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## Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

## Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: [review\\_editor@platypus1917.org](mailto:review_editor@platypus1917.org). All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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The *Platypus Review*

Issue #50 | October 2012

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constantly challenged by what they in fact do. In another word, the proletariat, and shows that they are i would say rather phenomenological. Marx analyzes DH: I would not say "Hegelian," at least not for Leftists, movement?

**Douglas La Rocca:** Would you say Marx positions him-

on himself, reflecting on himself.

"All I'm doing is letting history express itself. I'm bring-

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fundamentalist for them: first, the danger of bureaucracy

international around 1946–1947. Two insights became

dissenting group within the French branch of the Fourier

movement. Marx's originality of the Fourier

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**Interview, continued from page 1**

essay that is part of a polemic between him and Sartre. Lefort writes a phenomenology of the working class. Quite literally, it raises the question of "What do you do when you work? What happens, how does consciousness find itself, lose itself, and so on?" He published it *Les Temps Modernes* when Merleau-Ponty, who was Lefort's teacher, was still part of the journal. Sartre, who was in one of his Stalinist phases, wrote a reply in which he claims, "What Lefort didn't understand is that the working class can never become fully self-conscious, it needs the Party." Lefort polemics back and I won't go further into the exchange, but what it shows is that the dialectic is not simply thesis-antithesis-synthesis - it keeps on going. To that degree, phenomenology, and particularly as it develops with Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, is more adequate than what could be called the "simple" dialectic. In this sense, phenomenology is an example of what Marx calls immanent critique. In his *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx has a phrase that translates roughly like this: "We must make these petrified, reified relations dance by chanting before them their own melody."<sup>2</sup> Note their own melody, not ours. Of course, Marx could be making a claim to know what the melody of the stones is, that the stones do not know their own melody except through the theorist. On the other hand, he could be saying as a phenomenologist, we need to look at them to see what they are saying. Not what we bring them to say, but what they are trying to say. If we think we know what they are trying to say, then we think we know better. It is like when a professor says to a student, "What you're trying to say is ..." But the professor does not actually know what the student wanted to say.

**DL:** In Luxemburg, too, you traced a tension between a theory of and a theory for the proletariat.

**DH:** Luxemburg is in a sense why I turned to this series of questions. There is the volume of essays I edited of hers, in the introduction to which I made her into much more of a Trotskyist than she actually is. When I re-read it a year or two later, in preparation for writing the paper in *The Marxian Legacy*, I said basically that Luxemburg did not have the answers. The first part of the paper is on Luxemburg as a spontaneous—all the things about her that make her so appealing, so attractive, so alert to what's happening in the world. But then, in the second part, I asked why in her refutation of Bernstein's revisionism, her critiques of Kautsky's orthodoxy and so on, each time, in order to clinch her point, she quotes Marx as if it were sacred text. And so I asked, how could she be, at the same time, the most spontaneous and the most orthodox of Marxists? I just tried to pose this problem. Before publishing, I delivered it at a conference of Luxemburgists, where criticizing orthodoxy was verboten. On the third day of the conference, incidentally, the coup d'état in Chile against Allende took place.

**SL:** In preface to the *The Unknown Dimension*, you nod to the formative role played by the Civil Rights Movement in the formation of the New Left, mentioning specifically the Montgomery Bus Boycott and SNCC's agitations in the South. This is before you go on to mention May 1968, "the indomitable people of Vietnam," and the women's movement. Elsewhere in your work, when speaking of your experience and travels in Europe in the late 1960s, you relate your feeling upon returning to the U.S. that the New Left here was or had become "parochial." What was the significance of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement to the New Left internationally and what were the limitations in how Americans (and Europeans) recognized and practiced internationalism in the early 1960s? How did the centrality of opposition to the Vietnam War figure? Does the current preoccupation with "cosmopolitanism" and human rights represent a legacy of or a falling off from New Left internationalism?

**DH:** For the "indomitable people of Vietnam," there are lots of things I have written that appear to play to the prejudices of my intended audience, the Left. There are lots of naive assertions. One might call them utopian, but they show little real understanding of the world.

One of the first articles published was in 1966 in the SDS journal, *New Left Notes*. The title was "The Reactionary Radicals." I was asking about some of our dogmas. Without claiming that I somehow anticipated something, there was always a certain suspicion, a certain fear, of what you call here "parochialism." "Reactionaries" were, if you really want to take that phrase seriously, fascists. I wasn't saying that SDS was fascist, but, perhaps, "parochial" fits here.

When I came back from Paris to the states, SDS was in its death throes. I was in Austin at the convention where the break-up began to take place. The Progressive Labor Party was spouting its slogans, Maoism was emerging, and the like. There was this idea that we students had to become workers. We were to deny our own spontaneity, our own judgment. We wanted truth, rather than judgment. So we as students had to somehow assimilate to the working class, especially since "we" had been thrown out of SNCC. I was at the Champaign-Urbana convention when SNCC said, "No white people." Out of this comes Maoism and, in the end, the break-up of the New Left. Not immediately; it was still ongoing until at least 1976. There was still a quest, at least on campuses, to think. When I was a young professor at Stony Brook, we would meet with groups of students, both graduates and undergraduates. We were searching for something different, something new. Was that "parochial"? No, I think it is better understood as groping around. But there was always that desire to be part of history, to become part of something bigger, broader. That explains, in part, the break-up.

The first half of the '70s is dominated by a kind of guilt. This is why one became a leftist in America in the 1970s and 1980s: guilt for being part of this wealthy, imperialist nation. Remember Lenin's *Theses on Imperialism*. Why is there no revolution in America or in England? Because imperialism draws in surplus profits that are used to buy off the working class, etc., etc., etc. So there's this idea that we're guilty, that we must do something, sacrifice ourselves to redeem our debt to the exploited. And remember, this is the time of the Vietnam war. Intellectually, what is happening is that a couple of journals are thrashing around. The three I knew were

Radical America, which I took part in, *Telos*, and *New German Critique*. If you look at the back issues of *Telos* we had the fortune and the misfortune of conducting our education in public. Numbers six and seven contained studies of Lukács, who was not yet translated. And there was Korsch. We didn't have teachers. On the one hand, this was good. But it also meant we made lots of errors. When I see students' books today on these figures, they are much more sophisticated. They see all sorts of things we didn't see. This brings me back to the title of that early book, *The Marxian Legacy*. We were confronting the question of what it meant to bear a legacy. Is it a burden? Sartre says somewhere, "When I give my child a name I'm determining that child's future essentially." Similarly, when I get a legacy, I'm also determined. On the other hand, without a legacy, what am I?

**DL:** You took up this question in an essay on Merleau-Ponty, where you pointed to how both Marxism and philosophy share a concern with their own self-becoming. As you then said, "Each is what it is only as having become, and each is continually reinterpreting the sense of the distance it has traveled. More: each lives the paradox that the distance is only a return to the source, for the task and the goal remain constant."<sup>3</sup> At that time, you sought to undertake a critique of the New Left on the basis of its failure to move beyond "the critique of everyday life" to what you termed "the historical." What distinguished you and your comrades within the New Left from others in the movement such that you felt a need to work through and re-appropriate the Marxian legacy? What blocked the New Left from thinking itself historically?

**DH:** We knew languages and we knew history, which other people didn't know, and we were not content with what we had. There was always something more, something further to be discovered. For example, I wrote a 30- or 40-page introduction for *The Unknown Dimension* which was a sort of history of the period after the Russian Revolution. I had to cobble that together. There was no non-dogmatic leftist historical analysis of that period. I haven't re-read that introduction since. In some ways, I do not dare to since I am sure it has many shortcomings. But I was also helped by Karl Klare, who, like many in the New Left, was a red-diaper baby. He knew the classical history of the working class. His dad was a Teamsters' organizer. You have probably read his brother Michael Klare in *The Nation*. Karl knew a lot of this stuff, particularly about the Eastern Europeans, because his dad, I believe, had been a member of the party. I never asked, but he probably left in 1956 with the Hungarian revolution. I, on the other hand, am the son of a school teacher from Ohio and a traveling salesman who dropped out of college after a semester. I had no background in this stuff whatsoever.

**SL:** Keeping with the '70s, in a recent volume honoring the work of your lifelong friend Andrew Arato, you describe when you first met in 1970 as follows:

[At that time] the New Left knew that it had to be more than a counter-cultural movement, and that it could not simply mobilize the resentment of those who might be drafted into the vain and vainglorious anti-communist crusade in Vietnam. "From Resistance to Revolution" was the vague slogan of those who began to call themselves "comrades" as they abandoned what they called their bourgeois liberalism for one or another variant of Marxism (a few Stalinists, more Trotskyists, still more Maoists and of course the Castroist-Guevarist).<sup>4</sup>

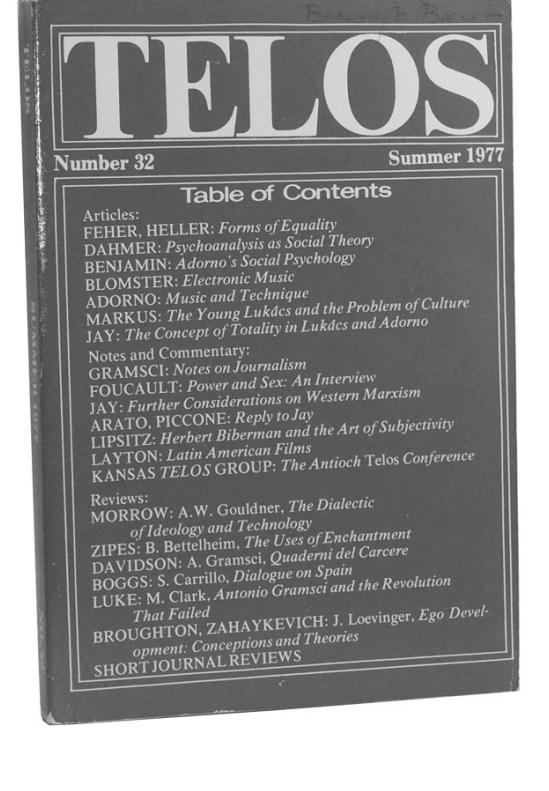
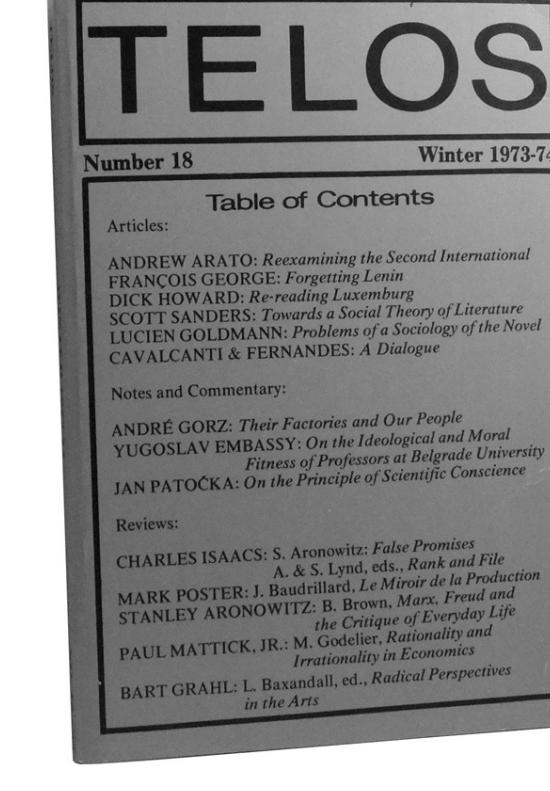
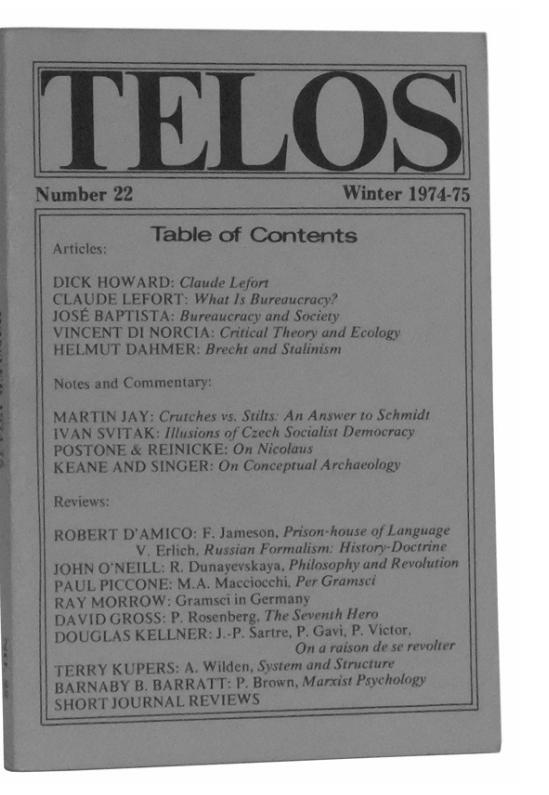
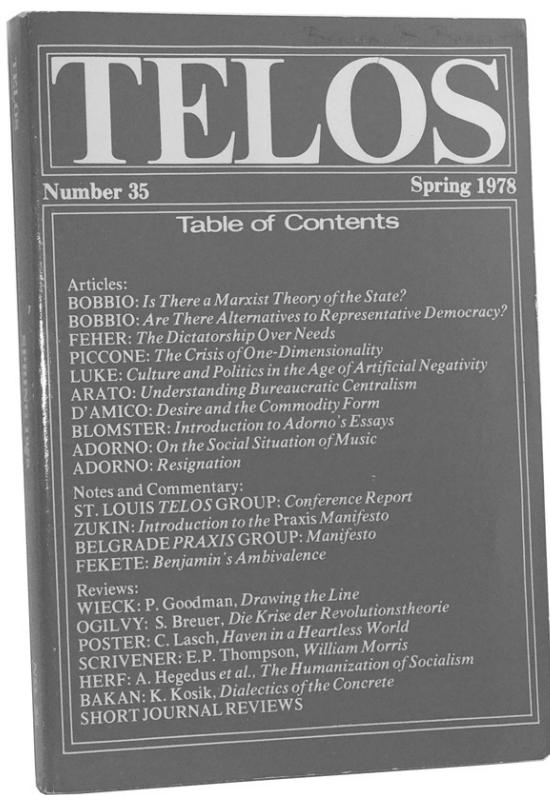
You then go on to remark that, "For all their differences, these groups shared an orthodoxy built around the legacy of Lenin." You describe your collaboration with Arato as an attempt to retrieve the legacy of a post-1917 Western Marxist tradition. Even in your book on Luxemburg, you seem to want to distinguish her strongly from Lenin and the Bolsheviks. How and why did Lenin make a comeback in the 1970s? Why did you split with many of your fellow new leftists over this? How, if at all, do the relevant questions seem different to you today than they did more than forty years ago?

**DL:** That still happens.

**DH:** I'm sure it does. In some ways, it is an abiding temptation. What is political correctness, after all? So this is where civil society becomes at one and the same time the source of problems and a place where fruitful clashes can occur. This is where the question of judgment returns. One of the claims of *From Marx to Kant* is that Kant, or more precisely the Kant of the Third Critique, gives us the tools to understand and perhaps to do what Marx sought to understand and to do.

Kant distinguishes between two kinds of judgment. There's determinate judgment, where I start with a theory, e.g., what a physician does, and I encounter some new facts. Or say I'm an orthodox Marxist, a Leninist. History is moving towards some overcoming of contradictions; I'm confronted with a fact—say, the Burmese government has let up on censorship, while China is about to go to war with Japan. I confront these things, and as a Leninist, I immediately have the answer because I fit the facts into a theory of history. There's a quote from Harold Rosenberg that Lefort often emphasizes: "The communist militant is an intellectual who does not think." He does not judge. You've met Leninists—they're often absolutely brilliant, they read everything, they know exactly what's happening in Burma, say, what is it about Thai development that has led the Burmese to open up, and so on. They are intellectuals in some sense. But they don't ask questions. They know the answer which lies in universal history. They just ascertain where we are at this moment.

This leads me to Kant's other kind of judgment, what he calls reflexive judgment in which one has to move from the particular to some universal claim. If we take art for example, and I say to you, "That painting is beautiful," you might ask "Why?" and wait to hear a theory about how beauty is structured. But that does not work. What I have to do is start with the particular and show



what you make of Marx's own self-conception as a critic of democracy?

**DH:** Kant doesn't talk about civil society. It is really Hegel who is the crucial figure there. In any case, when you read the young Marx, you can see him assimilating Hegel. In a sense Marx is trying to materialize Hegel: to take Hegel's spirit and anchor it in material reality. And he gets very good at it. For instance, one of the interesting things that you notice when you read the *Grundrisse* is that when Marx writes spontaneously, he uses Hegelian categories. He is really a Hegelian. Marx's theory of history, insofar as it's a theory of historical necessity, has a Hegelian structure, a Hegelian inevitability. You say that Marx views the state as somehow over and against society, which leads to the idea of the "smashing" or the revolutionary overthrow of the state. That does not work. For there to be a clash, the state and society would have to be of the same element. The separation between the state and society is at the same time a mutual implication: that the one can't live without the other. In that sense, Hegel's theory of civil society has civil society standing between, as the common element shared by, morality/family as particular and the state as universal. That's where civil society becomes political. Now we go back to the SDS, if you will. The slogan "The personal is political" is at one and the same time extremely rich and awfully dangerous. You might know enough about the history of the New Left to know that some people destroyed themselves by trying to be political in all aspects of their lives.

**DL:** That still happens.

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**DH:** The argument of *The Primacy of the Political* is that there is a structure inherent in human sociality, if you will. This structure can be called "dialectic," so long as one grasps that a synthesis overcomes the antitheses is impossible. Instead of reconciliation, there is a constant movement between the political and the anti-political. The political is that framework, the institutional structure, which gives meaning to all aspects of life. It can be thrown into question insofar as its fragility emerges, because it must uphold a total meaning. It can be thrown into question by events. Such moments of crisis are reflected on in turn by philosophers. When the political order is thrown into question, what happens is curious: It is challenged by what I call the anti-political. The anti-political is in its own way a new kind of political meaning. A peasant jacquerie could have been an affirmation of a new form, one that overcomes the church-bound, tradition-bound, and so on. At the same time, if it is successful and becomes the new form of the political, it no longer poses a political challenge but passes over into anti-politics. Or, to return to the example of the 1970s, the slogan "the personal is political." That claim is anti-politics insofar as it challenges the bourgeois-liberal vision of politics: it says that politics has to have this form of intimacy, this form of sociability, and so on. But if that set of values becomes dominant, then in effect, we have a new form of the political, but it's an anti-political form of the political: it closes rather than opens social self-questioning. This is the paradox here. What I want to suggest is that anti-politics is a "politics" insofar as it rejects or challenges the reigning vision of politics. But it is a politics that wants to put an end to the political.

**DL:** In the history of political thought, and in these categories, how do you read the difference between, for example, 1789 and 1848?

**DH:** Let's take the passage between 1789 and 1794, which is simpler. What you get, in effect, is an overcoming of the *ancien régime*, the emergence of new possibilities, indeterminate possibilities, in a situation that is of course overdetermined. What happens is that Robespierre and the Jacobins then come in with a new totalizing anti-politics. The genius of Robespierre—he's really the ancestor of Leninism, in this sense—is that he never talks in his own name. Rather, he speaks in the name of the Revolution (although not yet in that of World History). And you can't beat him. If you claim that he and the Committee of Public Safety are somehow oppressive or wrong, you are accused of particularism. So if you look at the history between 1789 and 1794 each time you get an opening or an emergence of a break it's immediately accused of particularism, what Lenin calls "bourgeois self-interest!" And it is accused of endangering the revolution. Bonaparte, on his way to the empire, creates the Napoleonic code, the first land

still valid legal code. It is built around the sacred, holy rights of property, individual rights, etc. It's very much a reworking of Roman law. Interestingly, as Napoleon is defeated, this continues, though challenged, at a formal level. The reality puts it into question, so you have in 1830 a kind of bourgeois revolution and then in 1848 the February days and then the bloody uprising in June.

**DH:** Marx has the idea of 1789 as moving in an "ascending line" compared to the "descending," "regressive motion" of the Revolution of 1848 and the rise of Bonapartism.

**DL:** But 1848 does not immediately lead to Bonapartism. By Bonapartism Marx means a return of plebeian, pseudo-democratic centralized state structures overriding and overarching the society. That does not come with the election of Napoleon III in 1848, but later with the coup d'état in 1851. So that is a different story.

There is an absolutely brilliant essay by Harold Rosenberg on the *Communist Manifesto*. It's an interesting story: When Merleau-Ponty in 1948 decided to publish an anthology, sort of like *The Unknown Dimension*, but on the whole history of philosophy, he asked different people to write a chapter. For the chapter on Marx to pick a Frenchman would have been difficult because you are obviously showing your colors. So, instead, he asked Rosenberg to write the chapter. He begins the essay: "Nowhere in history have there been more ghost-inspectors, more unexpected returns, than in Shakespeare and in Marx."<sup>5</sup> In other words, he brings out a kind of Shakespearean dimension which, to my mind, and again, because Rosenberg was a critic and because he's entire critical structure builds around the idea of judgment and of action, fits very nicely and in a way rounds out our discussion. Just to conclude with America: the two great critics of the American breakthrough in painting—abstract expressionism—were Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. Greenberg was a Trotskyist, and if you read his theory, he has a vision whereby painting is going to go through a series of stages where it is going to move more and more free itself from representation and become absolute. So this abstract expressionism, which has no claim to represent anything—it's simply the painting itself, *the surface*, shines, and so on, Rosenberg, however, comes from a more [dare I say] anarchist perspective. He develops the idea of action painting. For him, recall those pictures of Jackson Pollock throwing the paint on the floor, it is the action, the brush that counts.

**DL:** The critique of political economy and the question of capitalism, both time-honored on the Left, seem in some ways to have been displaced in your work. For instance, Marx, as you present him, was wrong to theorize the crisis of modern society in 1848 as the crisis

of capital. This led you to propose a re-reading of Marx after 1989, one that would re-join the Marxian legacy to the historical project of democracy. Do you view things differently now, as we enter more deeply into the post-2008 "new normal" of stagnant wages and joblessness?

**DH:** I don't think that the "critique of political economy" is identical to the "question of capitalism." Re-reading Marx after 1989 means returning to the former to get a broader perspective; it means reviving the political, which cannot be reduced to what you call the "new normal." People don't take their fate into their hands because of "stagnant wages and joblessness"—as if there existed a sort of revolutionary "tipping point" after which the revolutionary reflex would take hold. When are wages high enough, and what kind of full employment make for a fulfilled human society? In May '68, our slogan was "l'imaginaire au pouvoir"; that was just an updated version of the young Marx's claim that "to be radical is to go to the root; and for man, the root is man himself."

**SL:** The now seemingly spent #Occupy movement arose as a belated response to the massive economic crisis that began in 2008. The situation seems not unlike the exhaustion of the Seattle "anti-globalization" movement during the election year that followed. Both of these movements arguably looked more to 1968 than to any other historical reference point. And, of course, between 1999 and 2011 came the anti-war movement, which was perhaps the last [and final?] time when the ghost of Marxism came unmistakably back to the fore in the form of anti-imperialism. None of these seem to have escaped the sort of repetition compulsion operative on the left for some decades now. There even seems to be something of a recognition of this in the form of widespread depoliticization. What stretches before an increasingly demoralized younger generation is the prospect of the total exhaustion of the post-1989 left [such as it was] with little prospect of anything taking its place. What possibility do you see in the present for at least bringing to a close a left imagination that seems increasingly to run on auto-pilot? Does politics today generate any prospect for actually being able to set aside the "200 years of error" that you speak of in your work?

**DH:** One can't predict the imagination! All one can do, I think, is to learn to avoid the anti-political temptation. And one aspect of this temptation is what I'm about to accuse you of!

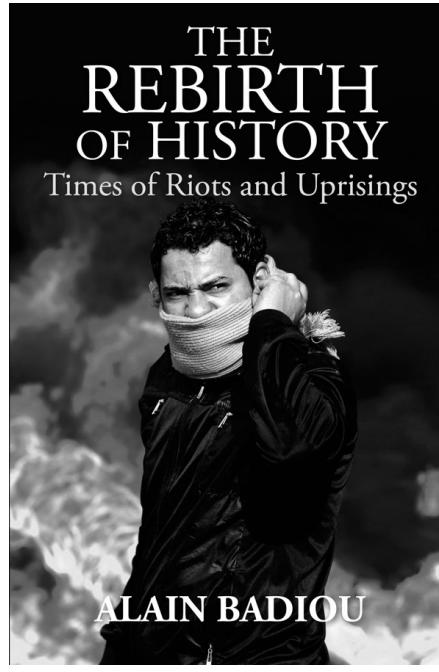
Your question supposes that there could be something and that someone could know it. All I can do is to judge what is going on as it takes place and try to contribute to some understanding of the need to do more than just "everyday politics." From this perspective, one of the

things I do write about day-to-day politics. Today, for example, on my weekly commentary for Radio Canada, I talked about what's going on with the Republican convention: I thought it was wonderful that this jerk from Missouri—Todd Akin and the "legitimate rape" controversy—is probably going to cost the Republicans the presidential election. It may also cost them the Senate. I do not expect Obama to transform the world: Many of us had wonderful hopes in 2008, but it was naïve to think that one person could do it; after all, charismatic leaders are doomed to routinize their charisma in order to preserve their power. But old Civil Rights Movement people like me certainly were amazed at his election, wishing/hoping/imaging it was a sign that society had been transformed. What one could have hoped was that he would have kept alive this movement of which we thought/hoped/imagined that he was the representative. I say "movement" despite its being a potentially antipolitical term: It suggests, as did the "proletariat" for Marx and the Marxists, the idea that society can somehow crystallize or "fuse" into a frictionless unity. Although I've suggested reasons why that Platonic-Marxist, antipolitical, dream will never be realized, I don't want to say that those who participate in movements are somehow "wrong." After all, I would not be who I am had it not been for the Civil Rights Movement. Movements are indeed "

# The Arab uprisings and the dawn of emancipatory history

Book review: Alain Badiou. *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*. New York: Verso, 2012.

Daniel Tutt



## Introduction

Alain Badiou claims that the twenty first century has yet to begin. We stand mired in the ideology of democratic materialism, which insists there are only bodies and language, and that we can persist without an idea. Our "atonal" environment of weak differences is riddled with a type of nihilism that crushes every master signifier, even those struggling to point in the direction of equality. Emancipatory politics is confronted with the nearly impossible task of going beyond the subject of the market, but with no clear means by which to do so. Thus, at the turn of the twenty first century, Badiou claims, in no uncertain terms, "there are not yet events in the philosophical sense of the word," but only "the constitution of zones of precariousness, of partial movement that one can interpret as announcing that something

will happen."<sup>1</sup> To make matters worse, Badiou's agent of change, the militant subject, runs headlong into a political deadlock in which the militant are forced to strike blindly against the capitalist system merely to demonstrate their strike capacity. Badiou characterized emancipatory resistance in the following terms: "what is at stake are bloody and nihilistic games of power without purpose and without truth."<sup>2</sup>

Badiou's "prescriptive politics" has been criticized for distancing itself from the state and from economic resistance to capitalism, insisting that resistance must be waged with respect to democracy. Even Badiou's finest reader, Peter Hallward, has pointed out that, "so long as it works within the element of this subtraction, Badiou's philosophy forever risks its restriction to the empty realm of prescription pure and simple."<sup>3</sup> There is thus an inherent risk that Badiou's subtractive purity will result only in a rarefied metapolitics, purified to the point of being politics without politics. However, in his latest text, *The Rebirth of History: Time of Riots and Uprisings*, Badiou leaves his apoliticism at the door and ushers in a fresh set of thinking for the introduction of a new political sequence against the backdrop of a failing capitalist system. One part manifesto, and one part doctrinal guidebook for political organization following the Arab uprisings, Badiou presents a logical taxonomy of the riot as a form of political struggle in the context of his eventual politics. The Arab uprisings, or what the West has perhaps condescendingly dubbed "The Arab Spring," are placed in the context of world historical protests for equality; Badiou even elevates them to the level of the 1848 European worker riots that gave birth to the *Communist Manifesto*.

The Arab riots present a pre-political sign of a formerly nonexistent political body and signal a new epochal opening of emancipatory history. Like the 1848 riots, the Arab uprisings had origins that were seemingly random (a shopkeeper's suicide) and, also like 1848, they ultimately ended in failure, with a new repressive politi-

cal order assuming power. While the 1848 riots did not cause an event in the formal sense, which for Badiou constitutes "a rupture in the transcendental world of the state," they did usher in a new political sequence, one that ended only around 1990, with the collapse of "really existing socialism." In the Badiouian lexicon, the 1848 riots, like the Arab uprisings, represent a "strong singularity" that presents a formerly nonexistent subjectivity in a mode of intensity that contains the capacity for an eventual explosion. The Arab uprisings have become for Badiou the guardians of a pre-eventual or pre-political opening, an opportunity to re-begin time.

In this review I will examine Badiou's reading of the Arab uprisings in particular, which constitutes the central part of *The Rebirth of History*, and place the text in dialogue both with Badiou's own political thought and that of the Arab psychoanalyst Moustapha Safouan, whose book, *Why Are the Arabs Not Free?*, presents two distinct models for thinking political change in the Arab world today. It should be noted, however, that Badiou's text does not offer a substantive reflection on recent western movements against capitalism, such as Occupy Wall Street and the Quebec student movement, as these only emerged after the publication of the text.

## The historical riot: The guardian of emancipatory history

In Badiou's taxonomy, there are three types of riots. The immediate riot tends to be youth-driven, located in the territory of those who take part, and typically consists of a "weak localization" (24). The immediate riot lacks the ability to displace itself and usually remains caught within a ghetto or the site of some grave injustice; this is what happened during the French riots of 2006. The second type of riot is a latent riot, which is what Great Britain experienced in the summer of 2011: a riot that contains the "possibility of possibility," but ultimately lacks discipline, and remains merely quasi-riots. More optimistically, the latent riot only requires an insignificant spark to set the whole thing back in motion (32). The final type of riot is the historical riot, which is what constitutes the transition from immediate to pre-political riot. For an historical riot to take place, there must be a moment of imitation, or "qualitative extension" of the site into something universal, which, as Badiou puts it, can develop "in a blink of an eye" (69). Thus, for Badiou, a pre-political event (historical riot) has a universal register of address.

Badiou invokes the term universality out of three related concepts, all of which were exhibited by the Arab uprisings. Following the logical and phenomenological proofs found in Badiou's 2006 magnum opus *Logics of Worlds*, the three necessary components that propelled the Arab uprisings from immediate to historical are intensification, contraction, and localization. Firstly, the historical riot maintains intensification by presenting to the state a formerly nonexistent subject in an intensified form that exceeds the ability of the state to represent it. There were only one million Egyptians who occupied

Tahrir Square, which in a state of tens of millions did not represent a consensus or even a majority, but the riots nonetheless presented a sort of universality due to the intensity of their singular demand. Secondly, the Arab uprisings, in presenting this intensified existence, affirmed a generic being<sup>4</sup> that refused identitarian objectification by the power of the state to represent differences. The subjects of the riot were Egyptians of all different identities, religions, etc., and in their radical refusal to be divided by these seemingly arbitrary designations, they affirmed a generic being and negated the modes of representation that the state promulgates in order to ensure its own existence. Badiou calls this second quality of the historical riot "contraction," meaning that it presents a genericity of itself, to itself, and thus enables the riot to become the symbolic master of its own site. Genericity leads to the final necessary component of the historical riot, localization, which can be seen in the politics of naming that took place in Tahrir Square. Badiou's politics of naming does not start with an idea but with a messy and spontaneous clinging to genericity.

In previous work on emancipatory politics, Badiou has pointed out how militant subjects generate nominations or statements posed in a future anterior tense, towards a situation to come. As a continuation of Badiou's politics of naming, which he dedicated the short text *Metapolitics* to perfecting, Badiou remarks "the ill said words of the subject(s) in fidelity to an event forms the basis of courage that forces the truth of a new situation."<sup>5</sup> We might look at the American civil rights movement as a pre-eventual riot of naming pointed towards universal equality in the words written on the protest banner that read, "Ain't I a man?" As Badiou remarks in *Metapolitics*, the first condition of any metapolitical sequence is that its collective is able to serve as a universal receptacle for all, which means that for every X, there is thought. In the Tahrir Square riots that succeeded in forcing Mubarak to step down, the protest signs read, "Clear off Mubarak" and other slogans that affirmed a certain symbolic ownership of Egypt by its people and not the state.

## Capitalism against the democratic materialists

Badiou's metapolitics haunts today's revolutionary imagination, waiting in the shadows, standing out against the "democratic materialists" who claim we can persist without allegiance to an idea. Badiou has gone so far as to bifurcate emancipatory movements along the oldest philosophical dichotomy available, between Plato and Aristotle. The Aristotelian democratic materialists end up enveloping revolutionary momentum into a flat ontology of descriptions that do not open onto Platonic axioms. The "multitude" approach to emancipation, popularized by Hardt and Negri, or what Badiou has referred to as the "movementists," are simply obsessed with continually adapting to the ruptures that the

"Arab uprisings" continues on page 4

## Book review: John Holloway, Fernando Matamoros, Sergio Tischler, eds. *Negativity & Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism*. London: Pluto Press, 2009.

David Brian Howard

[N]egative dialectics seeks the self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking is to be true—today, in any case—it must also think against itself. If thinking fails to measure itself by the extremeness that eludes the concept, it is from the outset like the accompanying music with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims.

— Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

*NEGATIVITY & REVOLUTION* seems to fly in the face of the Adorno revival over the last twenty years. The editors bravely assert in the introduction to their book that their focus will not be on Adorno, nor about the body of his work, and, above all, that it is not written by Adorno specialists. The intent of this book, which is the outcome of a seminar at the Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades Alfonso Vélez Pliego of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, is to elaborate on what Adorno called negative dialectics and how it might serve as a counter-strategy to other forms of theorizing the present, and could thus be of benefit to radicals, political activists, and Adorno scholars.

The attempt to maneuver Adorno's thought into a place of relevance in the lifeless field of radical politics is, I think, a very worthwhile endeavor. However, the reader quickly confronts the danger of prioritizing Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, which is that the concept of negative dialectics itself is much abused and misunderstood. Another, secondary impediment, is the fact that Adorno is still vilified by many on the Left for having called the police when the Frankfurt Institute was occupied by the student movement in 1969, and for agreeing with Habermas's formulation that the students were "left-fascist." This book asks, Why is Adorno a hero of revolution and political activism? For one of the editors, John Holloway, Adorno's concept of negative dialectics and its Hegelian pedigree offers an enticing vision of theoretical depth that is "both libertarian and revolutionary." He argues

than the identity that is undermined by non-identity, then there is no possibility of stability. All identity is false, contradictory, resting on the negation of the non-identity which it suppresses, which it seeks to contain but cannot. (13)

For Holloway, Adorno's concept of non-identity, elucidated most rigorously in *Negative Dialectics*, is "the hero, the centre, the moving force of the world." By contrast, Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, published in 1968, distances itself from the dialectical legacy of Hegel and the arguments of Adorno, arguing that

History progresses not by negation and the negation of negation, but by deciding problems and affirming differences. It is no less bloody and cruel as a result. Only the shadows of history live by negation: the good enter into it with all the power of a posited differential or a difference affirmed.... That is why real revolutions have the atmosphere of fêtes. Contradiction is not the weapon of the proletariat but, rather, the manner in which the bourgeoisie defends and preserves itself.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, the emphasis throughout *Negativity & Revolution* is placed on rescuing the negative dialectical movement from the short-circuiting of theory by the demands of practice, "a practice which in its anti-theoreticism is left at 'the prey of powers,' whether that of charismatic leaders or revolutionary parties" (35). While there have been attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the work of Adorno, for instance Espen Hammer's *Adorno and the Political* (2005), this book presents a unique spectrum of the political application of Hegel and negative dialectics to the twenty first century and an attempt to negotiate the Scylla and Charybdis of neoliberalism and anti-dialecticism.

Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) was one of the key leaders of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theorists that emerged in Germany between the world wars and played a crucial role both in the re-establishment of Marxian Critical Theory in post-WWII Germany and in providing intellectual inspiration to much of the New Left in Western Europe and North America during the same period. This Frankfurt School group was instrumental in developing variations in Marxist theory that

had neither the vulgar, didactic quality of the "official Marxism" of the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and early 1930s, nor the progressive evolutionary quality of the late nineteenth century Second International Marxism. Both of these forms of Marxism were seen by the members of the Frankfurt School as a fundamental betrayal of dialectical materialism as Georg Lukács elaborated in his important book *History and Class Consciousness* and as found in Marx's so-called humanist manuscripts of 1844 that were rediscovered in the early 1930s. Both of these publishing developments gave renewed emphasis to the Hegelian dialectic within Marxism, but with a twist. Whereas in Lukács's Hegelian Marxism one could assume that the working class was available as the potential subject of history that would lead to the overthrowing of its antithesis, for the members of the Frankfurt School the rise of Hitler and Fascism as well as the destruction of the working class as a potential subject of history meant that the Hegelian dialectic needed to be rethought in the absence of a powerful counter-subject to capital. As suggested in *Negativity & Revolution*, what would later emerge as a full-blown theory of negative dialectics that culminated in the book by the same name in 1966 is indistinguishable from the question of practice. However, equally inseparable from the thought of Adorno is Lukács's elaboration of the concepts of totality, reification, and the commodity.

Adorno, whose early training in the European Enlightenment philosophical tradition began at fourteen when he started studying Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* with Siegfried Kracauer, was an accomplished musician as



Horkheimer (front left) and Adorno at the Max Weber-Sozialtag, with Habermas (back, far right) and other students.

well as philosopher who studied modernist piano technique under the guidance of Alban Berg, whom he had met in 1924 when he was completing his doctorate. This intertwining of philosophy, aesthetics, and music imparted to Adorno a unique skill set that, I would argue, to this day is what gives Adorno's work such longevity, theoretical vibrancy, and ongoing relevance. The mutual interaction and contrapuntal intricacy of these different registers in the various modes of his thought and compositional technique within his writing are seldom legible to contemporary writers.

Ironically, Adorno's admiration of Lukács would come after the latter had recanted his youthful work, including *History and Class Consciousness*. Thus, by the time Adorno appropriated many of Lukács's concepts, Lukács summarily dismissed Adorno and his colleagues as occupying "the Grand Hotel Abyss," a caricature meant to mock their culturally elitist positions as well as their

distance from any meaningful relationship between theory and practice. This dismissal was easily adopted by many members of the New Left in Europe and North America in the 1960s and, from a different theoretical perspective, by many practitioners of postmodernism and post-structuralism who perceived in the work of Adorno a rigid adherence to a kind of Hegelian Marxist doctrine that was seen to be totalizing, elitist, and pessimistic. Even Adorno's most well-known student, Jürgen Habermas, distanced himself from the Hegelian philosophical and utopian idealism implicit in his mentor, in favor of the kind of social science popular in mid-century America, tinged in various ways with the tradition of pragmatism, as well as an intersubjective theory of communicative reason that sought to displace subject-centered language models. In addition, followers of the French post-structuralist theorist Gilles Deleuze and his "politics of difference" or the students of Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, and Paolo Virno, who pursue a concept called "the politics of the multitude," all claim to have found a more productive and direct route to radical change that avoids the dialectical legacy of Adorno. Even in the current, more radicalized atmosphere of the Occupy Wall Street era, there is immense pressure to move towards forms of praxis that bypass the impediments to direct action that Adorno's theories would seem, as a function of their overtly negative political outlook as well as their almost impenetrable complexity, to pose.

The weakest sections of *Negativity & Revolution* are those dealing with art and its relationship to politics. Adorno, who was working on his magnum opus *Aesthetic Theory* when he died of a heart attack after hiking in the Swiss Alps in 1969, was specifying how aesthetics inflects his political and theoretical analysis. Assuming that Adorno's aesthetics reflects his philosophy rather than informing it profoundly, on the level of form and content, what this book fails to consider is, How does Adorno alter our understanding of the relationship of negative dialectics, as well as art, to revolution and political activism? A book dealing with the subject of art and negative dialectics is vitally important at this historical juncture, when increasing demands for more "relevant" forms of political art threaten the kind of critical tension and dialectical negativity that Adorno's aesthetic theory implies. □P

1. Giles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum International, 1994), 268.