Westerners (Herzen, Bielinski, and others), reinforcing and complementing one another, as well as the revolutionary Narodniks, the mainstay of the Russian Jacobin tradition. All these Lenin synthesized in the name of Marx and Engels, absorbing a lot, particularly the interpretation of philosophical materialism, from the earlier generation of Russian Marxists, chiefly Plekhanov. He finally he absorbed the ideology and practice of modern workers movement organization from German social democracy, chiefly Kautsky.

Every one of the sources of Lenin's Marxism combined in the articulation of theory with practice, of the class approach to culture and politics. And yet Lenin resisted the vulgar ideology of class, the populist perception of class struggle, and the appeal to its negative counterpoint, the teleological abstraction of reality. In Lenin's "theoretical practice" the basic issue is always the relation between action and theory, the transitions, the elaboration of the contacts between the two. The sources of his Marxism resolved him upon an anti-messianic and anti-utopian approach. Lenin's interest in long-range objectives was deeply pragmatic. Finally, the issues he raised and the solutions he advocated always incorporated the objections or conclusions of his comrades in debate. In this sense, Lenin's comrades in the Second International also belong to the array of sources that influenced his Marxism: in addition to Plekhanov and Kautsky, there was Bernstein and the young Struve, Berdiaev and the ethical socialism of his younger years, Maslov and Trotsky, Bogdanov and Pannekoek, Bakunin and Sorel, and Luxemburg and Bukharin. And in addition, there were the "leftist" tendencies with which he had to contend in the aftermath of the revolution, which postulated a permanent revolution at a time when the counter-revolution was already underway. Lenin transcended these tendencies—albeit with grave contradictions. Nevertheless, his responses to their queries reflected a narrowing of alternatives, even in the particular political context of his office.

Lenin was an independent thinker, but the idea that he created a distinct theoretical system that can be denominated "Leninism" is a Stalinist invention. What he did was rediscover, reenergize, and deepen elements of the Marxist tradition that mainstream European social democracy was intent on burying. Certainly, his Marxism was a Marxism, and not the theory of a "conspiratorial party."

The issue of organization

Lenin's notion of a centralized, vanguard, and underground party ("the party of professional revolutionaries") is usually ascribed to its Russian origins and, indeed, this has some factual basis. The historical experience of building an underground party was important to Lenin's Marxism. His "theory of party" was a product of this. What remains important is Lenin's conception of the "workers' party" as a social counter-power, a political and cultural leader of a network of civil society organizations, which never exclusively signified the party of manual laborers. In this context, the party becomes a network promoting understanding and articulation of interests, the "organizational form of proletarian class consciousness," as Lukács put it. This party was the demiurge of a broad, horizontally and vertically segmented social resistance, the "moving force of which is the proletariat." In Lenin's concept and practice the cadre of the "counter-society" is the underground and centralized party. Thus, in Lenin's theory the historical role of the party (social democratic, later communist) was not simply to "import class consciousness into the proletariat from the outside" (this was already understood by Kautsky, when Lenin "inherited" the idea), but rather that the party, as part of the social class, indeed "its most revolutionary part," becomes an independent actor with a vested interest in the conscious, revolutionary transformation of society. He raised the issue already in April 1917 when he argued that the existence of the party is justified only as long as the class of wage-earners has not created the economic and political conditions for its own liquidation. He had no ready-made theory to the effect that the party should become the embodiment of the missing components of socialism, whether in organization, in theory, or in sociology. One cause and consequence of the one-party system that eventually emerged in the U.S.S.R. was that the party itself took on the functions of the proletariat. But even the communist parties that came into existence elsewhere in Europe included only the most revolutionary strata of the working class. Lenin was aware that in this situation the evolution of the party was impacted by the combination of bureaucratic pragmatism and revolutionary messianism. Proletarian class consciousness was increasingly embodied in the Russian Bolshevik Party as a kind of substitute: The organizational issue was thus raised to the level of the general issue of application of state power. Looking at it from the point of view of the 1930s, the "*etat*ization" of the party became inevitable with the defeat of European revolution.

Lenin never adequately explained the failure of the revolutionary breakout in Western Europe. Analyzing the causes of the ideological crisis of Second International Marxism in his magisterial work, *History and Class Consciousness*, the young Lukács came to the conclusion that Menshevism and economism, or the emphasis on the role of the workers' aristocracy and on their bourgeoisification, probably did not affect the "totality of the issue, that is, its essence." In recognizing the "limits of revolutionary spontaneity," Lukács found that it was not enough to merely enlighten the masses with propaganda in order to endow them with consciousness sufficient to overcome the impasse. The party must hold "the entire proletariat" through its direct immediate interests, according to this argument: "the experiences of the revolutionary struggles have failed to yield any conclusive evidence that the proletariat's revolutionary fervor and will to fight corresponds in any straight forward manner to the economic level of its various parts."[2] Thus, Lukács came to the decisive role of "forcing decisions" by increasing the role of the people in the Leninist organization.

The older Lukács, in polemics with his younger self, discovered the weak points of Lenin's analysis regarding the party and proletarian class consciousness some fifty years later in his book *The Ontology of Social Being*. The elder Lukács was no longer seeking the resolution of the basic problem in the "ideological backwardness of the proletariat." Neither the mechanistic theory of spontaneity, nor the superficial understanding of the importation of class consciousness from the outside could "adequately" explain the crisis in the anti-capitalist consciousness of the proletariat. In his critique of Lenin he drew attention away from the ideological aspect and focused on the economic aspect, on the changes in the nature of the capitalist economy, and on the subjective consequences of these changes. "Lenin's general thinking—contrasting Marx's concept in a revolutionary way with the reality of the present... placed too much emphasis on revolutionizing the ideology. Hence he did not direct this ideology specifically on the object to be revolutionized, the capitalist economy."[3] Lenin was unable to identify the economic features of the "latest" stage of capitalist development, in the transformation of the workers movement in the "developed countries." Thus, according to the late Lukács, economic interest as a social motive was not at the center of Lenin's thought in the years following the revolution. Lenin provided a means to break out from the notion of apologetics found in *Realpolitik*, only to become the theoretician of a new version of the same. The party itself became the organization embodying this new *Realpolitik*, eventually becoming the party-state, the objective of which was no longer to locate the rights to power in the working class but to preserve the power of an isolated elite. Lukács argued, "The ideological generalization [of Lenin's formulations from this period gave Stalin and his followers the opportunity to present their own ideology, which is the exact opposite [of Lenin's] in every significant respect, and not its direct continuation."[4]

Uneven development and the hierarchy of the world system: is revolution still possible?

Lenin started off from the contemporary analysis of capitalism. His point of departure was his understanding of the development of capitalism in the Russia toward the end of the 19th century as both a general and a specific manifestation of capitalism. Even before 1905, Lenin recognized the integration of Russia in the world system as a process, which today we might describe as "semi-peripheral integration," whereby pre-capitalist forms were preserved in accordance with capital's own interests. Capitalism thereby subordinated pre-capitalist forms within its own processes. Lenin was able to tie the mixing of pre-capitalist and capitalist forms to the concept of internal colonialism under the Tsarist regime. He also identified the existence of a center-periphery relation inside Russia as a form of internal colonialism. He was aware not only of the tripartite structural hierarchy that Wallerstein specifies as means of explaining the uneven relations of capitalism, but also of a hierarchy within regions and nation-states, such that the development of the core is not understood simply as the result of surplus extraction from the periphery.

Learning the lessons of the Great War, Lenin offered a theory regarding the hierarchical constitution of the capitalist world system, outlining the so-called law of the uneven development of capitalism in the age of imperialism. Within this framework he regarded dynamics at the colonial periphery as the by-product and manifestation of international capitalist competition and capital accumulation. Parallel to this was the contradictory alliance between anti-capitalist "proletarian resistance" and the struggles for national independence of third world capitalism—a struggle that ties in with the anti-regime struggle of the semi-periphery with the center (primarily in Russia).

The break with the Eurocentric worldview entailed a total theoretical, political, and organizational break with revisionist social democracy in the summer of 1914. That was when the official nuclei of social democracy in Europe almost everywhere decided to support the imperialist governments of their respective countries. In the process of Lenin's examinations, he was able to outline not only the historical forms of nationalism, but also nationalism in its manipulations, its quasi-religious function within ruling class policies and propaganda. The collapse of social democracy in 1914 made Lenin acutely aware that it represented primarily the interests of the upper echelon, of the "bourgeois-inclined" stratum of the proletariat. Revisionist social democracy was the political expression of those who had surrendered the concept and praxis of the universal revolution and class struggle as theorized by Marx.

Although Lenin wrote no original works, whether in sociology or in philosophy, he clearly outlined the practical movement and theoretical requirements necessary for the overthrow of capitalism. Nevertheless he did not fully envision the particular political, sociological, psychological, and organizational configuration that arose in a consequence of the very uneven development of global capitalism that he himself had discovered. In other words, he did not fully realize the consequences that uneven development within the world system would impose. In fact, this would become obvious only in our own day. As we know, history can never provide decisive proofs on theoretical issues, and the developments after 1945 certainly did not validate the expectations of Lenin, or of Marx. Rather than the capitalism of the center growing ripe for socialist revolution, it stabilized in the form of the welfare state. Acknowledging this is not to excuse the historical role of social democracy. On the contrary, since the "end of history" did not occur in 1989, one need not be a prophet to foresee that the need for the "revolutionary salvation" of the world will rise again.

The method and philosophy of revolution

The Great War signaled the arrival of a new period, one that promised the fulfillment of the conditions for the revolution. At the same time, a turn took place in Lenin's revolutionary tactics inspired by his studies of Hegel in consequence of which he came to an integrated conception of theory, politics, and organization. From the beginning of the war his revolutionary strategy was based on the premise that there could be no compromise with any pro-war attitude or with pacifist half-solution. Lenin realized that the war had engendered a potentially revolutionary situation within Russia (and in Europe). He addressed the masses that had no interest in pursuing the war, because he counted on the evolution of the subjective conditions of a revolutionary situation. Hence, he broke with the centrists and called for a new International. Authors who argue that Lenin's Marxism elicited a radical reinterpretation of subjectivism, mainly as a result of his reading of Hegel, are correct. Lenin became aware of the historical circumstances that caused the awakening of the consciousness of the individual and of the masses. He understood that these could provide a "foundation" for revolutionary politics. That is, the objective relations of forces could be reconfigured, since even ten may suffice to confront the war, and under the new set of circumstances, millions could join them. Lenin knew this by the time recruits were marching to the front, singing in high spirits. In contrast to the elitist and speculative "mass philosophies" and the utopian, "prophetic" socialists, Lenin, on the basis of his study of Hegel and Marx, emphasized the ideas and practices of revolutionary change. It was partly this challenge that motivated his philosophical studies and debates, as well as the notion that the revisionism of official social democracy was striving to "save" the collapsed world order. Their empiricism or neo-Kantian "messages" sought to lull workers with the promise of the pacification of the capitalist order.

The opinion of some experts, that at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries Lenin considered revisionism merely as an ideological or political aberration, would suggest to us that the Bernsteinian "turn" (reconciliation of capitalism and the workers' movement) has been validated in light of recent decades. Ultimately, they argue, social reforms, rather than social revolution, have found their justification. Of course, this apologetic revisionism does not stand up to analysis, because it continues to reflect only the Eurocentric view of the core countries. The global capitalist system did not overcome the starvation affecting hundreds of millions, the crises, the wars, the dictatorships, nor the unemployment, the social and cultural alienation. Lenin's Marxism strived for *totality* in its manner of contemplation. That is, in contrast to his previous contemplative materialism, he moved in the direction of an "activist dialectical practical philosophy." With the Great War, the time had come when the proletariat could take its fate into its own hands world-wide. In contrast with Western social democracy and the partial solutions it offered since the turn of the century, Lenin took the position of considering the whole. He restored the Hegelian Marxist theoretical and methodological awareness, based on "totality," to its rightful place, including, first of all, the "qualitative leap" of revolutionary change, the dialectical dismissal of the old civilization. In accord with its basic objective, Lenin's Marxism had arrived at the theory and practice of social transformation in the historical moment when it did indeed prove possible to break through the surface of the capitalist world order, at least for a time.

In Lenin's social theory history provides multiple potentialities. Hence, the art of revolutionary politics is contained in recognizing and finding a way among alternatives. This does not necessarily signify "from the perspective of the proletariat" a choice of the most radical revolutionary action. The starting point can only be what is specifically possible. In Lenin's thought the prerequisite for determining what is and what is not possible resides in the historical, concrete analysis of political relations and the respective power of the classes, a selection of the direction of change and of strategy for securing lasting allies for the working class.

Lenin's theoretical and political theses, grounded in historical and economic fact, held that the Tsarist autocracy could only be dislodged by revolution. This was accompanied by his recognition that the Russian bourgeoisie could play "no leading role" in the revolution. For Plekhanov, such an assessment of the Russian bourgeoisie was disagreeable. Lenin, by contrast, grasped the Russian "national revolution" or "bourgeois revolution" as a joint venture of the urban workers and the landless peasantry. This is precisely what the events of 1905 demonstrated. This naturally led to the well-known thesis that "the bourgeois revolution cannot be separated from the proletarian revolution by a Chinese wall." With capitalist globalization reaching a higher level by the time of the Great War, this view was vindicated globally as the movement of the disgruntled masses of armed workers and peasants, as well as the movements of the nationalities gained momentum and

"Lenin's legacy" continues on page 4

Cultural resistance, continued from page 1

capitalism, as if all one needs to do is snap out of it, as though the world were only just sleepwalking. In Reverend Billy's rhetoric, what constrains our freedom in the modern world is understood as a mass addiction to consumption. In the language of politics, the utopian character of Reverend Billy's performative activism is little more than a promotion of the petty bourgeois demand for "local economies" and the romantic return to a more immediate experience that was supposedly existent prior to the exchange-relation in capitalism, or else to an earlier configuration of capitalism—back in the "good old days." However sincerely intended, Reverend Billy's activism, in terms of form as well as content, is hard to distinguish from what a viral ad campaign stunt might look like.

On the other hand, considering cultural resistance purely by the criteria of art, or aesthetics, one cannot help but note that in its execution cultural resistance art typically strives only to transmit an idea or attitude. Its medium and form of expression merely becomes a vehicle. The particular qualities of the aesthetic object and its medium of expression lose their authority and become incidental, and thus largely insignificant in their individual, idiosyncratic qualities. Each new artwork offers only that which is shared, familiar, and redundant. Its material properties end up becoming an illustration for a political or ethical message. Even when the message is new, the relationship between the material and the message is seldom ever novel. Paradoxically, cultural resistance often takes the path of least resistance in terms of its aesthetic presentation because the mere presentation of a message precludes, a priori, those tensions, ambiguities, and deferments of resolution that distinguish art from advertisement, traffic signs, and smoke signals. Prioritizing the issue of transmitting its political message in the most efficient and accessible way as possible, the formal elements of cultural resistance willfully accommodate themselves to the status quo—that is, to the current political situation, in which all political groups, right and left, vie for the sleekest political package, and all ideas are mangled in order to fit this Procrustean bed before they have even fully formed. Form becomes a mere instrument for expressing content that is outside the experience it brings. Or, as one of the most predominate curators and critics of cultural resistance projects, Nato Thompson, writes, cultural resistance artists use aesthetics as "tools" in order to bring in "political issues to an audience outside the insular art world's doors."[7]

Cultural resistance is often defended on the grounds that it creates "pre-figurative political space," as if the work or performance is able to construct "temporary zones" of "freedom" that anticipate what a post-capitalist world would look like. Here the questions of art and politics are merged—it takes a certain aesthetic arranging to create a zone in which people can feel "free" or see the injustice of the status quo more clearly. Nato Thompson further describes this strategy to make cultural resistance projects to function much like a "spa" that can temporarily ease the modern subject from the overwhelming speed of life of neoliberal capitalism. As he says, "In this spasmodic era, we find the arts recalibrated as a temporal, spatial, and bodily escape."[8] However, what is troubling about treating cultural resistance in this way is the fact that setting up alternative "spas" to clear out the senses functions no differently than going off on holiday only to return to the drudgery of everyday life once again. Cultural resistance is based in the notion that "pre-figurative politics" participates in the creating the *semblance* of momentary freedom rather than making legible the unfreedom that still remains, underlaying all apparent choices as well as any fleeting, ecstatic fantasies of escape. In the case of Reverand Billy, when one is "saved" from the veil of consumer culture one takes solace in one's ability to make sophisticated consumer choices while capitalism as an oppresive and exploititve system not only continues, but is primed to expand to a new frontier in the increasingly profitable market for "ethical consumer goods." To imagine oneself as temporarily "free" or outside of bleak social conditions only strengthens the system all the more.

As I asked at the outset of my remarks, why is it that, in our historical moment, we find this urge to overtly link artistic struggles with political struggles, and subsume one to the other? Indeed, this a trope has been a theme since the early 20th century, but the absence of proponents arguing for art's autonomy in the present day forces us to understand the political commitment of art as cultural resistance in a new light. While it was once thought that a new world and society was around the corner (in the case of the constructivists), today this is no longer the case. I take this trend to be an expression of the Left's current political helplessness, as an eager and desperate urge to overcome very real social ills when all possible options to do so seem unreachable. In response, so-called progressive artists (and activists) have become impatient with the peculiar facets of their practices, and disenchanted with the failed goals of modernist artistic autonomy However, it is not simply a matter of making a compromise between autonomous art and cultural resistance, as they can only exist antagonistically and are irreconcilable when brought together as a whole. The politically committed art of today is only a shadow of yesterday's, partly because its audience is politically confused, while autonomous art remains an impossibility. Adorno identified a tension between Brecht and Beckett, as exemplars of "committed" art versus "autonomous" art. But today we are confronted with ever more obtuse aesthetic symptoms that further obscure the problem of freedom. Cultural resistance fails to transform history by overcoming its Brechtian phantasm, which was arguably a more provocative approach towards politically committed art than what we are presented with today. Meanwhile, contemporary, "formal" art has become routinely neo-modern and complacent with familiar styles. What used to be two opposite poles in productive tension are now two dismal resemblances of each other. Each is *pastiche*.

Cultural resistance art, in falsely synthesizing politics and art, assumes that art as an autonomous field has little of importance to actually say about politics, and vice-versa. To take the compatibility of politics and art, as they exist now, for granted is tantamount to naturalizing the impossibility of both. As Adorno reminds us, autonomous art fulfills the desiderata of politically committed art better than it itself can, since "non-conceptual knowledge" can communicate by signaling the issue of freedom, or the lack thereof.[9] But even this might no longer be the case, as autonomous art, much like art as cultural resistance, has become a caricature of itself. Art and politics each seeks to change the world: but in different ways. Their approaches are not incompatible, but they are not identical either. Though the "correct" approach cannot be worked out in advance, it is clear that art's autonomy must be defended, as it is clear that any demand for art's autonomy cannot be construed as resignation, nor merely as a call to imitate the art of another historical era. **|P**

1. Herbert Marcuse, "Art and Revolution" in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 105, emphasis added.
2. Ibid., 106. Marcuse actually attributes this observation about Courbet to the surrealist André Breton. He is probably referring to Breton's 1935 essay "Political Positions of Today's Art." See André Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 212-233.
3. Marcuse quoting André Fernigier, ibid., 110.
4. Ibid, 106-107. Marcuse further argues that art's political effect resides in the ability to render new techniques or "translating reality into a new aesthetic form." The creation of a new perceptible reality out of our existing one is where art's political potential lies.
5. Ever since the 1970s, the politics of resistance has been the battle cry from the activist left. As Žižek notes, the politics of resistance assumes that capitalism as a world-historical force stabilized itself as a form of social domination, and is now objectively impossible to overcome. In response, the Left assumes its role to "resist" certain aspects of capitalism, or to simply reform its structures in order to make a "better" more "humane" capitalism. From this perspective, human emancipation—and even political emancipation—becomes cynically viewed as a pipedream and ipso facto an impossible feat. See Slavoj Žižek, "Resistance is Surrender," *London Review of Books*, Vol. 29 No. 22 (15 November 2007) . <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n22/slavoj-zizek/resistance-is-surrender>. Or, to see a broad historical outline of how the politics of resistance has come to be, see Stephen Duncombe's remarks at the forum in "The 3Rs: Reform, Revolution, and 'Resistance'—The Problematic Forms of 'Anticapitalism' Today," *Platypus Review* #4 (April 2008). A video of the event is available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2007/11/12/the-3-rs-reform-revolution-and-resistance/>.
6. For the most exemplary debates on this matter, see Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007).
7. See Nato Thompson, "Trespassing Relevance," *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 14.
8. Nato Thompson, "Contractions of Time: On Social Practice from a Temporal Perspective," *e-flux Journal* #20 (November 2010): 2. Also available online at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/view/186>.
9. Theodor Adorno, "Commitment," *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 193.

Lenin's legacy, continued from page 3

intimated the possibility of another revolution, namely the revolution of the workers, soldiers and peasants premised on land reform and on exit from the war. Though Lenin called this simply "proletarian revolution," he was perfectly aware that a purely proletarian revolution was impossible in Russia. His well known, intermittent debates with Trotsky reflect how complex was the actual relationship of policy making and theory.

Yet Lenin had to modify the notion, inherited from Marx, regarding the world revolution and the law of uneven development ("the weakest link in the chain of imperialism"). He argued that world revolution, as a long-range historical process, may indeed begin in Russia. The Russian revolution might well become "the spark" of world revolution. Although Lenin knew well that this was "merely" a historical possibility, he also knew that nothing could be worse than the war itself (even if capitalist civilization was nowhere near its end). Lenin drew his political conclusions from these facts. Other leaders of European Marxism, such as Rosa Luxembourg and Karl Liebknecht, agreed.

The socialist perspective: The contradiction that has no resolution

If only because of the limits imposed by historical circumstance and individual mortality, Lenin was able to provide only a very limited Marxist answer to the issue of having to resort to a dictatorship even against its own social base, for the sake of preserving Soviet power. On the one hand, he tried to compensate for political oppression by proclaiming in opposition to the "remaining" and ever stronger state power that "the working class must defend itself against its own state." He left unexplained how it could do so with the support of that very state. In other words, the workers must confront the state, yet defend the state and all its institutions at the same time. There was no dialectical solution to such a contradiction. Moreover, there was another contradiction without resolution: Lenin reserved to the party and the state the capacity for extra-economic compulsion, which was proportional to the lack of conditions for realizing socialism. Even Peter the Great had to resort "to barbarian methods to sweep away the barbarian conditions." The earlier theory and practice of social self-defense in Lenin's ideas not only grew faint, but was eventually completely displaced by the Stalinist turn, which later obviously contributed to the fall of state socialism. (The "ideologizing" of the unplanned developments of "state socialism" is completely absent from Lenin's ideas, and this absence was one of the theoretical sources in the lively debate engaged in by Trotsky and his comrades, joined later by others (including Jean-Paul Sartre), challenging the coherence and meaning of the Stalinist thesis of "socialism in one country.")

The dead-end of war communism, the removal of ideology from the military measures accompanying a specific kind of state socialism, the realization that the change of social forms can be carried out only partially, was formulated in Lenin's thinking. The New Economic Policy entailed the recognition that neither direct workers' democracy nor cooperative economics built on social self-government could be established. He identified this stage as one of "transition within the transition," as state capitalism overseen by the Soviet state. Unlike the majority of the Bolsheviks, Lenin stressed at this point that the new society could not be introduced by a revolutionary assault. Increasing development or reforms could not be confused with a revolutionary leap, if the human, subjective boundaries of development and the significance of step by step progress is taken into account. Yet Lenin never turned into a Bernsteinian, as some authors have suggested. He never dissolved the Marxist heritage into methodological and scientific parts. Rather, he accepted the contradiction, he conceived of it as a relative whole or as a system that could not be complemented or "pluralized," a concept which could not be deconstructed at will. As opposed to anarchist and dogmatic thinking, which treated totality as an absolute, and stressed the universality of gradualness, segmentation, the partial tasks, the particularism of revisionism (and of liberalism), Lenin emphasized a totalizing approach to the totality of the goals of socialism.

Lenin's key discovery after the revolution was precisely the fact that Russia had to assimilate the basic achievements of Western technology and cultural civilization at the same time as attempting to create a new mixed economy. In such circumstances, the Soviet state was called upon to back the competing social sectors, as "islands of socialism." The chief imperative of this wave of "modernization" was to advance the state and the social sectors, because the free market—the uninhibited domination of capital—was understood to be the foundation of human oppression. The autonomy of the individual as the main site of the unfolding of communist society remains elusive in Lenin's legacy as well as in the legacy of the entire period with its insistence on other dimensions of development. In other words, the task of Lenin's Marxism did not lie in replaying the role of Western European liberalism in the nineteenth-century, but in combining the economic and cultural sectors that supported each other. Yet, objective historical circumstances brought about an irreconcilable contradiction between the "political philosophy bent on preserving power" and socio-economic theory (communist theory). This theoretical conception of socialism, originally broached in *State and Revolution,* reactivates certain half-forgotten views of Marx: Socialism would be the outcome of a protracted historical process, the first phase of communism would inaugurate the possibility of a future "community of associated producers," and thereby the possibility of the universal freedom of civilized humanity.

The life work of Lenin reflects that, for him, Marxism as both a theory and political praxis deals directly in the project of going beyond capitalism. For him Marxism was not some sort of abstract discipline valuable for its own sake. Certainly it was not a form of abstract philosophizing about the meaning of life. Science and philosophy are merely tools to achieve human emancipation. An investigation of Lenin's Marxism therefore needs to start by properly mapping its own historical background. For at the center of his thought and of all his activities, we find the exploration of opportunities for the proletarian revolution in Russia and the world at large, and the inherent potential for their practical realization.

The specific historical form of the revolutionary trajectory examined here—from an aspect of its end-goal, social equality, that is, the end of social classes and the achievement of freedom—was stranded on historical circumstances and human limitations. At the same time however, the methodology of world social transformation survives the failure of the practical experiment. This is the contradiction that modern Marxist tendencies live through day in and day out. The conclusions are still in the process of being drawn. The modern triumph of revisionism has revived the ideological hypothesis confuted by the blood-stained history of the 20th century, the hypothesis that capitalism can be rendered globally civilized, can have a human face. Revisionism's main discovery was that capitalism can be civilized and can espouse civilization at the "center" of the capitalist system. What Lenin understood was the meaning of the system itself, namely that if it can be "improved" in some way (in fact, we must strive for such improvement locally and internationally), this can only be achieved at the expense of the welfare of peripheral populations. Thus, genuinely improving the system for all requires overcoming the system. To this day, the question of whether capitalist civilization can be conquered by means of social emancipation remains. Any attempt at answering this question cannot overlook Lenin's theoretical and political contribution. In a writing dedicated to Lenin, his political adversary, Nikolai Ustrialov, looking at the Bolshevik leader's achievements from the point of view of the "greatness of the Russian nation," opined that Lenin was deeply rooted in Russian history, that his place was clearly among the "great Russian national heroes," embodying Peter the Great and Napoleon, Mirabeau and Danton, and Pugachev and Robespierre all at the same time.[5]

Slavoj Žižek has summarized the problem on a Marxian footing: "To repeat Lenin does not mean that we must repeat what he achieved, but rather what he was not able to achieve." Even Václav Havel admits, as Žižek notes, that bourgeois democracy has exhausted its own resources and is incapable of resolving the world's basic problems, "but if a Leninist makes this claim, then he is immediately accused of totalitarianism." Lenin's topicality resides in that he transformed his own historical experiences into a set of theoretical concepts that undermine and destroy any justifications of bourgeois society, and in spite of the contradictions involved, provide a tool for those who still think in terms of the possibility of another, more humane world.[6] **|P**

Translated from Hungarian by Mario Fenyo and Balint Bethlenfalvy

1. The transfer of Lenin's ideas into the 21st century according to the leftist critique of the regime is not a matter of individual endeavor or experiment. It is an international phenomenon, involving a group of renowned theoreticians, whose works have been collected under the appropriate title, *Lenin Reloaded*, edited by Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, Slavoj Žižek, and David Fernbach, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
2. Georg Lukács, "Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organization" in *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 305.
3. Georg Lukács, *A társadalmi lét ontológiájáról* [The ontology of social being] Vol. 3, Prolegomena (London: Magveto könyvkiado, 1976), 270.
4. Ibid., 279.
5. Nikoilai Ustrialov, *Nacional-Bolshevizm* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2003), 372-76.
6. Slavoj Žižek, *13 opitov o Lenine* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo Ad marginem, 2003), 252-53.

Immigration, continued from page 2

DW: I really do not know. I have several friends who are Yugoslavs and they are now more tolerant of Tito's form of socialism because of what happened after Tito. However, you cannot say "worker's control" around them because they think "worker's control" as it was in Yugoslavia, which means you had to go to endless talks about how to manage the furnace and the plants. They think a situation where workers actually have control is a hoax, and it was a hoax in certain instances. With China perhaps the problem is even less obvious. China subcontracts and streamlines a lot of small and large businesses, and in many important economic aspects one does not get the sense that China really differs from the United States.

JC: But this raises the question, why is it that a minority rights banner is so much more palatable than, say, a renewed socialist banner? Some of it obviously has to be the negative perception on the part of American anti-Communists. But even the failure of the Left has deep ramifications for the people coming here to escape terrible regimes abroad.

DW: Well, for one thing you can start with the critique of capitalism, which is not impossible. It's right in your face. Look at what happened last fall in France, for instance, with all these strikes against pension reform. It turned out that a high percentage, on the order of 60 percent of the population, supported the strikes, but only 49 percent were opposed to the pension reforms. The same people who supported the strikes but were nebulous on the pension reforms totally supported taking away the niqab (veil) from the two thousand Muslim women in the country who actually wear it, and were violently racist against Muslims and Arabs. So it is a very complicated mixture, but there is this way that people's consciousness changes when you take away their pensions. In this country, people don't even know that the social security age keeps rising, because they are watching reality television!

JC: On the issue of internationalism, there would have to be some sort of organization between workers in Mexico and workers here and elsewhere that are constantly raising consciousness of the idea that capitalism here is capitalism there, and everywhere. Does the absence of such an organization contribute to American anti-immigrant sentiments? What would lead towards a more general emergence of class politics that could articulate real opposition to capitalism?

DW: To me one of the things that I think is so interesting about what happened in Wisconsin is that whenever someone expresses a sense of class consciousness, of any sort of solidarity, one stands in wonder. The level of propaganda we are confronted with is staggering. But, for example, when the cops, who fit the stereotype of classic racist white cops with their Long Island accents, were called in to handle a dispute in the greengrocer strikers, they instead issued tickets to the owner of the shop for violations that they found on site. Let me also emphasize the Dignity Campaign, which underscores the right to organize, the right to work, and includes the right to full legalization. A large percentage of the people in this country would support this if they understood that it is for their benefit. One's class interest is a way of opening minds against racism. **|P**

Transcribed by Ana Lilia Torres

Immigration and the Left: An interview with David Wilson

Jeremy Cohan

Jeremy Cohan publicly interviewed David Wilson, coauthor of The Politics of Immigration (2007)*, on April 19th, 2011 at NYU. The original description of the event reads: "Mass marches on May Day 2006 in the U.S., banning of minarets in Switzerland, pogroms in Libya against blacks from Central Africa feared to be mercenaries: Immigration is a central issue faced by the contemporary Left. But as mobilization has waxed and waned, the question of what constitutes an emancipatory response to the problems of immigration in modern society too often remains unaddressed. This interview sought to consider the limits and potentials of current immigration politics on the Left today, in America and globally. What is the future of internationalism?" What follows is an edited transcript of the interview. A full recording of the event is available online at: <http://ia600609.us.archive.org/13/items/TheFutureOfInternationalismImmigration/20110419194020.m4a>.*

JEREMY COHAN: Can you give a telescoped history of the relationship between the Left and immigration in U.S. history? How has immigration figured in Left politics? How have the Left and the labor movement reacted to, been involved in, been led by, opposed, or rejected immigration and immigrants?

DAVID WILSON: To a large extent anything in U.S. history after 1800 is about immigrants. Almost certainly, the wave of immigration from Europe brought a larger contingent of leftists to the U.S. than would have existed natively by the early 1900s without it. Especially in the second half of the 19th century when people from Italy, Eastern Europe, and so on started coming, socialism was very much in the public consciousness in Europe and a lot of it came over through immigration. In Europe there already was this socialist- and anarchist-promoting condition.

The U.S. originally cut off immigration from China and then from most of Asia by 1910. Then, in 1924, they cut off almost all immigration from Europe, except from Northern Europe. This was the period of the "Red Scare," and there was this image of Emma Goldman and Italian anarchists carrying bombs—most of it was not true, but there was an element of truth in it. There were sections of the Socialist Party on the East Coast that were told that this is the United States, there should be some materials in English, and they would say, "Why? We have materials in Yiddish, in German, in Russian, why would we have them in English?" So that is the level at which immigration was connected to the growth of the Left in America.

When immigration was cut off in 1924, older immigrants still considered themselves to be from immigrant families. And, for the same reason that the general population started getting the idea that immigration was abnormal, the Left did too. The Left pretty much lost any sense of how immigration works. Even in the early nineties I would hear amazing statements from people who were really quite progressive; I can still remember when a bunch of Central American and Haitian solidarity groups were planning an event in 1995 that was to have an immigration component. Somebody on the hard left objected that the topic was controversial. I kept running into that.

I think to a large extent the Left in this country started getting interested in immigration again after 2006, when suddenly there was this large demonstration that, if one wasn't already involved in the movement, seemed to come out of the blue. Some were interested in it for valid reasons, while some, out of sheer opportunism, felt they had to instantaneously relate to it. I also think a lot of leftists take liberal positions and simply exaggerate them. So a liberal might take up an ethical defense of the repression of immigrants—an attitude that these dark-skinned victims need our help, as the white man's burden. A lot of the leftists share this view. The idea that leftists had a hundred years ago, with the earlier wave of immigration, is that immigrants were being forced here. They are not coming here because they want to, but because they have been dislodged by global capitalism. Marx directly addresses this in an 1870 letter to Meyer and Vogt in which he talks about Irish immigration. The Irish, he says, are forced into England by English capital. Then they are super-exploited and used as a way of dividing the working class—the English workers against the Irish workers. When the immigrants come here, they're part of the U.S. working class; they are workers just like anybody else and that's the way we should think about it—their interests are the same as our interests.

JC: How have you seen, since 2006 especially, changes in the means of organizing and ways of attempting to articulate the immigration issue in the Left and the labor movement? Do these changes warrant all of the excitement about a renewed Left? What do you see as the positive developments that have allowed this movement to thrive, and have these developments been sufficiently articulated in terms of what a leftist movement might look like?

DW: Cirilo Garcia, who briefly worked with UNITE in the late 1990s, wanted a May Day where all the immigrants didn't go to work. And he started organizing lunchtime rallies on May Day at the Garment Center. (As an aside, there is no Garment Center anymore—that's how quickly things move.) We all thought that Cirilo was great, but crazy; we thought this would never happen. Then, in 2006, immigrants were upset over the Sensenbrenner Bill, and they actually did it, though this doesn't necessarily mean they are going to do it every year. One of the fallacies common to leftist organizing is the idea that what happened this year will happen again next year.

One thing was that the unions realized they were not getting anywhere, they were just losing members, and that a lot of the immigrants came from a more militant background. The militant tradition in this country has been forgotten since the McCarthy era. But immigrants coming here from Central America, for example, are part of this tradition. When they get laid off, they know that the owners are not going to pay the severance, so they sit in the factory and the bosses and owners cannot get the machinery out unless they pay. When this happened in Chicago at Republic Windows the public was appalled.

The unions recognized opportunity, whereas previously the unions had this tradition of just fitting into the normal mold—immigrants speak a foreign language and are hard to organize, etc. Then the unions discovered that immigrants are actually not hard to organize. A few years ago, Latino and Polish workers organized in a kosher meat factory in Brooklyn. The Latino workers got together, formed a union, and put the word out asking who would affiliate with them. For the longest time they could not find a union that wanted them until finally United Food and Commercial Workers, one of the locals, decided to take them on. But it is also difficult to organize because they are scattered, generally fragmented into small shops, and there is a really high turnover. Then, of course, there is the legal situation, which is that immigrants coming here are basically forced to be undocumented; they are "illegal workers." That is the term everyone uses, and with reason. They technically have labor rights, they technically have constitutional rights, but in reality they don't—they can be thrown in jail for months, and then deported. That is always a threat and it makes organizing difficult.

JC: Those structural limitations—the fact that immigrants often work in super-exploited and heavily subcontracted sectors, face immense legal barriers in terms of being represented, are vulnerable to deportation, and so forth—what do those mean vis-à-vis the prospects for large scale immigrant organizing, for immigration to be the vanguard of some sort of reconstituted leftist movement here in the U.S.? Are these structural barriers so deeply entrenched that it is difficult imagine a better labor movement?

DW: I think the idea that some groups are naturally the vanguard is not really true. Regarding structural limitations, somebody from UNITE who went on to be in charge of the AFL-CIO solidarity centers in the Caribbean once said that it is impossible to organize immigrants in little shops. I responded by asking him, "Do you know your union comes out of organizing little shops, the uprising of the twenty thousand?" He said he did not know that! Garment workers were organized in these tiny shops with the demand for an industry-wide contract, which of course these AFL unions did not want, but were forced by immigrant workers to accept. What I am interested in is the other side of your question: the people who are not immigrants and who do not grasp how the system works. The unions supported the employer sanctions in 1986 to a large extent and now they say they are against employer sanctions.

But do leftists here even know what employer sanctions are? When you get a job you need documents to work. Amnesty for immigrants was passed in 1986 as part of a compromise: The undocumented immigrants were able to apply and have a chance at getting legal residency, but in exchange the anti-immigrant groups were successful in getting employer sanctions instated, meaning that employers are fined if they hire undocumented workers, which was ultimately intended to stop immigration as there would be no jobs. There was a war going on in Central America and a debt crisis in Mexico. Immigrants were not migrating because of nice jobs in the United States; they were migrating because thier standard of living had suffered a terrible drop or because their families were being hauled away by death squads and murdered. So they were going to come regardless, but what happens with the imposition of sanctions is that salaries drop, and rights fall by the wayside. It created a situation in which it is easier for employers to exploit immigrant employees. While this legislation was being debated in 1986, no one in the mainstream media mentioned this. It was only after the fact that the *New York Times* ran an article with the view of a Mexican economist who noted this exact effect—that, while wages would fall, immigration would continue unabated—which is precisely what happened. It was hardly an unintentional effect.

Undocumented workers were making about twice as much in 1985, before the employer sanctions went into effect. In other words, undocumented workers were making about 10 percent less than documented workers with the same job skills, English proficiency, and so on. By 1990 it was 20 percent less. As an employer the choice of which workers to hire is like being up against a firing wall, as some of them are willing to work for 15–20 percent less than others. That is what employer sanctions are and the unions actually supported this as a compromise with the ruling class. Some even rationalized it as establishing greater parity between documented and undocumented workers in competition for jobs. Yet by 1999 the AFL-CIO came out against employer sanctions. Business leaders, of course, want to legalize super-exploitation by implementing a guest-worker program.

JC: Do you think it is because of this compromise orientation that some of the more ambitious goals of the immigration movement, most recently identified with the Dream Act, have been scuttled? Or are there other reasons why these initiatives have not seemed to pan out?

DW: What happened in 2006 was a fluke, but I do not think that there has been a descent from 2006. Rather, I think 2006 rose organizing to a higher level. Leftists like the idea of going out and having a demonstration every year. If you are in a country where they give you a holiday on the first of May, as most countries do, then of course there will be marches. It is much harder to march if you have to take a day off. This year May Day falls on a Sunday, so what happens if workers have to give up a Sunday to march?

In 2006 immigrants were really hopeful because there was talk about some sort of legalization, and at the same time some were furious because the Sensenbrenner Bill was a slap in the face. It threatened to allow the arrest of anyone who helped an undocumented worker. On the other hand, I think most of the undocumented immigrants don't actually follow developments on the political level as much as the middle class leftists do, and they are not really aware of all these ins and outs. What immigrants really want, desperately, is legalization, but I don't know if they follow all the compromises. Within the immigrant rights movement the compromisers are the liberals. Every time immigration reform has failed the liberals always turn around and blame those who did not compromise. Liberals in the immigrant rights movement always go to Congress and say, "We've given up everything, to the point we accept exactly what Congress wants." And then the right wing says, "No, we want more"—of course they do!

In June I interviewed some of those who were on a hunger strike in front of Senator Schumer's office. Although it was reported that they were all undocumented workers, some were actually native New Yorkers, but were there to show solidarity. I asked them if they really liked the Dream Act. They all said no, they did not like it because there is a military component, and because it says those born here are innocent while implying that their parents are criminals. The Dream Act is designed, like so many things in this country, to set workers against each other. Although no one liked it, they thought it was the only option. They were told this is the best deal that could be made, and had indeed been told this since 2003. Schumer wanted a package of limited legalization, an expansive guest-worker program, and more sanctions; that is why they were having the hunger strike in front of Schumer's office. The hunger strikers wanted the Democrats to hold out for a better package. When it became obvious that they would not get the package they wanted this year, and the elections were over, then Obama and all the Democrats decided they wanted the Dream Act! When there was a possibility it could have an effect earlier in the year, they said no. After it was too late, they claimed to want the Dream Act, which the Republicans would vote against. Then, at no cost to themselves, they can stand up as heroes for the Latino vote in 2012. Nonetheless, many Latinos are perfectly aware that the Democrats did not do anything for them up until December, when it was too late.

JC: So is there any discussion in this movement, or more generally in the labor world, about some sort of politics independent of the Democratic Party? What would that mean? Or are they resigned to the Democrats?

DW: It isn't just the immigrant rights movement that has this universal idea of democratic rights. The movement is much more focused on workplace issues, much more focused on community issues, rather than thinking about politics as such. When it came to the Dream Act, activists looked at the gay rights movement and sought to use their tactics, getting migrants to come out into the open, to court arrest, by proclaiming their undocumented status, unafraid and unashamed. I think that labor organizing is another key.

JC: You talked about the fetishism of marches and the expectation they would come to be an everyday thing. Obviously, calling for the larger work of organizing is a slower process. Do you feel the way in which labor organizing is happening currently, especially the phenomenon of worker centers, is adequate to the task of enabling the politics that would improve immigrants' lives? For one thing, worker centers usually focus on turning high-profile, middle class opinion on to helping out illegal immigrants, rather than on structural power exerted by immigrants themselves. For another, worker centers are often organized along ethnic lines. In light of that, do you think these centers are adequate to the slow work of organizing immigration and making it part of the larger labor movement that you are calling for?

DW: Formal labor organizing isn't the biggest problem. I am a Luxemburgist on this, in that labor organizing is the rock of Sisyphus: You roll it up the hill and it rolls back down. You need to organize labor, because it is the only way workers can defend their lives—their salaries, their working conditions, and their pensions. However organizing happens, whether it is through worker centers or regular unions, there is always the danger of compromise. The Wobblies used to say that the problem with unions is that they sign contracts. But then when Wobblies started to organize locals they had to sign contracts. You might think that was a hundred years ago, but I had friends who were syndicalist Haitian exiles who, on their return to Haiti in 1999, objected to the idea of signing a contract, but were forced to do so when they organized their own local. And they ultimately lost control of that local when workers objected to the bad contract they had signed. The form of unions that now exists in Haiti is the same as that of the AFL-CIO, except that leftist politics still exists in Haiti—there is still a belief in the class fight. As for worker centers, there are some who believe in them only or primarily because they are ethnically centered and they don't want to organize with people who are not in their own ethnic group, which is unfortunate. On the other hand, they are often successful when they work with each other and unions, as sometimes happens.

In 1999 Jerry Dominguez, who is now a union organizer in California, set up what was basically a little worker center where he attempted and failed to organize the workers of greengrocers. He ended up talking to Ernesto Jofre from UNITE 169, which no longer exists. Ernesto Jofre, a Chilean unionist who had been tortured, and a solid leftist, gave his support and invited Dominguez into UNITE. For various reasons UNITE, which doesn't normally support things like this, looked the other way. So, before long there were picket lines in front of five different grocery stores on the Lower East Side, a middle class neighborhood with a lot of yuppies moving in but also a lot of leftists and liberals. There we were, appealing to the middle class, and I recall one woman who exclaimed she had to shop at the store we were picketing, as it was the only convenient place with baguettes. I retorted, "For the sake of the working class, can you go without a baguette for a few days?"

At first it worked—these little greengrocer shops actually signed contracts, and so on. Then the whole thing fell apart. Ernesto died of cancer, there is high turnover, and it is hard to maintain a union in these domains. One result was that, after Steven Greenhouse of the *New York Times* wrote an article on the greengrocers in early 2000, the Central Labor Council, which had been ignoring our strike, suddenly got interested in immigrant rights. Still, no one is allowed to say that immigrant workers are workers, and when their wages fall it lowers the floor for everyone else.

JC: For Luxemburg a union, in some ways, is only as good as the left wing that is achieving consciousness through the activity of that union, only as good as the Left that is there to tell workers that there are limits to union politics, to point out compromises for what they are, and to demonstrate the necessity of a larger political goal, socialism. You have been talking about the earlier, more militant moment in America during which socialists were organizing workers as part of a large-scale working class movement to overcome capitalism, whereas the vast majority of the politicized youth today support immigrant organization in order to increase a minority population's share in the American pie. Do you agree that the element of political consciousness of a working class movement working towards a political goal of overcoming capitalism is missing in the present?

DW: If you ask a lot of Mexicans about the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática), their responses frequently will be, "It compromises too much." So there is that problem with the immigrant rights movement, a problem of organizing on an ethnic basis, of course, which is dividing the working class against other parts of the working class. Straight white men aren't going to do anything for women in the absence of the women's movement, for African-Americans in the absence of the Civil Rights Movement, for gays in the absence of the gay movement. Immigrants need to be involved in the immigrants' movement as they are the ones directly impacted.

JC: The African-American movement is a good example, actually, because wages for black workers are on average lower than they were before the 1960s. There have been great advancements in certain cultural respects, and in civil rights for African-Americans. But in terms of labor, the African-American movement has not really achieved success in a meaningful way.

DW: That is true, and what is also interesting is that those who are most directly impacted by competition for wages with undocumented immigrants are in fact African-Americans and native-born Latinos. Those who say, "Well, they take our jobs," interestingly enough, are from the segments of workers that are least impacted by immigration. Everybody who is actually in the working class is impacted by it because it lowers wages a little bit. There are workers forced off the construction site to work at McDonalds where, despite the worse wages, there is no competition from undocumented immigrants. Based on experience, generally, African-Americans will say that we fought to be able to get into construction sites, for example, and have largely overcome the racism of the building trade unions, but now all sites are filled with immigrants. But if you put it in class terms, that this is dividing the class against itself, then the issue is quickly recognized as analogous to life in the South, where white and black workers were pitted against each other. African-Americans have a better sense of how to deal with immigration, even though they are the ones who are directly impacted. They are a minority, and they had that experience. After the immigrants, they, along with native-born Latinos, are the ones who suffer the most.

JC: In addressing these issues, what forms of political consciousness work? What kinds of educational work have you seen that have contributed to transforming the movement?

DW: There is a type of dialogue we have had on a picket line that starts as discouraging passersby from shopping at this or that store. Before long people drop their objections to unions and are brought around to the unpopular realization that real wages have dropped or stagnated over the last 20 years. I very much support a model that strives to educate. We can argue over certain matters—whether to support the military intervention in Libya, for example—but in doing so, we cannot afford to be distracted or to lose sight of the day-to-day issues.

Q & A

What do you think of larger demographic trends in the United States? What impact might they have in all the various struggles that you have noted? For instance, what will be the significance for immigration and labor organizing of the fact that, in the coming decades, Hispanics will be the largest minority in the United States?

DW: On demographics, the advantage that early European immigrants had, despite all the talk of the Jewish, Slavic, and Italian races as being inferior, was that they could assimilate into the white middle class. Skin color really does make a difference today because, for example, Puerto Ricans, who were encouraged to emigrate in the 1940s and 1950s, and who were U.S. citizens, are still second-class citizens. The new immigrants do assimilate but are assimilated into the so-called minority class and they do not get the advantages of being second-generation immigrants. And if they live in Arizona...

What message would you suggest to unify Hispanics who are completely fragmented, whether it is white Cubans who are anti-Castro, Mexicans, or Chinese immigrants who have experience with so-called Communism? How is one to address migrants who have experience with leftist movements that have failed in every way imaginable?

"Immigration" continues on page 4