Between Old Left and New: A postwar balance sheet

Ian Morrison

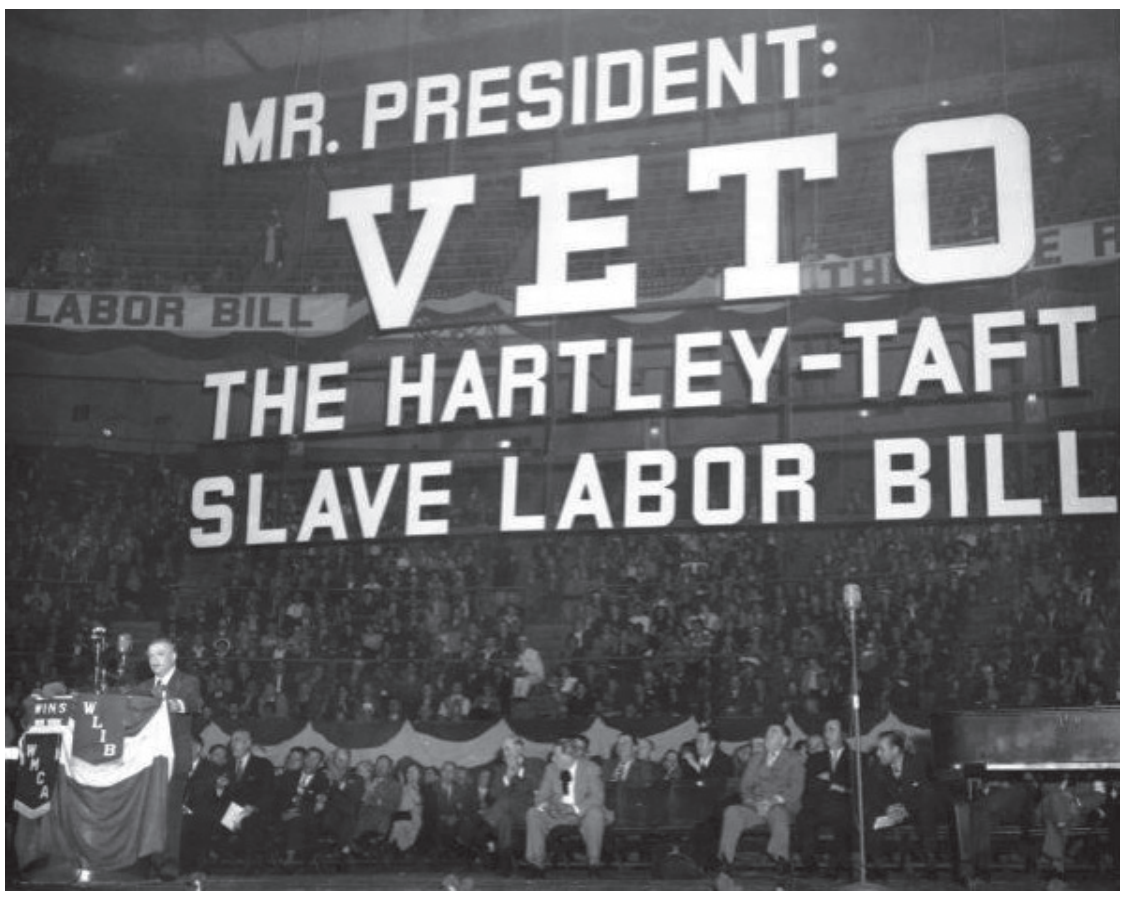
THE PERIOD FROM THE FIRST WORLD WAR to the Cold War belies easy classification. Unlike the single decade associated with the New Left, this extensive and historically dense period, that of the "Old Left," has to be broken up into decades. Indeed, this is done even in the popular imagination, in which the 1930s were a time of economic collapse and union radicalism; the 1940s, a time of "the common enemy," fascism; and the 1950s, a time of refrigerators and consumerism, of complacency and automatic dishwashers. The 1920s are willfully neglected, or else acknowledged only with respect to the "Lost Generation," an historical touchstone that, while important, draws us away from America, back to the Old World of Europe. But, as is often the case, actual history cuts against the grain of popular storytelling.

When former SDS president Carl Oglesby sat down in the late 1960s to map out the contours of the New Left, he asked himself, with good reason, "Why New? Why not simply a continuation of the previous Left?" As an opening into this question, he poses others, "Why did the workers permit the purge [of communists], [why did] the people authorize the anti-Bolshevism, [why did] their leaders allow the top-down liquidation of McCarthy to provide, above all, for the continuation of McCarthyism by more subtle means?"[1] But these questions find no ready answers. So, instead, Oglesby attempts to cut against the idea of 1950s conservatism by claiming the decade also belonged to "the Chinese, the Vietnamese, the Cubans, the Algerians, [and] the decolonizing African states."[2] He goes on to argue that the East is separate from "Western Culture," which "appears to be distinguished by its failure to produce a class whose essential objectives transcend the capacities of the given order and whose presence would therefore force a structural transformation of the relations of production."[3] Here we get the familiar paradigm. What is the new agency of revolutionary change, asks Oglesby and the New Left, now that the workers have failed us? The answers range from the intellectual and the student to the wretched of the earth and the subaltern.

We can no longer today evade the important questions. And the fact remains that, even if we are to believe that in the 1960s students and peasant rebels emerged as new agencies of social transformation, this does nothing to explain why the working class in the First World became depoliticized in the first place. Why was it that the revolutionary potential of the working class seemed to melt into air? How did the Old Left become depoliticized? To answer this question we must look at the history of the Left, both in terms of the possibilities it created and the fetters it imposed on itself.

First, to be clear, the conservative turn in the labor unions after the post-Second World War strike wave is an inescapably true historical development, culminating in the notorious 1947 Taft-Hartley Act. The problem that confronted the New Left—the problem of a stymied organized working class—was real. The problem persists to this day, even as our understanding of this issue, which strikes directly at the question of creating a strong Left in the U.S., remains frozen in place. C. Wright Mills, one of the intellectual catalysts of the New Left, summed up the mood of the 1950s when he wrote that union leaders were "government-made men, and they have feared—correctly, as it turns out—that they can be unmade by the government... Neither labor leaders nor labor unions are at the present juncture likely to be 'independent variables' in the national context."[4] Now, Mills was drawn to the idea that, at least in the postwar situation in which he found himself, intellectuals were what he termed "the independent variable." For Mills understood, even if many of his New Left followers did not, that the isolation of the intellectual was nothing less than a symptom of Stalinism. Mills was not interested in "leaving behind" the working class, as a political program. At the same time, he was also acutely aware of the alliance between labor and the state forged in Roosevelt's New Deal and maintained during the Second World War as part of the alliance with the Soviet Union. To the extent that the New Left brushed aside the hostility of the "hard hats," it not only chose to ignore the issue but, no less certainly, also blocked its own way into the history of the Left. And this, above all, fatally compromised the New Left from the beginning.

Mills began working towards a theory of the shifting social groups, and the new post-war consolidations of power, while partially under the influence of Max Shachtman's Workers Party, an intellectual tradition stemming from the Left Opposition (commonly referred to as Trotskyism). This thwarted tradition was bitterly aware of the nightmare unfolding in the 1930s. But, unlike the New Left, and unlike thinkers such as C. Wright Mills, Shachtman put forth a different and far more controversial conclusion in 1950: "It is not Marxism that has failed, as many gloomy critics find it so popular to say nowadays; it is the Marxian dogmatists who have failed."[5]



A union rally in 1947 held at Madison Square Garden in New York City to oppose the passage of the Labor Management Relations Act, generally referred to as the Taft-Hartley Bill.

To grasp why there is no adequate theoretical tradition in America, one must first abandon the idea of the radical 1930s so popular today, and focus instead on the preceding decade. As Christopher Lasch argued, "By the middle twenties American radicalism had acquired the characteristics it has retained until the present day: sectarianism, marginality, and alienation from American life."[6] Unlike in Europe, American radicalism was not split by social democracy. In 1917, at the American Socialist Party's emergency convention in St. Louis, it espoused an openly internationalist perspective, opposing on that basis America's entry into the war. But such declarations must be viewed in proper perspective. At the only Socialist-led action in opposition to the war, which took place in Boston, "hundreds of Socialists were beaten and forced to kiss the flag on their knees."[7] The anti-war tendencies in the U.S., which might have been the springboard for a radical international socialism, lacked effective organization.

It was not until the end of the First World War that these bad omens were fully realized in the actual political situation. As Shachtman recalled in a speech he gave in the late 1960s,

> The once spectacular IWW had all but died-out completely. The Farm-Labor party movement of the early twenties collapsed after the defeat of Senator La Follette in the 1924 presidential election. The official labor movement of that time was conservative, narrow, smug, and small. Before it was split in 1919, the united Socialist Party had well over a hundred thousand dues-paying members in its ranks. It is certain that the communists and socialists parties had less than 20,000 members between them ten years later when the [stock marked crash] erupted.[8]

Displaying a stunning lack of perspicacity, the communists of the 1920s set American Leftist politics on a collision course, a disaster on par with and in the tradition of the failed revolution in Germany, the botched general strike in Britain in 1926, and the crushed Shanghai Commune of 1927. Effectively writing off the entire organized working class in favor of underground irrelevancy, the majority of American communists adopted a supercilious attitude toward the explosive strike wave that swept the country in 1919. When, after years of inter-party struggle and the intervention of the Soviet government, the communists finally formed a legal party that working class Americans could actually read about and join, the radical tide had turned. At the 1921 founding conference of the legal party, future leader of the American Left Opposition, James P. Cannon, lamented, "We have

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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 750–2,500 words, but longer pieces will also be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: *review_editorfdplatypus1917.org*. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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The poverty of Pakistan's politics (PPP)

Atiya Khan

LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY PAKISTAN is marked by a sense of despair and helplessness. A report commissioned by the British Council based on research conducted by the Nielson Company recently found that only a third of the Pakistanis surveyed thought democracy was the best system for the country, a ratio roughly equal to that preferring *sharia*. The findings amounted to what David Martin, director of the British Council in Pakistan, called "an indictment of the failures of democracy over many years."[1] Add to this the weak economy, mounting unemployment rates, the ongoing war in neighboring Afghanistan, the looming threat of the spread of the Taliban, and the massive displacement of population resulting from the military's ham-fisted "war" against the militants. In the face of all this, combined with the legacy of deteriorating schools, overburdened and outdated infrastructure, and the permanent war with India over Kashmir, the common Pakistani woman is caught between corrupt "democracy" and Islamist "justice." She has learned the true meaning of the neoliberal creed "there is no alternative": All alternatives are equally intolerable.

Liberal Concessions to the Right

As worrisome as Pakistan's descent into chaos is the apathy it has been met with from the liberal Left. Earlier this month, in an issue of the chief organ of left-liberalism in the U.S., *The Nation*, the Pakistani-American historian Manan Ahmad deprecates the very idea of international alarm over the crisis playing out in Pakistan. According to Ahmad, whenever the Pakistani electorate is given the opportunity to vote, it "[keeps] conservative Islamic parties to less than 10 percent of the seats in any election." And, revealing something more of the nationalism underlying his argument, Ahmad denies that, even in the absence of elections, there is any "path by which The Taliban... [could] overwhelm a nation of nearly 180 million, a standing army of more than 600,000, vibrant mega-cities and an established civilian infrastructure."[2] But the lacunae of such liberalism are now so wide one must forcibly shut one's eyes not see through them.

After all, if electoral politics is the sole measure of the restoration of secular democracy, then how might we explain the rise of the Taliban in the past two decades, the ambivalence that Pakistani citizens seem to have toward democratically elected governments, and, in some cases, their unswerving loyalty for the exponents of *sharia*? Ahmad is unable to reconcile this problem, being wholly unable to see anything but the humanitarian crisis caused by American unmanned drone missile strikes in the country's lawless, or rather Talibanized, "tribal" belt along the border with Afghanistan. Moreover, his explanation of the current crisis in Pakistan is, as we shall see, completely at odds with the fact that it was Benazir Bhutto who, during her first premiership in 1988, was complicit in nurturing the mujahideen in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Paradoxically, the project of Islamization initiated by Zia ul-Haq was fulfilled by Benazir who, in an ironic twist, became a victim of the Taliban in 2007. Ahmad cannot, it seems, bring himself to mention the catastrophic destruction unleashed by the Taliban, particularly in the northern areas of Pakistan, and the continuous suicide bomb explosions in all the country's "vibrant" major cities. More shockingly, Ahmad was apparently not pressed by the editors of the standard-bearer of the American liberal Left to so much as touch on the atrocities the Taliban committed in Swat and Waziristan: the public flogging of men and women after summary "trials" in which semi-educated fanatics dispense justice according to medieval law; the decimation of schools, printing presses, radio, and TV stations; and, of course, the brutal murder of those who attempted to oppose the Taliban's political values or their authority. As anyone who has the stomach for the news coming out of Pakistan this year knows, the desecrated corpses of these dissenters were piled on the roadside or hung from lampposts to ensure that the message of terror was legible even to the most wretchedly poor and illiterate person. But none of this concerns Ahmad. Rather, he denies the Taliban pose any threat, instead claiming that "the Taliban operating in the north and southwestern regions were and are still an amorphous, ill-defined lot, ideologically and politically diverse—from jihadists to secular subnationalists to tribalists."[3]

Contrary to Ahmad's view, Pakistani journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai explains that the Pakistani Taliban "[are] what they are. They are Taliban in the sense that they share the same ideology as the Taliban in Afghanistan, and see them as their allies."[4] As the well-known history of its origins goes, the Taliban first sprung to life from a witch's brew of Chinese opportunism, the panic that gripped Washington after the fall of the Shah, oil sheikh "philanthropy," and the reactionary political imperatives that have guided the Pakistani military since the country's inception. Simply put, the communist coup in Afghanistan in 1978 prompted the neoliberal regimes in the Muslim world and the United States to intervene. Supported by CIA and Saudi money, but orchestrated by Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), the worst of the reactionary Afghan landlords, together with the more religion- and patriarchy-warped peasants whose allegiance they could command, were armed and indoctrinated with a caustic brand of fascistic Islam. At the same time, entire regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan shifted over to a war economy driven by opium, guns, and mercenary payments. Generations of young men dislocated in Afghan refugee camps were absorbed into madrassas closely aligned to one or another of Pakistan's Islamist parties and sponsored by Islamist money flowing out of the Gulf. Far from amorphous, the Pakistani Taliban is linked ideologically and organizationally to the same elements that the ISI fostered in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, the Taliban never recognized there to be any border separating those in the Pakistani madrassa from those doing the fighting in Afghanistan; rather, they saw themselves as all members of a single religious and political movement. As Yusufzai rightly saw and reported in 2007, the name "Taliban" itself does not refer to a loosely connected constellation of groups, but denotes a political program based on a pseudo-archaic and highly authoritarian system of government.

Another expression of the confusion regarding the Taliban is articulated by Faisal Devji in the pages of *The Guardian*, who lumps them together with the Naxalites or Maoist rebels in India, the supposed analogy between these movements of the radical Left and the radical right being that both have attempted to "take over certain areas and attack government forces there to provide an alternative but non-governmental form of order."[5] The Taliban, in Devji's view, is just another corporate group jockeying for power, no different from the army, the religious parties, the private companies, or the NGOs, and so should the government treat them. It may "bring these groups into the political arena, as India did with Nepal's Maoists, ensuring their investment in the state by forcing them to take it over."[6] But this comparison between the right and Left, however debased the latter's leftism may be, is invidious; it blurs an essential political difference that sets these groups apart from one another. Unlike the Taliban, the Naxalites are driven by a secular outlook, involved in a political struggle that seeks to secure social justice for a super-exploited peasantry. In fact, the Maoist rebels harken back to a rich history of the Indian Left responsible for the large-scale unionization of workers that took place under the auspices of the Left in the 1950s and 1960s. It is in line with this tradition that the Maoist rebels continue to struggle against the "saffron" right and religious romanticism. One may criticize them for the poverty of their strategic vision and their consequent incapacity to succeed in substantially improving the Indian peasants' life circumstances in the long term, and this, of course, points to the larger problem of the political inertia in which the international Left is mired. However, the Maoist victory in Nepal is certainly *not* the catastrophe for the Nepalese people that the Taliban coming to power in Afghanistan has been, or their coming to power in Pakistan would be. For Devji to suggest otherwise is obfuscatory, to say the least, or naïve at best.

May Day rally of 200 union workers in 2009 in the city of Hyderabad, Sindh. Led by former General Secretary of the Communist Party of India, Jam Saqi, this was one of 42 such rallies held across the country. Their banner reads, "Workers of the World Unite! Red Salute to the Martyrs of Chicago! Pakistan Trade Union Defense Campaign"

The Collapse of the Left in Pakistan

Unlike in India, where the late Stalinist Left still retains considerable strength, in Pakistan the Left as well as its attendant labor movement had collapsed by the mid-1970s. Yet, if one is to be able to make sense of the present-day crisis of Pakistan, it is essential to recover the history of this collapse in which the Pakistani Left mutated into the new international right. The failure of the Left-labor coalition in Pakistan is a complex story intimately linked to the decline of the international Left in the 20th century.

At its inception as an independent country in 1947, Pakistan inherited trained trade unionists, veterans with valuable experience in the labor struggles that had formed the backbone of the wider anti-imperialist struggle against the British Raj. The Pakistani labor movement thus quickly developed significant influence after independence, so that by the 1950s trade unionism flourished in the railway, shipping, hydroelectric power, post and telegraph, cement, and mining sectors. Trade unions expanded by an estimated 650 percent in the half decade after the creation of Pakistan. Under the stewardship of members of the All India Trade Union Congress who migrated westward, the All Pakistan Trade Union Federation (APTUF) was founded in 1948, which was affiliated to the Prague-based World Federation of Trade Unions. Other unions that took shape in that era were the Lahore-based Pakistan Federation of Labor, and the Seamen's Union in Karachi, which was a direct offshoot of the Calcutta Seamen's Union. In 1951, 209 unions had organized a total of 393,137 workers, but the unions were themselves split based on Cold War rivalries.[7]

Pakistani trade unions fell into distinct camps: On one side, the antecedents of the Indian Federation of Labor formed the Pakistan Federation of Labor, which adhered to a reformist program; on the other side, the APTUF lined up with the Moscow-affiliated Red International of Trade Unions. The latter, the APTUF, functioned as an umbrella organization for the important railway workers' union in East Pakistan and for the stevedores' union in Karachi in the West. However, by the end of 1951 communist influence in the trade unions started to wane, as the state-sanctioned All Pakistan Confederation of Labor (APCOL)—which aligned itself with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), a self-professedly anti-Communist union—became the *de facto* representative of the working class in Pakistan.

In the period between 1950 and 1955, Pakistan vacillated between democratic and authoritarian leadership and, in the confusion, Pakistani labor surged forward. The rise of industrial and agrarian unrest in East Pakistan compelled the state to adopt a two-pronged policy granting workers the right to organize and at the same time enacting legislation to control trade union activity. From the standpoint of trade unionists, the 1952 Pakistan Essential Services (Maintenance) Act, whose undeniable objective was to circumscribe their activities, was an expression of the collusion between industrialists and the state bureaucracy against the growth of industrialized labor. The statute was broadly applied to include the transportation, energy, communications, and educational sectors.[8] From 1950 to 1955, the Government of Pakistan further limited trade union activity by imposing the condition that union officials had to be workers in one of the factories in which the union was active. The year 1954 was marked by further erosions of trade union rights, including a ban on the Communist Party of Pakistan (CPP) and Pakistan's entry into the U.S.-led anti-Communist alliance that was the South East Asia Treaty Organization. Pakistani trade unions were increasingly drawn together with their counterparts stateside. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) established offices in Karachi and Lahore, extended financial and material assistance to the APCOL, and offered scholarships to Pakistani workers to study trade unionism in the United States. This was followed by a series of splits in the APCOL in the 1960s leading to the emergence of five federations: the Pakistan National Federation of Trade Unions which was granted affiliation with the ICFTU; the West Pakistan Federation of Trade Unions, later renamed the All-Pakistan Federation of Trade Unions in 1971; the West Pakistan Workers Federation and Karachi Workers Central Committee; and the Mazdoor Rabta Committee (Workers' Coordination Committee) in Karachi. This last group, which included students and trade union leaders who, after the ban on the CPP, were seeking to start afresh, were instrumental in organizing the strike at the Karachi Port Trust in 1967 that contributed to the downfall of the military dictator General Ayub Khan.[9]

But in 1958, before his downfall, General Ayub Khan declared martial law, after repealing the new Constitution, which necessitated reigning in the workers' movement. General Khan acted swiftly to enact the Industrial Disputes Ordinance, an executive order that restricted labor agitation by giving leverage to state interests in labor disputes. But it was the formation of the Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation in 1962, which privatized Pakistan's factories, that most directly contributed to a radicalization of labor in the 1960s. While the labor movement was in the course of negotiating its demands, leftist parties were also motivated to advance their political programs. After the disintegration of the CPP the Left was reconstituted under the National Awami Party (NAP) in 1957. This marked a shift in the ideology of the Left as it drew closer to a political framework based on nationalism. In a sense, the formation of the NAP was a symptom of the failures of the Left after World War II, a Left that had accommodated itself to the Stalinist slogan, "socialism in one country." The Sino-Soviet split of 1964 had a further series of repercussions: As India lined itself up closer to Moscow, Peking made overtures toward General Ayub, to disastrous effect for the Left. The NAP was factionalized, as the group in East Pakistan refused to oppose Ayub based on instructions from China, whereas NAP centers in Baluchistan and the Frontier Province struggled for regional autonomy, objecting to the hegemony of the central government in West Pakistan.

Despite the ideological limitations and theoretical confusion on the Left, the labor movement continued gathering momentum, pushing for further reforms between 1969 and 1972. Rapid industrial development under the anti-labor statutes enacted by Ayub Khan, which restricted unionization while depressing wages, sparked a wave of strikes in Karachi, Lahore, and other industrial centers that drew in railway workers, doctors and hospital employees, farmers, water works and electrical workers—all of them demanding restoration of the right to unionize, the right to collective bargaining, and the right to strike. After failed negotiations with the trade union leaders as well as the increasingly vociferous demands of the student movement, Ayub Khan announced his resignation in March 1969, appointing another Pakistani Army General, Yahya Khan, as interim head of state to reach an agreement with labor leaders. Though the government was able to retain some of its power, such as its "right" to ban and call off strikes, the labor movement was able to exact some of its salient demands.

It was in this context that a new party, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), emerged in West Pakistan in 1967, while an old one, the Awami League, was able to revitalize itself in East Pakistan. Both these organizations were strengthened by the incorporation of a vast number of leftists who were either disillusioned by the NAP or inspired by the quasi-populist rhetoric of the PPP under Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. These leftists brought with them trained cadres in addition to an attractive ideological program to win over the allegiance of the masses. The PPP, therefore, was formed as a menagerie of leftist groups from the National Awami Party, ex-members of the Muslim League, students, and the landlords of Sindh and Punjab. Bhutto had the foresight to exploit the radical stratum of the party in the run-up to elections to secure a mass base. The rhetoric of socialism, combined with slogans capturing anti-imperial and anti-feudal sentiments, embraced the *zeitgeist* of the 1960s New Left. However, once the PPP wrested control of the state, its left flank was faced with the choice of either accepting the commands of the state or else self-liquidating. When the outcome of the 1970 election resulted in an overall majority for the Bengali nationalists in East Pakistan, entitling the Awami League to form the central government, Bhutto was unable to reconcile himself to a junior partnership in a coalition at the center. With the support of the United States, Bhutto sent in the army, precipitating the Bangladesh War. Had it laid any real foundations in the years preceding the upheaval, the Left might have transformed the situation to its favor, but in 1972, when Bhutto's nationalization policy brought the confrontation with the labor movement to a head, some 200,000 workers called a strike in Karachi that brought the city to a standstill. During this the Left was paralyzed: The left faction within the PPP feared that if the strikes continued this would jeopardize the possibility of long term benefits, while the China-aligned leftists were reluctant to support further strikes since the labor movement excluded the peasantry from its struggle.

From Defeat to Delusion

For much of the seventies, especially after the worldwide economic collapse of 1972–73 that reached Pakistan on the heels of the Bangladesh War, Bhutto tried to assuage the beleaguered state apparatus, including the military, but was unable to stem the exodus of workers and the middle class. The decimation of the Left and of labor had culminated on the international level in the neoliberal Thatcher-Reagan regimes that, in turn, strengthened conservative forces within Pakistan just as the Soviets marched on Afghanistan. General Zia ul-Haq, who had overthrown Bhutto in 1977, tendered Pakistan as an Islamic bulwark in the proxy war. Thus, with Zia at the helm of the state in Pakistan, along with the victory of Khomeni's Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, the character of democracy in Pakistan was left to be validated by either the military establishment or by religious clerics. The brief interludes of civilian rule in Pakistan since then, such as the election of Benazir Bhutto in 1988 and then later in 1993, or Nawaz Sharif's election in 1990 and subsequently in 1997, amounted to little more than neoliberal cronyism. In the absence of an international Left, one struggles to imagine how they could have amounted to anything else.

It is ironic that a hundred years ago, when the workers of Bombay led strikes protesting the trial of their leader, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lenin remarked, "in India... the proletariat has already developed to conscious political mass struggle."[10] If the possibility, albeit somewhat obtuse, of a socialist revolution had existed in 1908 India, then one wonders why the Left in the 1960s was unable to capitalize in its historical moment. Ahmad and Devji are the clearest symptoms today of this history of failure; their unwillingness to deal with the rise of Islamization of Pakistan over the last 30 years represents an impoverished imagination of internationalism, an internationalism that collapsed alongside the rest of the Left in the course of the 1970s–80s. Their attempt to search for a solution that minimizes the alarm over the Talibanization of Pakistan, their struggle to analyze the current situation in Pakistan within the framework of international norms, is bound to remain inadequate as it hypostatizes the situation of the present-day crisis. The problem with the liberal Left today, as illustrated in the pages of *The Nation* and *The Guardian*, is its inability to digest the legacy of the Stalinized Left and its problematic overcoming through the crypto-fascism of Talibanism. The real issue that the liberal Left seeks to evade is its own complicity in the death of the Left in the 1970s, a death hastened by the ideologies of conservative nationalism and culturalism. In the end, the liberal Left can do no more than to applaud Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif for restoring democratic values, when in fact such democratic regimes completed the agenda set by the Taliban in Afghanistan to find an ally across the Kyber Pass. The liberal Left is but the acute manifestation of the atrophy that continues in the increasingly depoliticized post-9/11 milieu and in the absence of a vibrant international Left. **IP**

1. Quoted in Sabrina Tavernise, "Surveys of Pakistan's Young Predicts 'Disaster' If Their Needs Aren't Addressed," *New York Times*, November 22, 2009, World section, <www.nytimes.com/2009/11/22/world/asia/22pstan.html>.
2. Manan Ahmad, "Paranoia over Pakistan," *The Nation,* November 9, 2009, <www.thenation.com/doc/20091109/ahmed>.
3. Ibid.
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5. Faisal Devji, "Pakistan, the Privatised State," *The Guardian*, October 16, 2009, <www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/oct/16/pakistan-government-militants>.
6. Ibid.
7. Christopher Candland, *Labor Democratization and Development in India and Pakistan* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), 36.
8. Ibid., 38.
9. Ibid., 39–40.
10. Vladimir Lenin, "Inflammable Material in World Politics," *Proletary* 33 (July 23, 1908), <www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1908/jul/23.htm>.

Comments on Chris Cutrone's review of *Marxism and Philosophy* by Karl Korsch

David Black

> [Philosophy] is the scientific expression of a certain fundamental human attitude... toward being and beings in general, and through which a historical-social situation often can express itself more clearly and deeply than in the reified, practical spheres of life.
>
> — Herbert Marcuse[1]

CHRIS CUTRONE WRITES, "What the usual interpretive emphasis on Lukács occludes is that the Frankfurt School writers grappled not only with the problem of Stalinism but with that of 'anti-Stalinism' as well."[2] This statement is well founded, considering how Korsch's troubled relationship with Adorno and Horkheimer was paralleled by Sohn-Rethel's with those two during the same period; not to mention the later dialogues Dunayevskaya had with Marcuse and Fromm.

On the key question question of "nonidentity" versus the "identity of effective theory and practice," Cutrone says that, for the earlier Korsch, "constitutive non-identity" was "expressed symptomatically, in the subsistence of 'philosophy' as a distinct activity in the historical epoch of Marxism." This was because it expressed a "genuine historical need... to transcend and supersede philosophy"; a "recognition of the actuality of the symptom of philosophical thinking, of the mutually constitutive separation of theory and practice."[3] Cutrone relates this to Adorno's reiteration almost half a century later in *Negative Dialectics* of Korsch's statement in *Marxism and Philosophy* that "Philosophy cannot be abolished without being realized." Cutrone says that "This side of emancipation, 'theoretical' self-reflection, thought's reflecting on its own conditions of possibility, remains necessary, precisely because it expresses an unresolved social-historical problem." He adds that the later Korsch, "by assuming the identity of theory and practice, or of social being and consciousness in the workers' movement... sought their 'reconciliation,' instead of discerning and critically grasping their persistent antagonism, as would necessarily be articulated in any purported politics of emancipation."[4]

The later Korsch's abandonment of the theory and practice problem, which I will come to later, is however already present in the earlier writings, which raises the question, What remains that is of value in Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*? In that work Korsch quotes Engels's notorious statement about Marx's philosophy: "That which survives independently of all earlier philosophies is the science of thought and its laws—formal logic and dialectics. Everything else is subsumed in the positive science of nature and history."[5] (However, Korsch did make one criticism of Engels, that "In Hegel's terms he retreats from the heights of the Concept [Notion] to its threshold to the categories of reacting and mutual interaction.")[6] But if "Marxism" is "superseded and annihilated as a philosophical object," then it might also be superseded as a "positive science" of society if its historical practice can be can be shown to have "failed," and if the determinations based on its methodology can be "falsified" according to positivist method. This annihilation of Marxism as a "philosophical object" seems to me the basis for Korsch's eventual downgrading of Marx to just another theoretician, no more important than Thomas More or Mikhail Bukunin.[7]

But the important issue is the "problem of the philosophy of revolution, or of the 'theory of social revolution'" for both Hegel and Marx, which Cutrone spells out as follows: "How is it possible, if however problematic, to be a self-conscious agent of change, if what is being transformed includes oneself, or, more precisely, an agency that transforms conditions both for one's practical grounding and for one's theoretical self-understanding in the process of acting?"

This question, as well as addressing the problem of consciousness for the proletariat, also conjures up the self-consciousness of Marx the Philosopher, as a self-described "disciple" of Hegel who, in *Capital*, did not so much "apply" the Hegelian dialectic as recreate it. Korsch describes Marx's pre-1848 period as characterized by "a critique of philosophy calling for its simultaneous realization and self-abolition," and describes the circa-1848 period as "the sublimation of philosophy in revolution." Following this is the "curious blank spot or gap in the history of philosophy from the 1840s–60s, the period of Marxism's emergence"; then there is everything in "Marxism" up to 1917.

Taking off from Raya Dunayevskaya's unfinished critique of Korsch,[8] I have in my own research found the tripartite division Korsch applies to the history of "Marxism" to be highly questionable. As Cutrone points out, Korsch's 1923 work was accomplished without benefit of Marx's 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* or the *Grundrisse*, or Lenin's 1914 *Hegel Notebooks*. One might add that Korsch also did not have full knowledge of the debates within the Communist League in the early 1850s, now well documented.

George Lichtheim describes the original insight of Marx's critical theory in 1843–44 as "the belief that a mere spark of critical self-awareness could ignite a revolutionary tinder heaped up by the inhuman conditions of life imposed on the early proletariat. In enabling the oppressed to attain an adequate consciousness of their true role, critical theory translates itself into revolutionary practice." Consciousness was able to grasp "the total historical situation in which it is embedded... because at certain privileged moments a 'revolution in thought' acquired the character of a material force."[9]

By 1850, following the defeat of the 1848–49 revolutions, Marx was developing the perspective of "Revolution in Permanence." Marx argued that, although revolutionary workers parties could and would march with the petty bourgeois radicals against the class enemy, they would have to oppose all attempts by the bourgeois radicals to consolidate their position to the detriment of the workers. Dunayevskaya connects this concept with the "unchained dialectic" and "absolute negativity" of Hegel as appropriated by Marx in 1844. In my book, *Helen Macfarlane,* I have probed the connection

Participants of the Marxist Workshop in Thüringen in 1923, including Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács, and Friedrich Pollack, among others.

of "Revolution in Permanence" to Blanquism. There was once a widespread myth that Blanqui actually coined the term "Revolution in Permanence." Although this is long discredited, it is nonetheless true that the Marx–Blanqui relation was important. Blanqui was an implacable materialist, upholding, not the Hegelian dialectic, but the 18th-century French materialism of Holbach as the rightful inheritance of the proletariat, and as that which gave the proletarian body its head. Blanqui also saw revolutionary organization as a science as well as an art, requiring a "natural" hierarchy. But Blanqui was, like Marx, strongly anti-positivist, regarding the Comtean "equilibrium" theory of classes as counter-revolutionary. Sam Bernstein says that, in opposition to positivist equilibrium theory, Blanqui

> thought of democracy as a process, with a history and a future. In practice it meant a series of acts which climaxed in what was then designated as the social republic. And being a process, it could neither ignore the past nor be mummified like revolutionary relics.... Democracy, from Blanqui's viewpoint, had to become socialism, or it would be nothing more than a convenient cover for anyone, even for its enemies when they desire to disguise their intentions.[10]

At the very time Marx was writing about "Revolution in Permanence" in 1850, Louis Blanc, Giuseppe Mazzini, and Arnold Ruge issued a grandiose international program, which they hoped would reignite the defeated revolutions of 1848. Their program rejected "the cold and unfeeling travail of the intellect" in favour of the "instinct of the masses" as "the people in motion." To Marx's mind this was tantamount to demanding that the people "have no thought for the morrow and must strike all ideas from the mind" and that "the riddle of the future will be solved by a miracle."[11] Within the German Communist League, August Willich and Karl Schapper argued that the counterrevolution in Europe would soon force the existing French bourgeois republic to fight against the *anciens régimes* of Europe and would thus reopen the floodgates of revolution. In practice this would mean the communists and Blanquists finding common cause with the petit-bourgeois democrats and nationalists of Europe, and the setting aside of the communist program of the dictatorship of the proletariat. According to Marx, Willich and Schapper "demanded, if not real conspiracies, at least the appearance of conspiracies, and accordingly favored an alliance with the heroes of the hour."[12] Marx, who was studying the economic situation in Europe closely, knew that with industry booming, the old order of Europe re-stabilized, and the bourgeoisie newly confident in its ability to rule, Schapper's perspective was a fantasy. As he said of Schapper's proposals:

> The revolution is not seen as a product of the *realities* of the situation but as the result of an effort of *will*. Whereas we say to the workers: you have 15, 20, 50 years of civil war to go through in order to alter the situation and to *train* yourselves for the *exercise of power* it is said: we must take power at once, or else we might as well take to our beds. Just as the democrats abused the word "people" so now the word "proletariat" has been used as a mere phrase.[13]

Marx's position was consistent with what he actually was to do in the following years and decades: writing *Capital*, building the First International, etc. In 1850 Marx pointed out that, under present conditions in Europe, for the communists to make a revolution out of existing forces in the name of the proletariat they would have to describe the petty-bourgeoisie as proletarian and become *their* representatives. Schapper, in his reply, did not try to refute Marx's arguments. Instead he drew a division between the "party of theory" and the "party of action." Somewhat prefiguring the arguments of the "socialist" dictators of the underdeveloped world of the twentieth-century, Schapper said,

> The people who represent the party in principle part company with those who organize the proletariat.... The question at issue is whether we ourselves chop off a few heads right at the start or whether it is our own heads that will fall. In France the workers will come to power and thereby in Germany too. Were this not the case I would indeed take to my bed.... If we come to power we can take such measures as are necessary to ensure the role of the proletariat. I am a fanatical supporter of this view.[14]

As far as Marx was concerned, it was not Schapper's "hero of the hour," Louis Blanc, but Auguste Blanqui who was "true leader of the French proletariat." Blanqui, in a statement smuggled out of prison, which was circulated by Marx and Engels, accused those in his own organization in favor of accommodation with the bourgeois radicals of "hiding its banner, giving ground to the bourgeois republicans and sacrificing the future for the morbid need of uncertain support in the present." Blanqui declared, "Ideas are the standard of the masses. We must therefore be clear and blunt, and explain everything on pain of being sorely let down. Secrecy is the preliminary of duplicity, and I shall never be party to it."[15]

None of this figures in Korsch's potted history of "Marxism." How then do we read Korsch's 1950 thesis on the points he saw as "particularly critical for Marxism"?

> (A) its dependence on the underdeveloped economic and political conditions in Germany and all the other countries of central and eastern Europe where it was to have political relevance; (B) its unconditional adherence to the political forms of the bourgeois revolution; (C) the unconditional acceptance of the advanced economic conditions of England as a model for the future development of all countries and as objective preconditions for the transition to socialism; to which one should add, (D) the consequences of its repeated desperate and contradictory attempts to break out of these conditions.[16]

As I have indicated, Marx's critique both of the revolutionaries' failure to read the "economic and political conditions" and contemporary political forms of class collaboration (Blanc), terrorism (Mazzini), and conspiracy (Schapper—and, implicitly, Blanqui), suggests otherwise. We now know, from Marx's late writings on Russia, his *Ethnological Notebooks*, and later editions of *Capital,* that he did *not* see the "advanced economic conditions of England" as *necessarily* a "model for the future development of all countries."[17] Also, it is clear that in the 1850 factional fight in the Communist League Marx was opposed to "desperate and contradictory attempts" by revolutionaries to break out of the social conditions.

As Cutrone points out, according to the later Korsch of the 1930 *Anti-Critique*, in the mid-19th century "Marxism" had grown ideological and even Marx's *Capital* expressed a certain "degeneration." According to Korsch, quoted by Cutrone, "[T]he *theory* of Marx and Engels was progressing towards an ever higher level of theoretical perfection although it was no longer directly related to the *practice* of the worker's movement."

But inasmuch as "practice" found its representation in the practices of Lassalle, then perhaps it was a case of "so much the worse for the practice." Marx's attack on Lassalleanism in the 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program* was as realistic and objective as the 1850 critique of Willich/Schapper, except that the Critique was able to offer *Capital,* vol. I as a "theoretical victory for our party."

The later Korsch's opinion of the mature Marx's work as "anachronistic" jars with his earlier view that Hegel's concept of the world-as-totality informed Marx's analysis in *Capital*, and therefore needed to be reclaimed from the social democrats, for whom it was a theory of ahistorical laws governing production, separate from politics.

Karl Marx addressing the International Workingman's Association (First International), 1864.

Korsch's 1922 introduction to Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* sees an affinity between the reformism of Social Democracy and Hegel's attempt to reconcile labor and society. The Lassalleans and social democrats saw the property issue as a juridical problem of distribution solvable through changes in the form of the state, rather than a social problem of production which could only be solved by overthrowing the economic structure of society. (Korsch argued that, because during the "first phase" of communism bourgeois law and the bourgeois state will not have been totally superseded, the working class would need to control the whole economy, with workers' councils playing a "constitutional" role to guard against any tendencies in management practices that might lead to capitalist restoration through bureaucracy.) Korsch's writing on Marx's 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program* is thus a real insight, which indicates to me that the *Critique* was a continuation of the 1844 *Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic*.[18]

Oddly, whereas in 1923 Korsch praised Lenin for his Hegelian "critical reflection on the *problem* of relating theory and practice," in 1938 he dismissed him for his Hegelianism. In 1922–23 Korsch had recognized that Hegel had regarded "revolution in the form of thought as an objective component of the total social process of a real revolution." But for Korsch, Hegel, in his quest for reconciliation with the results of the French Revolution, had preserved the position of thought as external to economic reality. By 1938 Korsch was stressing the "bourgeois," rather than revolutionary character of Hegel's philosophy. Having broken with Leninism, he dismissed the significance of Lenin's *Hegel Notebooks* when they appeared in the 1930s. "Lenin's appreciation of the 'intelligent idealism' of Hegel" came about, Korsch argued, because "the whole circle not only of bourgeois materialist thought but of all bourgeois philosophical thought from Holbach to Hegel was actually repeated in the Russian dominated phase of the Marxist movement."[19] If, as Patrick Goode says, Korsch viewed Leninism as "merely an ideological form assumed by the bourgeois revolution in an underdeveloped country," then it would not have been surprising to him that Lenin was drawn to Hegel.[20]

Given what Cutrone tells us about the "Leninist" aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno's agenda, and given Pannekoek's disregard for the Hegelian dialectic, it is amazing that the later Korsch could seriously expect Horkheimer and Adorno to publish Pannekoek's critique of Lenin, which contains the following:

> The first problem in the science of human knowledge, the origin of ideas, was answered by Marx in the demonstration that they are produced by the surrounding world. The second adjoining problem, how the impressions of the surrounding world are transformed into ideas, was answered by Dietzgen... Marx pointed out what the world does to the mind, Dietzgen pointed out what the mind does itself.[21]

Dietzgen, a self-proclaimed "materialist," had recognized that thinking as well as objects could be the object of thought. But in a somewhat neo-Kantian manner, he argued that whilst "our brains do not grasp the things themselves but only the concepts," the concepts were quite adequate for "practical living" in a rational human society run by the workers.[22] This is another world from Adorno's Lukácsian view expressed in his letter to Walter Benjamin quoted by Cutrone: "The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; rather it is dialectical, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness.... [P]erfection of the commodity character in a Hegelian self-consciousness inaugurates the explosion of its phantasmagoria."

As Walter Benjamin said of Dietzgen in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*:

> Josef Dietzgen announced: "Labor is the savior of modern times.... In the improvement... of labor... consists the wealth, which can now finally fulfill what no redeemer could hitherto achieve." This vulgar-Marxist concept of what labor is, does not bother to ask the question of how its products affect workers, so long as these are no longer at their disposal. It wishes to perceive only the progression of the exploitation of nature, not the regression of society. It already bears the technocratic traces which would later be found in Fascism.[23]

Cutrone writes,

> If Marxism continued to be subject to a "Hegelian dialectic," thus requiring the "historical materialist" analysis and explanation that Korsch sought to provide of it, this was because it was not itself the reconciled unity of theory and practice but remained, as theory, the critical reflection on the *problem* of relating theory and practice—which in turn prompted further theoretical development as well as practical political advances.

Korsch developed this view in 1923 whilst reflecting on the failure of German councilism and the contrasting achievements of the Bolsheviks. In other words he saw the connection between the "return" to "communist practice" of Marxism and the reemergence of the Hegelian dialectic. After 1923, sans philosophy, his work regresses—although the influence it had was and is important.[24] **|P**

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1. Quoted in Seyla Benhabib, introduction to *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, by Herbert Marcuse (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), xviii.
2. Chris Cutrone, "Book Review: Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*," *Platypus Review* 15 (September 2009), <http://platypus1917.org/2009/09/03/book-review-karl-korsch-marxism-and-philosophy/>.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Karl Marx and Freidrich Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1987), 26.
6. Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1970), 40, quoted in Raya Dunayevskaya, *The Power of Negativity* (Lanham: Lexington Books 2002), 253.
7. Karl Korsch, "Ten Theses on Marxism Today," trans. Andrew Giles-Peters, *Telos* 26 (Winter 1975–76), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1950/ten-theses.htm>.
8. Dunayevskaya, *The Power of Negativity*, 249–247.
9. George Lichtheim, *Lukács* (London: Fontana Modern Masters, 1970), 64–5.
10. Sam Bernstein, *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 227.
11. Marx and Engels, *CW*, vol. 10 (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1978), 529–31, quoted in David Black, *Helen Macfarlane: A Feminist, Revolutionary Journalist and Philosopher in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 114–5.
12. Karl Marx, *Herr Vogt* (London: New Park, 1982), 28, quoted in ibid., 114.
13. Marx and Engels, *CW*, vol. 10, 626–8, quoted in ibid., 116.
14. Marx and Engels, *CW*, vol. 10, 628–9, quoted in ibid.
15. Marx and Engels, *CW*, vol. 10, 587, quoted in ibid., 117.
16. Korsch, "Ten Theses."
17. Raya Dunayevskaya, *Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1982), 175–91.
18. Karl Korsch, introduction to *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, by Karl Marx, trans. Fred Halliday (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1922/gotha.htm>.
19. Karl Korsch, "Lenin's Philosophy," appendix to Anton Pannekoek, *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: Merlin, 1975) 114–5.
20. Patrick Goode, *Karl Korsch: A Study in Western Marxism* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 135, quoted in Kevin B. Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel and Western Marxism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 175–80.
21. Pannekoek, *Lenin and Philosophy*, 35
22. Quoted in ibid., 36.
23. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," trans. Dennis Redmond, < www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>.
24. I discuss Korsch's influence on the Situationists in my forthcoming essay, "Critique of the Situationist Dialectic."

Between, continued from page 1

a labor movement that is completely discouraged and demoralized. We have an organized labor movement that is unable on any front to put up an effective struggle against the drive of destruction, organized by the masters. We have a revolutionary moment which, until this inspirational call for a Workers' Party Convention, was disheartened, discouraged, and demoralized.'"[9] Future rationalizations for failing to strike when the iron was hot generally express, as did the Communist Party in 1919, contempt for the potential of the organized working class in the U.S.

Following the reigning dogma of the Comintern in the mid-1920s, communists attempted to align themselves with the Farm-Labor Party movement. The rather remarkable assumption behind this was that the most advanced capitalist country in the world at that time had not yet developed to the stage where the formation of a genuinely proletarian party was appropriate. Indeed, it was thought American workers may even be incapable of forming something comparable to the Labour Party in the United Kingdom. The U.S. working class was, to the communists in the 1920s, unripe. But to leftists familiar with American trade unions, far from being "unripe," the situation of American radicalism desperately called out for the theory and the kind of political support it received during the fight for a legal party. The American situation was, in other words, plenty ripe; it just had to be "plucked" by an internationalist and revolutionary Left. As James P. Cannon pleaded, during his factional fight with the Comintern representative,

> The American movement has no counterpart anywhere else in the world, and any attempt to meet its problems by the simple process of finding a European analogy will not succeed. The key to the American problem can be found only in a thorough examination of the peculiar American situation. Our Marxian outlook, confirmed by the history of the movement in Europe, provides us with some general principles to go by, but there is no pattern, made-to-order from the European experience, that fits America today.[10]

Yet, despite such pleas, American communists, along with their international counterparts, slid farther and farther to the right throughout the 1920s. It is on this very issue, and for this reason, that at the end of the decade Cannon broke with Stalinist orthodoxy in favor of Trotsky's Left Opposition.

Commenting on the rightward drift of communists in the 1920s, Shachtman argued, "Everything that had distinguished Communists from Socialists at the time of the historic split between them after the First World War was sunk without a trace [by the start of the 30s]. In fact, the 'Popular Front' position of the Communist Party on all questions of theory and politics would have repelled the most extreme right-wing socialism at the time of the split in 1919."[11] This statement may appear rather bombastic to the romanticized view of the radical 1930s, the counter-example undoubtedly being the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Bracketing for a moment the Moscow Trials and the unchallenged rise of fascism in Europe, let us take a closer look at the Popular Front politics of communists in the CIO. At this time communists had taken a monumental rightward leap: from a position of out-and-out disaffiliation with every non-communist union, the communists, under the aegis of the Popular Front, became uncritical cheerleaders for Roosevelt's New Deal, working closer to the Democratic Party than any previous American radical could ever have imagined.

The communists' pernicious role in the New Deal alliance between labor and the state has had complex as well as lasting results. When the Second World War was in full swing and strikes threatened military production, the CIO, in line with Popular Front thinking, supported no-strike pledges, a portentous state directive that culminated after the War in the Taft-Hartley Bill. This in effect outlawed not only wildcat strikes but sympathy strikes and, indeed, all labor action deemed undesirable to the state. The legislation allowed the CIO to purge the communists, placing organized labor firmly within the dualistic Cold War framework, which profoundly affected political action in the following decades. These difficulties were further compounded by the failure of the CIO's all too timid attempt of 1946–53, known as "Operation Dixie," to organize in the South, a failure that helped trigger the Cold War merger between the CIO and American Federation of Labor in December 1955, which in effect ended the CIO's period of militant organizing. December 1955, as any good American history buff knows, was also the start of the Montgomery Bus boycott. The missed opportunity, during the birth of the New Left, simply takes one's breath away.[12] Yet, the source of such problems lies in the 1920s, when American communists squandered the possibility of labor becoming an "independent variable," rather than a lackey for the state.

In all matters essential to thinking through the history of the American Left, especially the need for a party of labor, a place where the tension between reform and revolution can be dialectically propelled, the communists of the past give us little critical insight; they even conspired against those who might have provided some. American communists offered ossified thinking and a shift to the right in practice, withering along with the New Deal they supported, dying in the war whose aims they could not influence. Yet, posed against this was a different current of thought, whose hopes were pinned on the unbounded dynamism of the American working class, a hope that goes all the way back to Marx, who wrote in *Capital*,

> In the United States of America, every independent workers' movement was paralysed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the republic. Labour in a white skin cannot emancipate itself where it is branded in a black skin. However a new life immediately arose from the death of slavery. The first fruit of the American Civil War was the eight hours' agitation, which ran from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California with the seven-league boots of the locomotive.[13]

Three years before the first volume of Marx's masterpiece was published, the International Working Men's Association (which Marx served as Secretary) wrote as follows to Republican Party leader and U.S. President Abraham Lincoln,

> The workingmen of Europe feel sure that, as the American War of Independence initiated a new era of ascendancy for the middle class, so the American Antislavery War will do for the working classes. They consider it an earnest of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world.[14]

Max Eastman, James P. Cannon, and Big Bill Haywood at the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern held in Moscow in 1922. At this meeting, Cannon successfully argued for the legal and open functioning of the Communist Party of America.

In this same spirit, and in no less perilous a time, Trotsky proclaimed, completely out of sync with the dominant thought of the 1930s, most especially among "communists," that a socialist America was not only possible, but desirable:

> The governments of Central and South America would be pulled into [the North American Soviet] federation like iron filings to a magnet. So would Canada. The popular movements in these countries would be so strong that they would force this great unifying process within a short period and at insignificant costs. I am ready to bet that the first anniversary of the American soviets would find the Western Hemisphere transformed into the Soviet United States of North, Central and South America, with its capital at Panama.[15]

Why must this, even as a distant hope or dream, appear to the Left today, so concerned with "anti-imperialism," as a sacrilege?

How did the Left depoliticize a generation, and future generations, up to this day? The question with which Oglesby began is where we too must start. But, rather than searching the nooks and crannies of either the university or the Third World for an alternative revolutionary subject, we would do better to revisit the history that Oglesby and the New Left first misunderstood, then obscured. It was Stalinism itself, and *not* the purging of the Stalinists from the American trade unions in the heyday of McCarthyism, that most fundamentally conditioned the subsequent rightward turn of the working class. Moreover, the seeds of this were planted even before Stalinism had fully taken hold of American communism. At this critical juncture of history we can see, in figures like Shachtman and Cannon, glimpses of a nascent alternate future that had died by the end of the 1930s. The same might have been visible to the likes of Oglesby. Had he looked to it, the long detour of the New Left might have been avoided. That generation might conceivably have done what we must do now, namely undertake a critique of the history of the Left that, precisely because it takes a critical stance, declines to take the historical failure of the Left for granted. **IP**

1. Carl Oglesby, "The Idea of the New Left," in *The New Left Reader*, ed. Carl Oglesby (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 2.
2. Ibid., 4.
3. Ibid., 9.
4. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 263–65.
5. Max Shachtman, "Reflections on a Decade Past," *New International* 16:3 (May–June 1950): 131–144.
6. Christopher Lasch, *The Agony of the American Left* (New York: Knopf, 1968), 40.
7. Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 96.
8. Max Shachtman, "Radicalism in the Thirties: The Trotskyist View," in *As We Saw the Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade*, ed. Rita James Simon (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1969), 10–11.
9. Draper, *Roots of Communism,* 341.
10. James P. Cannon, "The Workers Party Today—And Tomorrow," in *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism: Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920–1928* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 1992), 137.
11. Shachtman, "Radicalism in the Thirties: The Trotskyist View," 34.
12. For a fuller analysis on the effects of the New Deal alliance on the Civil Rights Movement, see Adolph Reed, "Black Particularity Reconsidered," *Telos* 39 (Spring 1979): 71–93.
13. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, *A Critique of Political Economy,* trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 414.
14. Karl Marx, 29 November 1864, address of the International Working Men's Association to Abraham Lincoln, *The Bee-Hive* 169 (7 November 1865), <www.marxists.org/archive/marx/iwma/documents/1864/lincoln-letter.htm>.
15. Leon Trotsky, "If America Should Go Communist," *Liberty*, 23 March 1935, <www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1934/08/ame.htm>.

Film Review: *Public Enemies*

Ryan Hardy

John Dillinger hiding in public. Film Still, *Public Enemies*.

GIVE THE MAN full points for timing. Released less than a year after the onset in the summer of 2008 in the wake of global economic crisis, and now available on DVD, Michael Mann's *Public Enemies* captures perfectly, if unconsciously, the political condition of our time. The film tells the story of John Dillinger, a bank robber who was elevated by the desperation of the Great Depression into an iconic outlaw and an enduring American folk hero. A brilliant filmmaker, Mann must be an economic genius, if not an outright clairvoyant, to have successfully planned his film to coincide with this recent summer of American discontent. Or, if this sounds like too much, then certainly Mann was awfully lucky. For otherwise adverse conditions conspired to produce a most receptive climate for *Public Enemies*.

The figure of John Dillinger represents exactly the type of solitary, emotionally complex high-achiever around whom Mann prefers to build his films. The majority of his characters have been standard-issue good guys, but Mann has always been equally attracted to, and has never shied away from, protagonists on the other side of the law, from the tortured safecracker Frank (James Caan) in his debut feature, *Thief* (1981), to the disciplined yet romantic bank robber Neil McCauley (Robert De Niro), the outlaw half of the criminological dyad that defines *Heat* (1995)—Mann's greatest film yet. As in *Heat*, the lead characters of *Public Enemies* are a robber and a cop, Dillinger and FBI agent Melvin Purvis (Christian Bale). However, whereas *Heat* draws strength from the parallels between its two lead characters, *Public Enemies* gives unquestioned pride of place to Dillinger, played by the magnetic Johnny Depp.

With the preeminent leading man of our times in a starring role and a major Hollywood director at the helm, *Public Enemies* succeeded as a summer blockbuster. And yet, the film demands closer scrutiny. After all, it is a film about the ferment and chaos of the Great Depression released at a time when talk of both a second Depression and second New Deal is rampant. Yet, John Dillinger was, at bottom, little more than a nondescript criminal whom law enforcement's desperate public quest to apprehend transformed into an icon.

Using Dillinger as a starting point, Mann accomplishes something unique with *Public Enemies*. Although innumerable films have depicted this key period in American history, Mann's is one of only a handful to take into account the era's enduring appeal, its brutality and its pivotal place in the development of contemporary America.

Like many of Mann's films, *Public Enemies* begins with a dynamic set piece, in this case the escape from prison of Dillinger and his cronies. As in *Heat*, the incompetence of one of Dillinger's henchmen causes a snag in the breakout and leads to an unnecessary death. Absolutely pitiless in his retribution, Dillinger then throws the man from a speeding automobile. After their escape, he and his gang return to their criminal careers just where they left off, enjoying both the good life of fine dining and whorehouse excursions while knocking over banks in a technically assured, crisply professional fashion. It is not long before this hedonistic lifestyle brings Dillinger into contact with the object of romantic interest in the film, Billie Frechette (Marion Cotillard). Dillinger's romance with Frechette evokes a powerful nostalgia for the thirties as a time when "men were men and women were women." Their love affair begins with a dance to the song "Bye Bye Blackbird," the tune of which is reprised repeatedly thereafter. From this first meeting their romance develops through scenes of passionate verbal intercourse. One line Dillinger delivers in one such scene typifies the appeal of supposedly simpler times: "I like baseball, movies, good clothes, fast cars, whiskey... and you. What else you need to know?" And so with this succinct yet evocative proclamation of love, and only the briefest hint of any angst about the relationship's future, Mann portrays an idealized romance crucial for his portrait of Dillinger as a man of preternatural resolve and ability.

While both Dillinger's line and the affair it inaugurates seem simplistic, this simplicity is in many ways the point. Unlike the contemporary trope of anxiety-ridden lovers, Dillinger loves with pure intensity, if not pure intent.

And yet, the time period depicted in the film was in fact nowhere near as uncomplicated as Mann's film suggests. Indeed, few moments in American history were more pregnant with revolutionary possibilities than was this, a time that saw both the rise of populist demagogues such as Huey Long and Father Charles Coughlin and massive labor mobilization with a parallel swelling of the ranks of the American Communist Party. In this regard the "Dirty Thirties" may be second only to the period of the Republic's birth and the transformative chaos of the Civil War (the "Second American Revolution"), so much so that the film cannot wholly fail to depict it, as for instance in the social churning that renders the exploits of Dillinger and his confrères possible. These violate the security of governmental institutions while simultaneously wreaking havoc on the whole apparatus of state power. This is where Melvin Purvis and the FBI enter the picture. After all, the very title of the film comes from Dillinger's designation by the FBI as "Public Enemy Number One," a sobriquet coined by the ambitious head of the organization, J. Edgar Hoover, played Janus-faced by Billy Crudup. It is Hoover more than Purvis who is Dillinger's real counterpart in the film. Whereas Dillinger is both a throwback and an innovator, a Wild West-style bandit who uses superior technology (telephones, very fast cars, roaring Thompson machine guns) to elude corrupt and incompetent cops, Hoover is the organization man. Self-consciously modern, Hoover embodies the nascent Fordist state just as it comes into its own.

Hoover first appears in the film at a Senate subcommittee grilling in which he is compelled to confess that, although he is the head of a developing national police force, he himself has never made an arrest. This, Hoover argues, is because he is an administrator. His goal, apparent throughout the film, is to transform the FBI into a "modern" and professional organization with a nationwide scope, to accomplish which requires, above all, the pursuit and capture of gangsters like Dillinger.

For Mann, Dillinger is not only a criminal and, consequently, the enemy of Hoover's vast and expanding security apparatus, but also a celebrity who thrives on public interest and adulation. Thus, in one key scene, Dillinger surprises his Canadian counterpart, the criminal Alvin Karpis (Giovanni Ribisi), by declining to participate in a kidnapping scheme because, as Dillinger says, the public has no taste for kidnappings. Like any savvy celebrity, Dillinger knows the value of his audience: "I hide out among them... I gotta care what they think."

In one of the film's most fascinating sequences, Dillinger and several other criminals gather in a movie theatre to discuss their next score. All of a sudden, the film is interrupted by a public service announcement warning filmgoers about the Dillinger gang, announcing the criminals could be anywhere, even in the movie theatre. Unbelievably, and more or less in unison, the entire audience then complies with the announcer's directive to look around to see if Dillinger might not be there among them in the theater. The eerie spectacle of such mass obedience is disturbed only by the solitary figure of Dillinger, who remains still, with a smirk on his face exuding confidence.

Eventually it becomes obvious that Dillinger's strength is liable to fail. Although Dillinger contemptuously dismisses law enforcement as not "tough enough, smart enough, or fast enough," Hoover's FBI eventually does catch up with him. With all the smug confidence of the consolidating status quo Purvis tells Dillinger, "the only time you will leave this jail cell is when we take you out to execute you." While this prophecy misses the mark and Dillinger manages to escape, never again can he regain the upper hand. Instead, he is reduced to running and hiding from the FBI. In the end, this pursuit draws both Dillinger and Purvis, each accompanied by their men, to a roadside inn, the Little Bohemia Lodge, where the film reaches a violent climax. There, the Little Bohemia's bucolic tranquility is shattered by a shoot-out between gangsters and agents of the state.

During the exchange of gunfire, most of Dillinger's associates are killed, along with at least one FBI agent and several innocent bystanders. Though shaken, Dillinger himself manages to evade capture and plots his return to Chicago, motivated by his love for Billie. In their desperation to catch a man they have helped build into a living legend, the FBI and the police resort to increasingly brutal tactics which culminate in an especially grim scene in which the petite and elegant Billie is tied to a chair and beaten. Compared to the romantic heights during the beginning of their affair, life has become tough for Dillinger and Billie. The nationwide noose drawn by Hoover's FBI begins to tighten and Dillinger is drawn inexorably towards a final confrontation with his enemy.

Even a casual student of American history knows the film will end with Dillinger's death in a hail of bullets outside the Biograph Theater in Chicago. But Mann takes his time getting to this gory finale, instead taking Dillinger on a whimsical, and wholly imagined, visit to, of all places, the very FBI office where the search for him is being quarterbacked. In this strange moment the nostalgia for the 1930s as a "simpler time" collides with the fact that such times have ended, and perhaps never really existed. On the one hand, Dillinger is able to walk around the station in a pair of sunglasses and go unrecognized. But while he is there he observes the extent of the FBI's manhunt. Earlier in the film he claims that law enforcement agencies are not "smart enough" to ever catch him; this scene puts the lie to that boast. With relentless efficiency the FBI have collected photos of Dillinger and all the other public enemies, and noted one by one their capture or elimination, leaving only John Dillinger.

Against such a powerful foe, Dillinger cannot win. But the need to reenact his story, and especially his death, suggests that Dillinger and the outlaw ideal he represented remain powerful. The professionalization and expansion of law enforcement was but one step in the process of building contemporary American capitalism. But while Dillinger and his ilk were casualties of this process, it would be a mistake to believe they represented any kind of alternative to it. As a criminal epic in the vein of Mann's earlier films, *Public Enemies* is entertaining, but the elegiac tone of its conclusion is misplaced. Instead of mourning Dillinger's death and the untamed banditry he embodied, it would be better to lament the conditions of the present that can make mere criminality seem an appealing alternative. **IP**