# On "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg"

Greg Gabrellas

*At the Marxist Literary Group's Institute on Culture and Society 2011, held on June 20–24, 2011 at the Institute for the Humanities, University of Illinois at Chicago, Platypus members Chris Cutrone, Greg Gabrellas, and Ian Morrison organized a panel on "The Marxism of Second International Radicalism: Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky." The original description of the event reads: "The legacy of revolution 1917-19 in Russia, Germany, Hungary and Italy is concentrated above all in the historical figures Vladimir Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky, leaders of the Left in the Second International (1889-1914)—what they called 'revolutionary social democracy'—in the period preceding the crisis of war, revolution, counterrevolution and civil war in World War I and its aftermath. In 1920, Georg Lukács summed up this experience as follows: '[T]he crisis [of capital] remains permanent, it goes back to its starting-point, repeats the cycle until after infinite sufferings and terrible detours the school of history completes the education of the proletariat and confers upon it the leadership of mankind. . . . Of course this uncertainty and lack of clarity are themselves the symptoms of the crisis in bourgeois society. As the product of capitalism the proletariat must necessarily be subject to the modes of existence of its creator. . . . inhumanity and reification.' Nonetheless, these Marxists understood their politics as being 'on the basis of capitalism' itself (Lenin). How were the Second International radicals, importantly, critics, and not merely advocates, of their own political movement? What is the legacy of these figures today, after the 20th century—as Walter Benjamin said in his 1940 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' 'against the grain' of their time, reaching beyond it? How did Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky contribute to the potential advancement and transformation of Marxism, in and through the crisis of Marxism in the early 20th century? How can we return to these figures productively, today, to learn the lessons of their history?" What follows is an edited version of Greg Gabrellas's opening remarks.*

**DESPITE THE CONTRARY ASSERTIONS** of conservatives, Marxism as a body of thought is widely known and disseminated among activists, academics, and political intellectuals. They take Marxism to mean a theory of what is wrong in the world, and how it can be practically changed—essentially a normative political philosophy with a radical disposition. Marxism takes its seat next to feminism, queer theory and critical race studies as a philosophy of liberation. But this view is insufficient, and would have been unthinkable to the radicals of the Second International. Moreover, Marxism today is not only practically ineffectual. It stands in the way of future developments within Marxism, and with it the possibility of socialism.

This judgment might seem surprising, perhaps even shocking, to the activists, academics and intellectuals who consider themselves Marxists or at least sympathizers. There exist Marxist political organizations, journals, reading groups and conferences. Activist projects continue to arise, countering imperialist war and punitive sanctions against the poor and working class, and Marxists play a definitive role in all forms of contemporary activism. But the historical optimism implicit in activism for its own sake, manifest by the slogan "the struggle continues," condemns itself to impotence. Marxism is different from radical political theory only insofar as it is an active recognition of possibility amidst social disintegration and calamity. Marxists have forgotten that self-critical politics is the form in which progressive developments within Marxist theory take place.

At first this inward orientation might seem misplaced. But just as modern painting recovers and transforms the aesthetic conventions of previous generations, so the radicals of the Second International understood socialism to be exclusively possible through the self-criticism and advancement of the actually-existing-history of the movement. Understandably, the splotches on a Jackson Pollock painting, or the overlapping figures of a de Kooning, might confuse first-time visitors to any museum of modern art. With its historical link severed, Marxism too risks becoming unintelligible amid the chatter of contemporary theory.

For example, in *The Crisis of German Social Democracy*, written under the pseudonym Junius while imprisoned for her opposition to world war in 1914, Rosa Luxemburg wrote,

> Unsparing self-criticism is not merely an essential for its existence but the working class's supreme duty. On our ship we have the most valuable treasures of mankind, and the proletariat is their ordained guardian! And while bourgeois society, shamed and dishonored by the bloody orgy, rushes headlong toward its doom, the international proletariat must and will gather up the golden treasure that, in a moment of weakness and confusion in the chaos of the world war, it has allowed to sink to the ground.[1]


**Photograph from the Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz by Herbert Hoffmann of Rosa Luxemburg in Stuttgart in 1907.**

The "most valuable treasures of mankind" to which Luxemburg refers may be necessarily cryptic, but her phrase illuminates objective social sensibilities that have since vanished. Socialism was seen by the radical masses of workers and intellectuals alike as the fulfillment of humanity's highest social and cultural achievements. Marxism was itself a historical achievement rendered possible by the organized politics of the working class. The task of Marxist theory was the criticism of socialist politics as a means of developing Marxism itself, and with it the possibility for new social freedoms. For Luxemburg, the project of political Marxism was not simply a matter of ideology or a political program that could be right or wrong. Socialism was, as she put it in the same pamphlet, "the first popular movement in world history that has set itself the goal of bringing human consciousness, and thereby free will, into play in the social actions of mankind." In the wake of this movement's crisis and ultimate collapse in the twentieth century, we must struggle to discern why and how this nearly forgotten generation of workers, intellectuals and students came closest to achieving a real utopia.

If the intervening history has rendered this historical optimism suspect, then it is to Luxemburg's lasting credit that she passed judgment on the failure of the Left before barbarism itself had the last word. By declaring Social Democracy a "stinking corpse" in 1915, with its resignation in the face of national chauvinism and a looming world war, Luxemburg purposefully cast "the last forty-five year period [1870-1915] in the development of the modern labor movement…in doubt."[2] Luxemburg's readers must have found this judgment shocking, since it corresponded to the rise of mass democratic parties and trade unions—historically new institutions, but ones that seemed to many socialists to ensure their political victory. That a disciplined leader of the revolutionary movement could criticize the foundation of the modern labor movement itself illustrates the keen historical integrity of Luxemburg's Marxism. Fortified by her theoretical will to "self-criticism, remorseless, cruel," she politically challenged and tried to demolish the regressive political and ideological tendencies within her own movement.[3] She saw these as symptoms of the bourgeois social order in decline. Unable to contain the contradiction between the immense capacity to generate wealth and the intensifying fragmentation and attenuation of individual freedom, bourgeois society became repetitive, caught in the mythological repeat of the failure of revolution. This posed both a problem and an opportunity for the revolutionary left, which participated in mass institutions but only as a means to furthering human freedom by reconstructing society on a wholly new basis.

But the "crisis of German Social Democracy" revealed the extent to which the Left had become its own worst enemy. Rosa Luxemburg sought to crystallize this trauma, rendering it available to theoretical diagnosis and intervention. Her criticism was a necessary political attempt at achieving the historical consciousness required for the realization of socialism. For example, in her final political work she understood herself and her comrades on the Left to be returning, under changed conditions, to a moment of revolutionary potential occupied much earlier by the authors of *The Communist Manifesto*. She observed in 1918, at the founding congress of the German Communist Party (KPD), "the course of the historical dialectic has led us back to the point at which Marx and Engels stood in 1848 when they first unfurled the banner of international socialism. We stand where they stood, but with the advantage that seventy additional years of capitalist development lie behind us."[4] Luxemburg argued that the Left had lived for many years in the dark shadow cast by the failure of revolution in 1848. While industrial development spurred the development of wealth-generating machines on an ever-expanding scale, the working class organized itself on an increasingly collectivist basis that threatened to compromise the emancipatory impulse behind Marx's politics. Henceforth, "Marxist"

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Statement of purpose

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

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

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

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

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

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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_editor@platypus1917.org*. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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# Lukács's abyss

Jeremy Cohan

*At the Marxist Literary Group's Institute on Culture and Society 2011, held on June 20–24, 2011 at the Institute for the Humanities, University of Illinois at Chicago, Platypus members Spencer Leonard, Pamela Nogales, and Jeremy Cohan organized a panel on "Marxism and the Bourgeois Revolution." The original description of the event reads: "The 'bourgeois revolutions' from the 16th through the 19th centuries—extending into the 20th—conformed humanity to modern city life, ending traditional, pastoral, religious custom in favor of social relations of the exchange of labor. Abbé Sieyès wrote in 1789 that, in contradistinction to the clerical First Estate who 'prayed' and the aristocratic Second Estate who 'fought,' the commoner Third Estate 'worked': 'What has the Third Estate been? Nothing. What is it? Everything.' Kant warned that universal bourgeois society would be the mere midpoint in humanity's achievement of freedom. After the last bourgeois revolutions in Europe of 1848 failed, Marx wrote of the 'constitution of capital' the ambivalent, indeed self-contradictory character of 'free wage labor.' In the late 20th century, the majority of humanity abandoned agriculture in favor of urban life—however in 'slum cities.' How does the bourgeois revolution appear from a Marxian point of view? How did what Marx called the 'proletarianization' of society circa 1848 signal not only the crisis and supersession, but the need to 'complete' the bourgeois revolution, whose task now fell to the politics of 'proletarian' socialism, expressed by the workers' call for 'social democracy?' How did this express the attempt, as Lenin put it, to overcome bourgeois society 'on the basis of capitalism' itself? How did subsequent Marxism lose sight of Marx on this, and how might Marx's perspective on the crisis of the bourgeois revolution in the 19th century still resonate today?" What follows is an edited version of Jeremy's Cohan's opening remarks.*

**IN HIS "IDEA FOR A UNIVERSAL HISTORY FROM A COSMOPOLITAN POINT OF VIEW,"** Immanuel Kant sets forth to tell the story of humanity as if it were one of progress. This is not easy, says Kant,

> Since men in their endeavors behave, on the whole, not just instinctively, like the brutes, nor yet like rational citizens of the world according to some agreed-on plan, no history of man conceived according to a plan seems to be possible…One cannot suppress a certain indignation when one sees men's actions on the great world-stage and finds, beside the wisdom that appears here and there among individuals, everything in the large woven together from folly, childish vanity, even from childish malice and destructiveness.[1]

For Kant, rationality in human history depends on the future. By completing the seeds of freedom and development implicit in the present, we might illuminate and make meaningful the sound, fury, and idiocy thus far characteristic of world-history. The stakes are high:

> Until this last step…is taken, which is the halfway mark in the development of mankind, human nature must suffer the cruelest hardships under the guise of external well-being; and Rousseau was not far wrong in preferring the state of savages, so long, that is, as the last stage to which the human race must climb is not attained.[2]

Georg Lukács sought to revive a Marx that, like Kant, strove to bring the crisis-character of the present to self-consciousness, but under changed conditions. *This* Marx understood the problem of his—and our—epoch as the unfinished bourgeois revolution, whose gains would be meaningful only from the standpoint of redemption—what Lukács called the standpoint of the proletariat. The "orthodox" Marx Lukács found in the politics of the radicals of the Second International, Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin, stood at the edge of an historical abyss.

As Nietzsche's Zarathustra puts it: "Man is a rope tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping."[3] On the other side of the rope, the completion of the human freedom whose possibility the "bourgeois epoch" had begun. Beneath, the whoring subservience of bourgeois thought and socialism both, to a status quo with ever dwindling possibilities for human freedom.

This is a very different Lukács than the one who has gained some academic respectability of late. A sector of the academic left thinks we ought to take up many of the analytical tools Lukács has given us to become more "reflexive" critics of capitalism, paying attention to our "standpoint" of critique to get past objective and subjective dichotomies that plague debate in the social sciences, and to talk about ideology as "socially necessary illusion" rather than mere will o' the wisp. Sure, we have to ditch the politics—the crypto-messianic or proto-Stalinist (whichever you prefer) "proletariat as the identical subject-object of history." But Lukács can help us become keener, more critical academics.

I want to resist this assimilation of Lukács into the barbarism of academic reason.

As Lukács put it in his "What is Orthodox Marxism?": "Materialist dialectic is a revolutionary dialectic."[4] Lukács is not the mere "analyst" of reification, on the model of his cultural studies epigones. He sought to demonstrate that Marxism was, from beginning to end, only possible as a practical self-clarification of the ongoing crisis of society triggered by the unfinished bourgeois revolution. Recent attempts to rescue the "academic" Lukács are an exercise in contradiction. It is precisely when he *stopped* being an academic that he could move forward with his philosophical problems, because they were being addressed politically by the revolutionary Marxism of his day.

But the attempt to recover the political Lukács may be just as futile. For Lukács's moment is not ours; the crisis and possibility of the early 20th century is far from what we face. So any "recovery" of Lukács must operate on two levels: one, by asking seriously whether we have overcome the crisis that Lukács attempted to formulate theoretically, and two, by recognizing that, if we have not, we cannot simply take up where he left off.

## I

The problem of epistemology, morals, aesthetics "Reification" essay is reason at odds with itself; reason that ends in mythology, suffering, and unfreedom.

We return to Kant, this time offering the battle cry of the Enlightenment: "Ours is the genuine age of criticism, to which everything must submit."[5] Not just ideas, but social institutions and forms of life too, must *justify* themselves by appealing to reason, rather than through claims of tradition or dogma. The philosophical Enlightenment and the political revolutions that fought under its banner—the American, the French, the Haitian, and those of 1848—looked forward to the realization of reason, freedom, and human self-development in the world, in our social institutions and in ourselves. This would be emancipation—humanity's "maturity" as Kant puts it.

But bourgeois society has been unable to fulfill its promise. We all-too reasonable moderns seem consigned to contemplate a ready-made world. Lukács shows this reason—a more powerful and mythical dominating force than nature ever was—at odds with itself, and in play in all forms in society: from the factory machine to the bureaucratic state, from jurisprudence to journalism. He peoples his essay with characters from the great social scientists of his day, Max Weber and Georg Simmel—the bureaucrats, the abstract calculative individuals—to describe a society whose "reason" is a soulless restrictive rationalization shaping humanity in its narrow image. He might, like Weber, have also turned to Nietzsche's "last man"—the shrunken, all-too reasonable, modern toady. Happy; unable to give birth to a star.

Nor does academia help us out of this crisis of modern reason. Disciplinary fragmentation is the rule, wherein the more we seem to know, the more reasonable each science becomes, the less it has to say about the nature of our society as a whole. Weber puts it like so in his "Science as a Vocation," "Natural science gives us an answer to the question of what we wish to do to master life technically. It leaves quite aside…whether we should and do wish to master life technically and whether it ultimately makes sense to do so."[6] We once thought we could go to reason with our deep questions; we now know better, says Weber.

And, importantly, Marxism has been on the whole no better—it has been only a more advanced form of this domination-reconstituting reason. The target of most of *History and Class Consciousness* is, after all, Marxism itself, a "vulgar" Marxism that loses the capacity to affect the course of events. This Marxism had signed on to national war efforts in WWI; this Marxism was responsible for the tightening and spread of state control over everyday life. We will return to this point: Marxism, for Lukács, faced a crisis in which it would either have to transform itself or would become one more apologia for the status quo.

This betrayal of emancipation by reason—this formalization, fragmentation, and tyrannous indifference to the particular—is what Lukács calls reification. None of this, let me emphasize, can be solved by interdisciplinary programs. This is a problem, Lukács asserts, that arises in our textbooks, because it is *real*, it has a basis in our form of life. Capitalist totality *really does* proceed fragmentarily, unconsciously, relegating humans into mere things. Reification is a *Gegenstandlichkeitsform*, a "form of objectivity." It cannot be overcome except through consciousness, but it cannot be overcome through consciousness alone.

## II

We might read the entirety of the second part of the "Reification" essay, "The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought," as demonstrating, again and again, that reification cannot be overcome in thought alone. But Lukács is not setting up philosophy for a fall. Instead, Lukács gives an account of "Idealist" philosophy struggling to express the problems and potentials of freedom in its moment—that philosophy's ambition, and the limits it reached, are characteristic of the "high" moment of bourgeois politics. Bourgeois philosophy, says Lukács, is the self-consciousness of a contradictory age, whose further transformations and developments necessitated its (self-)overcoming. This attempt to realize a freedom not "imposed upon" but immanent *in* social reality is passed on to *Marxism*. Marxism, in turn, is undergoing its own deep split, its own crisis, taking up in transmuted form the earlier crisis of thought and action.

Marxism, for Lukács, is the direct inheritor of a bourgeois practical philosophy of freedom. This definitively separates Marxism from many other varieties of anti-modern discontent (of which postmodernism is the most recent variety). Philosophy seeks to express, and through expression to become midwife to, the birth of the freedom implicit in our social relations. And while this task is more opaque in Lukács's moment, Lukács refuses to sadly shrug his shoulders at the coming barbarism; he calls us to risk achieving the Enlightenment's promise. Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schiller, and Hegel would not cede the attempt to combine reason, freedom, and human development, even as they conscientiously recognized that these could not be reconciled in a bourgeois world. They express that bourgeois society has not yet given up on itself.

Bourgeois philosophy stuck with its ambition: "…the idea that the object…can be known by us for the reason that, and to the degree in which, it has been created by ourselves."[7] But through epistemology, morals, aesthetics (the subjects of Kant's three critiques) and even Hegel's invocation of history, this philosophy kept finding itself left with, on the one side, an incomplete formal reason, on the other side an inert and irrational object; on the one side a free, self-determining subject, on the other the brute facts and "laws" of the world. Reason simply reproduces a subject denuded of its capacity to shape the world and itself, reconciled at the expense of unfreedom.

Classical philosophy's honest focus on its limits was one of the things Lukács admired most about it. But even more importantly, that philosophical lineage attempted to probe and overcome its difficulties through developing a certain *form* of knowledge: the "identical subject-object," "its own age comprehended in thought," or *practical self-consciousness.* Classical idealist philosophy shows that freedom is possible only through a transformative self-consciousness, where "knowing" and "practical transformation" are mutually constitutive—where knowledge is immanent, rather than abstract.

Reason is not an abstract form to be imposed on a hostile reality—it is realizing something implicit in an object, an object which is actually *us*. A neurotic symptom appears to be a horrible hostile entity to be conquered, but it is rather a development of self to be understood and practically overcome. By knowing myself, I change myself. I am, but am not, the same self I was. Self-knowledge allows me, as Nietzsche puts it, to "become myself."

Marxism is the attempt to realize the form of practical self-knowledge which offers the only hope of achieving freedom, reason, and development. But Marxism has inherited not only the tasks, but also the problems and crises, of the practical philosophy of freedom. Neo-Kantian, scientistic Marxism, connected with varieties of reformism, becomes the farcical repetition of Kant's achievement: it fails to radicalize the Kant–Hegel–Marx lineage. Much like what Freud would call *regression*—the use of outdated psychic tools to cope with new problems and changed conditions—Marxism threatened to become "stuck," thus failing to justify the leap the bourgeois revolutions had initiated. Marxism needed to learn to grow up. Or, more specifically, it needed to learn to stop thinking that it had *already* grown up.

## III

Lukács insists that revolutionary Marxism is able to concretely pose the problem of emancipation, because its politics seeks to practically achieve the self-consciousness of capitalist society in its crisis. And capitalist society's crisis, in its most acute form, is the historical development and consciousness of the proletariat. As Lukács puts it, "the proletariat is nothing but the contradictions of history become conscious" (71). But why?

Firstly, because the rise of the proletariat meant, historically, the decline of bourgeois radicalism. The proletariat's incipient demand that they become the subjects promised by bourgeois society—free, creative, and equal—led the bourgeoisie to become "vulgar," to give up on the radical implications of the Enlightenment and to call for "law and order." Capital's tragedy is that it is always also the proletariat. The bourgeoisie's tragedy is that it must, by necessity, be always one step behind capital.

Second, because the proletariat is a commodity, and thus the ultimate object, she sells herself on the market, is enslaved by the machine, and is thrown about by economic crises over which she has not a whit of control. But bourgeois society also promises that each human being might become a self-determining subject. For Lukács, "the worker can only become conscious of his existence in society when he becomes aware of himself as a commodity." Or "[the proletariat's] consciousness is the *self-consciousness of the commodity*" (168). The commodity, this irrational reason, can *itself* make demands for its emancipation because the typical commodity is the proletariat. The inverse is also true: the proletariat is the quintessential "abstract" bourgeois subject, whose struggles to appropriate society for its purposes demand that the object—the product of the history of social labour—be infused with subjective purpose.

We are used to thinking of the natural constituency of the Left as those who are "marginal" to society. Lukács develops the daring claim of revolutionary Marxism that capitalism must overcome itself, not through the intervention of those outside, but by the action of those *at its very center*. "[The proletariat's] fate is typical of the society as a whole," says Lukács (92). The *only* advantage the worker might have is that her reification is often experienced as a form of powerlessness and therefore might be mediated politically into a transformative practice. Marxism is *not* the resistance to capitalism or reification or bourgeois subjectivity—it is their self-conscious realization and self-overcoming.

As proletarians seek to really become "bourgeois subjects," their demands for subjectivity begin to strain against the limits of what is possible in bourgeois society. But the proletariat's social position does not at all guarantee that it will radically push forward the demands of emancipation, only that it might. *Politics* is the attempt to realize this potential.

Lukács saw in the crisis of Marxism precipitated by World War I, but already presaged in the "revisionist debate," a re-enactment at a new level of the crisis of bourgeois philosophy. Here self-consciousness could advance the new tasks posed, or thinking would become little more than an apologia for domination. In the radicals of Second International Marxism, especially Luxemburg and Lenin, Lukács saw the attempt to meet the tasks of the present, to formulate the politics that could realize bourgeois society's—and *Marxism's*—potential self-overcoming.

The essence of Lenin and Luxemburg's Marxist politics was that socialism, in order to achieve emancipation, would have to be a conscious human act, immanent in present realities; it could not be deduced from social being nor a fervent wish from beyond. If one could "stumble into socialism," as if socialism were fated from time immemorial by inexorable laws, then it would be one more form of unfreedom, of fake subjectivity. Human consciousness would be an *integral* part of "objective" development, or nothing at all.

This was exemplified in their focus on the "non-automatic" character of the transition to socialism. They criticized both inevitabilism and the reduction of the proletariat as just another sectional interest, seeking its "cut of the pie." This was not Marxism, the politics of *freedom*, at all. Passages like the following from Rosa Luxemburg's *Reform or Revolution*, were key for Lukács:

> So that if we do not consider momentarily the immediate amelioration of the workers' condition – an objective common to our party program as well as to revisionism – the difference between the two outlooks is…[a]ccording to the present conception of the party [Luxemburg's position], trade-union and parliamentary activity are important for the socialist movement because such activity prepares the proletariat, that is to say, creates the subjective factor of the socialist transformation, for the task of realising socialism…we say that as a result of its trade union and parliamentary struggles, the proletariat becomes convinced, of the impossibility of accomplishing a fundamental social change through such activity and arrives at the understanding that the conquest of power is unavoidable.[8]

Luxemburg sought, then, to struggle with the proletariat in its halting attempts to achieve bourgeois subjectivity in order to constantly push against the limits of how much subjectivity capitalism *could* grant the workers—all so that the proletariat might someday demand the end of their being an object *tout court*. Furthermore political education and action around these limits would be designed to call workers to learning about how they came to be what they are—i.e. to understand historically their being as an expression of the crisis of capital—and thus be faced with the gravity of the task ahead for achieving freedom.

The revolutionary Marxism of Luxemburg and Lenin, then, was for Lukács the attempt to realize the promises and possibilities of bourgeois society by consistently pressing forward the demand for subjectivity contained in the commodity itself: the proletariat. This politics, in extremely telescoped form, insists on:

- the leading role of the proletariat as the most typical element and crisis-point of capitalism
- an emphasis on the subjective development of the proletariat in any struggles it undergoes
- a fight against the reduction of Marxism into sectional interest, seeking its "cut of the pie"
- the importance of emphasizing not victories, but limits in any given interest-pursued action by the proletariat
- the concomitant value of self-criticism and self-transformation
- the centrality of self-transformative political practice
- an organization—or party—dedicated (as Lukács quotes Marx in the Communist Manifesto) to clarifying the international and historical significance of any given action

This self-conscious capitalist politics elucidated, for Lukács, what the practical philosophy of freedom would have to look like in order to overcome the present and to realize the endangered, fragile past, soon to become only the miserable precursor to an even more miserable sequel.

This struggle with the proletariat to achieve its own possibility was for Lukács the other side of the struggle of bourgeois society to achieve its potential, an historical open question that would be decided only by self-conscious self-action. The crisis of modern society is the crisis of the bourgeois revolution—which at a new, more deadly level, is the crisis of Marxism.

If this politics is unsuccessful, there will certainly be plenty of movements and resistance. But unless capital, the dynamo of modernity, is overcome from within, rather than by a deus ex machina from without, you won't get the self-overcoming of capitalist society at its highest point and the realization of the potential freedom implicit in modernity. Instead resistance becomes the cry accompanying a resigned acceptance to the unfreedom of the whole.

## IV

Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* might be summed up in Freud's description of the goal of psychoanalysis: *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*; where it was, I shall be. Self-consciousness changes us, but we are still somehow "us"; we have *realized* something about ourselves. Nor is self-consciousness merely in the brain. To be really self-conscious we need to change our whole way of being. Lukács's Marxism is trying to recognize that Marxism poses the question to bourgeois society and to modernity as a whole whether or not it can achieve this kind of transformative self-consciousness. The prospects do not look bright.

But why return to Lukács? Especially if I insist that he was attempting to make sense of his practical moment, to raise the moment of world-historical danger and possibility of roughly 1917-1923 to self-consciousness, what relevance does he have in a moment whose practical possibilities are so different, and so diminished? Psychoanalysis again, perhaps, provides a useful metaphor. We do not revisit our childhoods to relive them—only to recognize how we have yet to integrate them by overcoming them. Lukács helps us see that we haven't grown up.

This means that perhaps Lukács's "identical subject-object" seems so "messianic" to us not because we have surpassed Lukács and his silly metaphysical speculations, but because we find ourselves no longer able to imagine this kind of freedom. We no longer believe that we can overcome capitalism for the better, realizing the reason, freedom, and human development it promises. Capitalism is a brute, inert, foreign entity, dominating us and our capacities. All we can do is look to the marginal, the suffering, and the pained, and offer sympathy and solidarity with their struggles: struggles that are part of the natural laws of history. There will be power, there will be resistance. Our politics take something like the form of Niezsche's eternal return. As "critical" as we are, we can only imagine freedom swooping in from beyond and bringing its liberation into our miserable lives. And we are right—for we are surely

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## Rosa Luxemburg, continued from page 1

politics was defined by its attempt to overcome the dead hand of this history.

Marxism, for Rosa Luxemburg, was not simply an insight into the 'objective' laws of capitalist development; rather, it was a kind of immanent knowledge, *itself bound up* in that very development. Her life's work might be described as an ongoing attempt at "revolutionary cognition," in which her politics were inextricable from her most inspired theoretical contributions.[5] In this work she was continuing the project of Marx and Engels, for whom the proletariat does not enter the historical arena preformed, but develops in a form suitable to revolutionary consciousness. According to *The Communist Manifesto*, the workers of the early period of bourgeois society do not recognize themselves as a class, but with the emergence of the factory system and large-scale industry, and after the labor process is thoroughly transformed by machinery, "the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes." In other words, class struggle is not the default of bourgeois society, but its achievement.

This achievement marks the turning point in history, for although the bourgeoisie protects its own interests, it nevertheless comes into conflict with itself as a class. It finds itself in a "constant battle," surrounded on all sides by global competition with other producers. Hence it "sees itself compelled to appeal to the proletariat, to ask for its help, and thus, to drag it into the political arena. The bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education." The proletariat, in turn, gradually rises above its own divisions of a class through political agitation for social reform: "It compels legislative recognition of particular interests of the workers, by taking advantage of the divisions of the bourgeoisie itself."[6] This movement is complemented by the bourgeoisie's own disintegration as a class, in which "a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole," break away and join the proletariat, "the class that holds the future in its hands."[7] It is this process of social disintegration and re-formation through class struggle that Marx and Engels suggested socialism would be achieved. They described it as, "the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority."[8]

If social disintegration continued well after the failed revolutions of 1848, for which Marx and Engels wrote the Manifesto, so too did the growth of class-conscious political organization that transformed the modern world. Marxist theorists sought to understand the new possibilities opened up by parliamentary Social Democracy, and hoped to push the natural tendency forward. It seemed that history was on the side of socialism. This was the context of historical optimism in which the German Social-Democratic Party was formed in 1875. Luxemburg intervened in the so-called "revisionist controversy" with her pamphlet *Social Reform or Revolution?* in order to clarify the real historical stakes of this confusion. Since the foundation of the Second International, political policy, which was more often than not informed by Marxian theory, came up against the immediate interests of the trade union leadership, which viewed its own immediate struggles as taking priority over the "political" decisions made by the congresses. Although the modern Social-Democratic parties were united within the Socialist International, organized constituencies within the parties—notably the parliamentary delegations and the trade union leadership—could create friction and block implementation of socialist strategy. An early instance of this was the protest of German trade union leaders against the International's decision to call a workers' holiday on May Day in 1890, shortly after the Haymarket massacre. This political tendency found an unlikely supporter in Eduard Bernstein, a longstanding member of German Social Democracy and one of its foremost Marxist theorists.

Bernstein argued that the very success of the social-democratic Left made Marx's "revolutionary" predictions, and his politics, obsolete. The development of credit and cartels had stabilized capitalist crises; the trade unions had begun to increase wages; and universal democracy could gradually be brought into being by legislative reforms. Luxemburg criticized Bernstein's one-sided approach to historical reality. By abandoning Marx's own approach of viewing society as a whole, Bernstein preferred to view certain social phenomena, like credit, as *disjecta membra*, dislocated fragments. He failed to consider working-class politics integral to the reproduction of capitalist society, which logically led him to political fatalism and unwarranted historical optimism. Although some of her arguments are sharp criticisms of Bernstein's interpretations of facts, Luxemburg's central critiques strike at the heart of the issue: how the conditions of immediate struggle in bourgeois society point beyond themselves to a socialist future.

In her pamphlet *Social Reform or Revolution?*, Luxemburg took aim at the notion that immediate gains that lead to forms of "social control," such as labor legislation, are in themselves the content of socialism. Why insist on some fantastical ideal when we can make progressive changes to improve working conditions in the here and now? But Luxemburg was not satisfied: such struggles are, she insisted, a "labor of Sisyphus"—necessary as defensive measures, but inadequate to eliminate exploitation in the social system predicated on the compulsion of wage earners to sell their labor. She struggled against the political and ideological tendency, internal to the socialist movement itself, of pushing up and defending bourgeois society, but from the perspective of the immediate interests of the working class, voiced by the trade unions. Luxemburg was not against workers' self-organization as such. But she called on Marxists to recognize that the new forms of organization were potentially straitjackets on bourgeois society in decline and not the dawning of socialism.

Rosa Luxemburg's role in the revisionist dispute reinforced the saliency of Marxism within the Marxist movement. In place of revolutionary consciousness, Marxist theory became increasingly absorbed by a regressive immediacy of working class politics. The result was not simply a struggle of Marxists against trade-union leaders, but a struggle within Marxism itself. Luxemburg and her allies, including Lenin in the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party, took their "orthodoxy" to demand constant attention to the historical whole of humanity, not individual parts. Her work clearly underscores the political significance of theoretical matters. She herself insisted, "No coarser insult, no baser defamation, can be thrown against the workers than the remark 'Theoretical controversies are only for intellectuals.'"[9] The betrayal of revolutionary politics, indicated by acquiescence to inter-imperial war, vindicated Luxemburg's bitter struggle to overcome the emerging ideology which opposed the revolutionary change sought by the left wing of the Second International.

By the time of the German Revolution in 1918, in which sailors' mutinies resulted in the formation of Councils of Workers and Soldiers' Deputies led by reluctant Socialists who had just recently inherited state power, Luxemburg identified a distinct need to transfer the masses of workers from their membership in the German Social Democracy to the revolution. What for us appears as a philosophy of history was, for her, the development of a Marxist politics worthy of the name. She wrote, "The first illusion of the workers and soldiers who made the revolution was: the illusion of unity under the banner of so-called socialism."[10] By raising broader theoretical problems that inevitably influenced the nature of capitalist society and the revolutionary process itself, Luxemburg was not merely an organizer—she gave conscious form to the previously latent crisis in bourgeois society, providing political leadership in the struggle to construct a new social world.

### CODA

Peer into a high-powered telescope, and you can witness the auratic glow of an archaic cosmic explosion—the origins—racing away from us at light speed. A similarly spectral shockwave marks the horizon of modern political experience, and it is also cataclysmic, though it goes largely unnoticed. The trauma includes the unnecessary suffering and death wrought by the miscarried socialist revolutions of the twentieth century, the failure of which made possible the unprecedented mass slaughter in Nazi death camps—humanity's self-immolation; it is the past that weighs heavier than ever like a nightmare on our brains. The Left in its various political manifestations is not exempt: the accumulating catastrophe is everything we say, do, and think. We can try to escape from this nightmare, and move on, we can try to discard Marxism, even ideology itself. But we cannot forget what we do not fully remember. And yet that smudge of light we see in our telescopes, nearly invisible to the naked eye, is about as hazy and irrelevant to our contemporary concerns as Marxism. How is it possible that this now discarded relic can help illuminate our present?

The Ancients once used the stars in constellation to find the proper place of humanity in the cosmos. Looking back to the moment of Luxemburg's murder, we survey the ruins of a historical accomplishment unprecedented in the history of humanity. If we capture a glimpse of the Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg, it is antiquity to our own. Nonetheless, perhaps it is an important part of the constellation we need. Christopher Lasch once wrote that radicals after the New Left could only relate to the past through either blind rejection or complete identification with exemplary predecessors. Both tendencies are pathological. Lasch likens this to a personality disorder in psychoanalytic theory, in which a fraught relationship to one's childhood, the lack of a Golden Age of youth, leads either to mania or depression, or perhaps both. Considering the problems confronting Marxism today, there are no easily drawn conclusions to be made, but rather ways of questioning the world that elucidate and advance historical tendencies now forgotten.

The Renaissance painters and philosophers looked to the ruins of Greek and Roman civilization to nourish their burgeoning self-consciousness and cultural achievements, heralding the dawn of a new age while rediscovering and transforming the value of the old. So we might still recognize in our times the wreckage of humanity's highest hopes, crystallized in the failure of the Marxist project in general, and of Rosa Luxemburg's Marxism in particular. But to do so we must see in ourselves—in every protest, every demonstration, and every factory takeover—*the* obstacle, insofar as it occludes historical consciousness and ensnares us in the immediacy of our present. We are not at the verge of a new beginning, but the tail end of an epoch-making project that once sought to change the world. Since the historical continuity is broken, this project can be taken up again only if we can somehow bring forgotten historical tendencies to consciousness—to render the faint memory of revolutionary socialism intelligible through self-criticism. While our own capacity to pose theoretical problems in the present is confounded, we might instead allow the past to ask questions of the present. Looking backwards is now the only way to move forwards. |**P**

1. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Crisis of German Social Democracy (The Junius Pamphlet)", 1915. available online at <www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/>.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Rosa Luxemburg, "Our Program and the Political Situation," in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, eds. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 363.
5. J.P. Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 336.
6. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 481.
7. Ibid., 481.
8. Ibid., 482.
9. Rosa Luxemburg, "Social Reform or Revolution," in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, eds. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 130.
10. Luxemburg, "Our Program," 367.

## Lukács's abyss, continued from page 3

in the age of second childhood, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Was Lukács a fool for wagering on the possibility of freedom by becoming, *politically*, a Marxist? Lukács would insist on Luxemburg's call—*socialism or barbarism*. Either the immanent overcoming of capitalism and its irrational rationality, or resignation to ever-new, ever-horrifying, forms of "reasonable" barbarism.

To end, I offer two quotes. The first from Lukács:

> When the moment of transition to the 'realm of freedom' arrives this will become apparent just because the blind forces really will hurtle blindly towards the abyss, and only the conscious will of the proletariat will be able to save mankind from the impending catastrophe. In other words, when the final economic crisis of capitalism develops, *the fate of the revolution (and with it the fate of mankind) will depend on the ideological maturity of the proletariat, i.e. on its class consciousness.* (69)

The second from Rilke in the first of his *Duino Elegies*:

> Yes—the springtimes needed you. Often a star
> was waiting for you to notice it. A wave rolled toward you
> out of the distant past, or as you walked
> under an open window, a violin
> yielded itself to your hearing. All this was mission.
> But could you accomplish it?[9]

Without Lukács's Pascalian wager on freedom, it is not clear to me that Lukács is worth much of anything at all. The demon that drove him from philosophy to the politics of revolutionary Marxism is what should call out to us today, not the analytical tools we can dig up from the grave of his practical philosophy of freedom. Or maybe he is just a dead dog. |**P**

1. Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," in *Kant on History*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963[1784]), 12.
2. Ibid., 21.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978[1891]), 126.
4. Georg Lukács, "What is Orthodox Marxism," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971 [1923]), 2.
5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1787]), 100-101.
6. Max Weber. "Science as a Vocation" in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958 [1918]), 144.
7. Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971 [1923]), 112. Hereafter referred to parenthetically with the appropriate page number(s).
8. Rosa Luxemburg, *Social Reform or Revolution*, in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. Mary-Alice Waters (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1979[1900]), 84-5.
9. Rainer Maria Rilke. *Duino Elegies* in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (NY: Random House, 1982[1922]), 151.

## Juliet Mitchell, continued from page 3

in creating sexual difference. When we talk about interpellation from Althusser, the primary one is "it's a girl" or "it's a boy." I am still trying to work this out in a way, which relates to my work on siblings. Everybody seems to be muddling up gender and sexual difference to me. And it stretches back to the old confusion between sexuality and reproduction. Gender, which can be looked at psychoanalytically, is an earlier formation than sexual difference and fantasies of reproduction are parthenogenic—imaginatively boys and girls equally give birth. Sexual difference takes up heterosexual reproduction. Gender can be made into a category of analysis whereas women can be the object but cannot be a category, which is why one can ask such questions as: Why is hysteria gendered? Why is mathematics gendered? Why is everything gendered?

**SS**: There was a classic Marxist prejudice against Freudian psychoanalysis. Lukács, as one example, considered Freud an "irrationalist"—as a "symptom." For Marxist radicals, Freud characterized the limits of "individual" subjectivity with which the revolutionaries had to contend in order to make their revolution. Wilhelm Reich was one of the first Marxists to critically appropriate Freudian categories to describe the social-historical condition of life under capital by perceptively identifying our fear of freedom. Do you think that the shift toward psychoanalysis by radical Marxists from the 1930s on, through the feminist embrace of psychoanalysis to address a felt deficit in the 1960s, registers the internalization of the defeat or is somehow apolitical?

**JM**: From where Lukács stood, feminism and psychoanalysis looked terribly pessimistic. I think it is the longest revolution. One needs, as Gramsci says, the conjuncture of the optimism of the will and pessimism of the intellect to realize the difficulties. These difficulties can be taken to psychoanalysis usefully, but from where Lukács was standing you couldn't. He was asking a different question of a different object. When I took up Laing, Reich, and the feminists in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, I never believed one could use psychoanalysis to be on the Left, rather it was what can one use psychoanalysis for to answer the question about the oppression of women, which is an abiding question for the Left.

What I am saying is that psychoanalysis would be different in a revolutionary context than in the fascist context in Berlin in which Reich wrote. I am critical of Reich, but there was an important liberal aspect within psychoanalysis, so that all of the work that Marxists within psychoanalysis were able to do in the polyclinics of Berlin before they were stamped out or forced into emigration by the Nazis, was radical, precipitating a revolution within psychoanalysis as well as within Marxism. Bourgeois concepts start to take on radical implications in the context of a revolution, as with the Marxists of the Second International in the 1920s. The context of the Bolshevik Revolution changed the significance of what Bebel had written on women for Lenin.

**SS**: The New Left icon Herbert Marcuse sought to outline what a socialist society would look like in *Eros and Civilization*. The alienation of labor in capital, Marcuse argues, means that the satisfaction from work can only ever be an ersatz form of libidinal release. In a nonrepressive socialist order, on the other hand, work would be recathected, and transformed into play. He also asserts that Freud had hypostatized the existence of the death drive, when in fact it is applicable only to the aggression that attends capitalist society. WLR concludes with a critique of such attempts to prefiguratively sketch out what an emancipated society might look like, posing starkly the danger of trying to measure the concrete character of an emancipated future. What are the challenges that confront the Left of the future in preserving the indeterminacy of the concept of socialism?

**JM**: On the first half of the question about the absence of play and the relationship of the death drive to capitalism: the death drive is a huge question, but why it should be limited to capitalism, not to slave or feudal society is beyond me. Maybe there will be a beyond, but maybe there will simply be ways in which we can work with the death drive or diffuse the id, since it isn't only violence, it is the return to stasis. It is a hypothesis. I don't agree with Marcuse; today there are new forms which it takes.

Why aren't we even where we were in the 60s anymore? I already told you we hit a ceiling, but there are new spaces opening up for the Left. Class will feature in the whole dilemma of illegal migrants, as in Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums*. The Left needs to start to think from *Planet of Slums*, which is a different location from that of the industrial working class of Marx or even the consumer capitalist class of late capitalism of Althusser or of Marcuse. *Planet of Slums* forecasts a different world, but there will always be a women's question, as there will be a race question, or a class question.

**SS**: Apart from the French tradition, the Frankfurt School, especially the work of Adorno, represents another important attempt to appropriate descriptive Freudian categories into a critical Marxist theory. Against Marcuse, Adorno held that it was a necessary symptom of capitalist society, which was characterized by a growing narcissism that weakened the defenses of the ego against the super-ego, that both psychological (ego psychology) and sociological (Parsonian sociology) approaches to social totality had to remain aporetic. The function of the ego, in other words, does not remain unscathed by the irrational reality of capitalist society with its endless means-ends reversals. What role do you think psychoanalysis can play in helping us cope with the normative psychosis of our sociopolitical world? Or, putting it in a more open-ended manner, what kind of emancipatory possibility might there be in the narcissistic character—what Adorno referred to as authoritarianism—of subjects of late capitalism?

**JM**: Quite correctly Reich had asked the question of the authoritarian personality that was then taken up by the Frankfurt School. I still think their work on the authoritarian personality is a marvelous use of psychoanalysis. Their use of psychoanalysis allowed them to ask questions about the role the authoritarian personality would play in collusion with or the in the self-replication of fascism. The Frankfurt School took to psychoanalysis. Lukács thought you couldn't, approaching it differently from within communism or within socialism trying to call itself communism. I never wanted to psychoanalyze society. I am uninterested in saying that society is narcissistic, depressive, or anything like that, but we are all still of the Left. Hopefully, Allah would say we will all go to the Left, even though we use psychoanalysis for different objects. Freud himself was saying we can change society, in discussions about "Why War?" with Einstein, what can we do to stop war. He then relied on theories of psychoanalysis to try to find some sort of answer—interestingly it turned out to be about the role of aesthetics. He thought from within the clinic as well as from elsewhere. I don't know what Adorno says in full, but just as a quick last note, in pursuing emancipation in the heart of darkness we also need to let light into the heart of darkness. |**P**

*Transcribed by Atiya Khan*

1. Juliet Mitchell, "Women: The Longest Revolution," *New Left Review*, I/40 (November-December 1966): 11-37.
2. C. Wright Mills, "Letter to the New Left," *New Left Review*, I/5 (September-October 1960): 18-23.
3. Juliet Mitchell, *Women's Estate* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), 58.
4. Ibid., 71.
5. "Who is Responsible?: An interview with Fred Halliday," interview by Danny Postel, *Salmagundi*, 151-152 (Spring-Summer 2006), <http://cms.skidmore.edu/salmagundi/backissues/150-151/halliday.cfm>.

# **Emancipation in the heart of darkness:** An interview with Juliet Mitchell

Sunit Singh

*On November 23, 2010, Sunit Singh conducted an interview with psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell at Jesus College in Cambridge. Although Professor Mitchell's rehabilitation of Freud is well chronicled, the attempt in "Women: The Longest Revolution" (1966)[1] to rescue the core content of the Marxist tradition—its emphasis on emancipation—remains unexplored. What follows is an edited version of the interview.*

**Sunit Singh**: The sociologist C. Wright Mills, in an open letter to the editors of *New Left Review* in 1960, exhorted the still inchoate "New Left" to reclaim an ideological space for socialism over the chorus of liberal commentators proclaiming "the end of ideology"—the idea that there are no more antagonistic contradictions within capitalist society. Post-Marxist rhetoric, as Mills identified, was expressive of the disillusionment with the Old Left, which was itself weakest on the historical agencies of structural change or the so-called subjective factor. Yet, if the Old Left was wedded to a Victorian labor metaphysic, Mills forewarned, the New Left threatened to forsake the "utopianism" of the Left in its search for a new revolutionary subject.[2] How sensitive were later members of the editorial board of the *New Left Review*, after Perry Anderson took over from Stuart Hall in 1962, to such injunctions? And to what extent was the project of socialism implicit in "Women: The Longest Revolution" (hereafter referred to as WLR) Five decades on, where does that project presently stand? What happened to "socialism"?

**Juliet Mitchell**: I came into direct contact with the *New Left Review* earlier than the mid-60s, partly through other work I was involved in. I was also a student in Oxford, where we were the originating group of the New Left. Perry [Anderson] and I married in 1962 and lived in London, although I worked in Leeds. The north of England, with Dorothy and Edward Thompson in nearby Halifax, was a centre for the older New Left.

Back then I was planning to write a book, which never saw the light of day, on women in England. It was a historical sociological treatment of the subject. We were driving to meet up with friends and colleagues who ran Lelio Basso's new journal in Rome when the manuscript was stolen with everything else from our car. I had a bit of a break before I returned to "women." "Women: the Longest Revolution" came in the mid-60s. The timing of the gap and the reluctance to re-do what I had done led to a considerable change in the way I looked at the issue. This relates to your question about C. Wright Mills and ideology. I think when we took over from Stuart Hall the distinction of what separated us from the preceding group was the conviction of the importance of theory over or out of empiricism.

So was I aware that in my use of "ideology" in "Women: The Longest Revolution" I was also picking up on C. Wright Mills's sense of utopianism? Well, "yes and no" would be my answer. For C. Wright Mills, "ideology" read "theory." However, it was exactly this shift that opened up the importance of ideology. But while reading and admiring C. Wright Mills, our quest led us directly to Althusser's work. We were in what Thompson later criticized as Sartrean "treetopism" We met with the *equipe* of Les Temps Modernes in the early 60s. De Beauvoir, with her brilliant depiction and analysis of the oppression of women, at that stage saw any politics of feminism as a trap. Instead she took the classical Marx/Engels line that the condition of women depends on the future of labor in the world. Together with Gérard Horst, who wrote under the name André Gorz, we had a cultural project in London, which, in addition to the magazine, we hoped to share with them. We didn't want to be imitative, but nevertheless wanted to be engaged with particularly French New Left struggles. The Algerian War was, of course, terribly important. We were urgent for an end to the British isolationism with which the anti-theoretical stance was associated. Then in 1962 some of us went to the celebrations for Ben Bella in Algiers. With Gisele Halimi and Djamila Boupacha this was a background to the left women's movement that was shortly to emerge. There was also the issue of our relationship to the Chinese Cultural Revolution. That is the background to WLR. And, "no," in the sense that when I use Althusser, as I do in WLR, it may seem as though I am also picking up on C. Wright Mills's assertion of the importance of ideology, but really the stress on ideology had more to do with the search for a new theoretical direction that was linked to contemporary French thought. What Althusser offered me through his re-definition of the nature and place of ideology is the overwhelming and now obvious point that sexual difference is lived in the head.

I have never been a member of a party or a church or sect, growing up as I had in an anarchist environment, but I worked actively within the New Left, and then in the women's movement, before training and practicing as a psychoanalyst. I have had to be pretty "utopian," as an underpinning to my "optimism of the will," first about class antagonism, then about women, then about Marxism as dialectical and historical materialism and, ironically, nowadays with the new versions of empiricism, about the theory of psychoanalysis.

**SS**: Your answer hints at the ways in which the New Left saw itself as new, as against the Maoists, other feminists, and presumably also in relation to the Trotskyists. You were critical of these other tendencies. A pithy passage from *Women's Estate* reads, feminist consciousness is "the equivalent of national chauvinism among Third World nations or economism among working-class organizations," that on its own it "will not naturally develop into socialism nor should it."[3] Furthermore: "The gray timelessness of Trotskyism is only to be matched by the eternal chameleonism of Western Maoism."[4] From there the text went on to say that what was needed was to deepen the Marxist method even if it meant rejecting some of the statements made by Marx and Marxists. Was that the task in WLR? Does the same challenge remain today for the Left? How did the ways in which the New Left understood and dealt with this methodological challenge affect the situation for a future Left?

**JM**: I reread WLR, which I haven't done for years, because you were coming. I was quite impressed by the shift that it represents from the book that never was, but I was also slightly unmoved by it. It does reflect that overall moment in the entire shift of the New Left from historical research into theory, so what we need to ask is, what happened to ideology? I think, getting back to utopia, that the conception of utopianism melded into the women's movement. The questions of the longest revolution were: What is the hope? Where is the utopianism? For Engels, there was the utopianism of the end of class antagonism, but what were we to do with that? This might come as a shock, but I never actually stopped thinking of myself as a Marxist, even after other friends on the New Left had stopped identifying themselves as such.

For us, in the 1960s, Marxism was not out there as "Marxism." One was also self-critical by then, the whole relationship to China had to be re-examined rather as earlier Marxists had to take stock of their relationship to Stalin. What everybody seems to forget is that socialism was foundational for the women's movement and those of us who were and still are on the Left understood where we had to expand it intellectually, so that is where I took it in WLR. I think of Marx much as I might think of Darwin or Freud in some senses. I think that when you use them, it's not that you stick within the terms that they set (after all, you are in a different historical epoch, you are in a different social context, and you are posing different questions). Giant theorists such as these impinge on us with their method, not in the narrow sense of methodology, but in their way of approaching the question.

Lately, I keep encountering this belief that where other radicalism was over after 1968, women's liberation arose out of it. This is not so and is poor history. Women's liberationists, now called feminists, were active as such in creating '68. Feminism continued gaining strength thereafter. Raymond Williams considered the women's movement the most important one of the last century. The student movement ended, the worker's movement ended—I am not playing them down—the black movement also ended. The women's movement was what happened to 1968—it went on. For me, what matters about the women's movement is the Left; it's not that it is attached to the Left, *it is the Left*. Of course at a time when the Left is not very active, conservative dimensions of feminism will flourish and feminism will be misused. It is not the first political movement to suffer these collapses!

**Photograph by Jerry Bauer of Juliet Mitchell on the cover of *Women's Estate* (1971).**

**SS**: I suppose my question, then, is: What happened to the women's movement?

**JM**: What happened to it?...Well, I think that when the conditions of existence, the relationship between women and men, achieve a new degree of equality, one comes up against a certain limit. Where first wave demands were dominated by the vote, I suppose we were dominated by the demand for equal work, pay, and conditions. Here our head hit a ceiling, and not a glass ceiling, a concrete one. Feminism from that moment has headed off to the hills to rethink what needs to be done politically. It is, as Adorno says, like putting messages in a bottle. I will remain in the hills until the streets, where there is still radical work going on, welcome me back. That is where I would like to be. But now is not the moment for that; we are plateauing. The fight against women's oppression as women is, after all, without a doubt, the longest revolution.

**SS**: A central claim of WLR, that the call for complete equality between the sexes remains completely within the framework of capital rather than in opposition to it, implies that the relationship between men and women, like the class distinction between capitalist and worker, itself derives from the contradictions of capitalism. The conditions that allow for and motivate the reproduction of "patriarchy" as well as other kinds of oppression, in other words, also form the essential conditions of possibility for the demands for equality. You presciently noted in WLR, applying the thesis of repressive desublimation, that the wave of sexual liberalization unleashed in the 1960s could lead to more freedom for women, but "equally it could presage new forms of oppression." Does our historical remove from the 1960s allow us to judge one way or another?

**JM**: I think, first of all, that in the 1960s I thought or felt that a measure of equality might be attained within the dominant socioeconomic class. I am now unsure that it will even be attained there. So it may be the ideology of capitalism has been hoisted on its own petard; in other words, caught and stuck within its own contradictions. The bourgeois husband needs a bourgeois wife. What we hadn't foreseen sufficiently was the return of the servant class if this wife was also to work. We were not surprised that there is no pay parity, nor had we failed to realize that, although there are some women who will climb the ladder, this is not going to affect the wretched of the earth, or where it does so it may do so negatively. Women can now vote, but now there are certain, increasingly disproportionate, sectors such as illegal migrants, who don't enjoy the equalities that those in liberal capitalist societies should. More importantly, can we really call the old democracies democratic when it is money not the vote that rules? Any struggle is always one step up the well and two steps down, or the two steps up and one step down, its never simply a matter of progress under capitalism, nor is it a matter of this ghastly government over another. There are liberal aspects of capitalism and for heaven's sake let's have them. All the egalitarian bits of capitalism must be pressed for if only to find out two things: one, that going the whole way towards equality is impossible under capitalism, and two, that going beyond these forms of equality is essential anyway.

I also think it is important that I wasn't prescient about the massive entry of women into the workforce, I wasn't prescient in WLR in seeing that education was going to expand as much as it did, and I think that I wasn't prescient about changes in production (I later addressed these issues elsewhere) or reproduction. Shulamith Firestone foresaw the "reproduction revolution" in some ways, but then again she was writing in the 1970s, not the mid-sixties; there was a women's movement by the time she wrote. With sexuality things are a little more complicated. I think there are always social classes, there are therefore different effects for the wretched of the earth than there are for the rich, so the degree to which I was prescient I don't know whether the measure of sexual liberation that effective contraception offered us middle-class "first-worlders" has created more oppression of women sexually worldwide—I don't think so. What I think it has done is definitely exposed the differences more. We know much more about the inequalities, whereas before it was taken for granted.

**SS**: WLR raises the issue of revolutionary strategy: the role of limited ameliorative reforms versus proposing maximalist demands. It treats as salutary the remark Lenin made to Clara Zetkin about developing a strategy commensurate with a socio-theoretical analysis of capitalism within the party to adequately address the "women's question." More recently, at a talk at Birkbeck in 1999, you ventured to wonder aloud, albeit with an understandable sense of nervousness, whether, in an era otherwise marked by acute depoliticiziation, the uptick of interest in psychoanalysis, sexuality, and the "women's question" might mean that Lenin was possibly right that such concerns are the noxious fruits growing out of the soiled earth of capitalist society. Has the naturalization of feminism in the present-day obscured the issue of strategy?

**JM**: I do still believe in crude old things like "to each according to his needs." People do need different things and that is beyond equality in a sense. This is where history comes in. Society is still trying to think that we all ought to be equal, but we haven't yet the kind of society that adequately attends to our needs.

The extreme of reformism versus voluntarism is not where we are at the moment. I think these are the concerns that come out of "the soiled earth of capitalist society," but again my answer would be rather like my answer about equality, that this doesn't invalidate these concerns. These are perfectly legitimate demands that are not confined by the conditions in which they come into existence. For example, if one looks at what happened to sexuality or reproduction in the Soviet Union, it would have been much better to follow the earlier tide in which sexual freedoms were seen as a condition of the revolution. That is, when Alexandra Kollontai wrote on free sexuality, that wasn't only a bourgeois demand, nor was it in 1968. A revolutionary situation is a discreet situation that transforms what could be thought within capitalism about sexuality, but it is not identical with capitalism; revolutions create the possibility of change, revolutions change the object. Though we are not in a revolutionary situation, that doesn't mean it is not around the corner.

The Old Left thought of capitalism as *en route* to communism. On the withering away of the state, there was a voluntarist injunction to abolish the family and then the opposite, producing a very interesting contradiction that cannot be chalked up to the fact that Stalin was a foul man. It may be that you can't wither away the family, or can't wither away the state, but the question is why? If, as Marx himself says, the call by utopian socialists to abolish the family would be tantamount to generalizing the prostitution of women, then what is the solution or next stage? This is why WLR examines the structures within the family. Marx was against the voluntarism of the abolition of the family. But then what measures escape reformism? There may be changes to the things that a family does that will lead to its diversification in such a way that is more revolutionary than what existed thus far under socialism or capitalism. Maybe there is something there to be thought about as new demands that are beyond socialism as well as beyond capitalism.

*Tea break*

**SS**: The program from the memorial service for Fred Halliday on the bookshelf reminds me of an anecdote that is recounted in an interview with Danny Postel.[5] He dreamt of appearing with Tariq Ali before Allah who says that one will veer to the Right, the other to the Left, without specifying who would head in which direction. I think we in Platypus often return to that story as a salient metaphor for the fragmentation of the New Left and the opacity of the present-day. He was planning to do a couple of events with Platypus on an upcoming visit to the U.S. that were alas never realized.

**JM**: His death is indeed tragic, but I like this story about Tariq and Fred; I think it is important to take up arguments with those who share the same space politically, if only to disagree. I disagree with feminists who dismiss Freud; both of us probably think we are going towards the Left, but we might both be going Right.

**SS**: For me, getting back on track, I should confess there is an intractable dilemma at the heart of WLR. On the one hand, there are passages gesturing toward a dialectical conception of capitalism—as both repressive as well as potentially emancipatory—while, on the other hand, the Althusserian notion of "overdetermation" that structures the argument emphasizes the role of contingency as the motor of historical change. As Althusser himself acknowledged, the idea of "overdetermination" was indebted to the anti-humanistic reinterpretation of Freud by Lacan. Can one accommodate the denial of the subject as an illusion of the ego in the Lacanian "return" to Freud with the Freudian emphasis on psychoanalysis as an ego-psychology therapy intended to strengthen the self-awareness and freedom of the individual subject as an ego?

**JM**: No, I never had any time for ego-psychology, but that isn't the same as the question about overdetermination. Some of the observations of Anna Freud are remarkable, but I don't see the whole concept of strengthening the ego as a way forward for psychoanalysis, although I suppose there is a context in which it could help if someone were completely fragmented; then there are stages, but it should it should only be a stage on the way to something else. For me it wasn't a shift from Lacan to Freud as such. I had met R. D. Laing in 1961. *The Divided Self* had came out shortly before, in 1959, so I was involved with anti-psychiatry in the same span of time as I was involved with the *NLR*.

On overdetermination as Althusser takes it from Freud: Overdetermination in Freud is not an anti-humanist concept, in Lacan maybe it is, but in Freud it is neither/nor. What it means is that there will always be one factor that is the key factor. And in Freud that is not socioeconomic. What I liked about Althusser was the definition of ideology as at times overdetermining. Ideology, in the Althusserian sense, interpellates individuals as subjects. Now, what Althusser offered me intellectually, so to speak, was that revolutionary change in any one of the superstructural or ideological state apparatuses can attain a certain autonomy, can occur even when it doesn't elsewhere. Yet, in the last instance, the economy is determinate.

**SS**: This raises a number of issues about the relationship of Althusser to Marx and that of Lacan to Freud. Does the Althusserian concept of ideology adequately address the ways in which we are forced to deal with our own alienated freedom in capital through reified forms of appearance and consciousness? Did the limitations of the Althusserian-Lacanian framework in WLR motivate the reconsideration of Freud?

**JM**: You might change sexuality or reproduction or sexualization, but if production remains unchanged, these will remain changes within those specific fields. This claim struck me as valid for the situation of women. I could use this insight to organize the structures that apply to women, which was the family. I broke down the family, each aspect of which I treated as superstructural, but that was in the final analysis determined by production, which was outside it.

There I was puzzling over the fact that women are marginal but that, as in the Chinese revolutionary saying, "women hold up half the sky." How does one think that? The only way I could think it was to break it up into these structures: production, reproduction, sexuality, and the socialization of children. Apart from what I quote—Engels, Bebel, Lenin, Simone De Beauvoir, and Betty Friedan—there was no category "woman" until feminism resuscitated it in the second half of the sixties.

Now, retrospectively, I would say that the intransigence of the oppression of women, as Engels had identified, also entails that it is the longest revolution. In turn the idea of the longest revolution as I wrote WLR made me think about what was absent in earlier analyses but also within Marxist thought. How do we view ourselves in the world? This is what took me to Freud; it took me first to the unconscious rather than sexuality. I thought, at least I thought then, that the unconscious was close to what Althusser had to say about ideology. The return to Freud was "overdetermined"—there were multiple directions for my getting to Freud.

**SS**: Given your own trajectory, what do you make of the reflorescence of a strain of Althusserian-Lacanian "Marxism" today in the form of Balibar, Rancière, and Badiou?

**JM**: I suppose this is getting me back to when I wrote WLR. I found Althusser extremely useful, but there was always a humanist in me. I think that remains true, despite all the shake-ups of postmodernity or whatever. I always wanted both perspectives, it was never a matter of either/or. I think we need to rethink our humanity in order to revalidate the universal—neo-universalism—which was interestingly debunked by postmodernism.

**SS**: Does the contemporary emphasis on performativity or gendering obscure the humanist motivations that led radical anti-feminists to psychoanalysis?

**JM**: It certainly changes it, it redirects it in a different direction, or it might be, as Judith Butler always tells me, that I haven't understood performativity properly. I think where I was going with psychoanalysis was more towards kinship, towards what is still fundamental in kinship structures in families, what effects does it have

*"Juliet Mitchell" continues on page 4*