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Statement of purpose

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

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

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

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

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

Submission guidelines

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

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EH: Changes in anti-fascism have to take into account the changes in fascism itself. Today, it is unclear whether we are actually dealing with fascism. Donald Trump repudiates the neo-Nazi groups at Charlottesville and disowns the support of KKK members like David Duke. One assumes that if Trump lost the election in 2020, he would step down, which seems antithetical to the practices of fascism historically. Given this, what would you say to people who find it harder to believe that fascism exists today?

MB: After World War Two, the profile of the far-right in Europe and in North America shifted. There is a different context in the United States, where the KKK threatened African American communities, and the Civil Rights movement was struggling against white supremacy that went back generations. It was not really until the 1970s that you started to see neo-Nazi and KKK groups overlap because it was formerly discouraged by the “patrician” legacy of opposing Nazism. Today, the alt-right is pretty open about being neo-Nazi and white supremacist. Just look at The Daily Stormer.

The alt-lite, represented by Breitbart, Milo Yiannopoulos and others, serves as a bridge between explicit neo-Nazi white supremacists and the conservative movement. College campus Republican groups invite these fascists onto campus.

While, I would not say that we have a fascist government in the U.S. right now, we do see that the Trump administration has a relationship to the alt-right, Breitbart, and to white nationalist politics. We saw that he was very sympathetic to the kakik-wearing, tikitorch white supremacists that rallied at Charlottesville. It is not necessary to have an all-or-nothing understanding of fascism, where either you have Mussolini’s government or everything is fine. Fascism can creep into traditional conservative politics such that definite fascistic tendencies develop. We should not wait for there to be a fully-formed fascist regime and then call to “pull the emergency brake.”

Rather, we need to combat fascist and white nationalist politics in all their forms, regardless of context. We should push back against a few hundred neo-Nazis in a park, or a few dozen neo-Nazi skinheads trying to set up a Nazi house down the street. We need to develop a broader conception of anti-fascism that connects the struggle against mass incarceration, against police brutality, against gentrification, and other kinds of perspectives.

EH: Could you explain the relationship of resistance to Trump and the goal of a post-capitalist society? After all, the struggle against fascism has been an issue since the beginning of the 20th century, so there is a question of what is the final goal?

MB: Politics entails short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals. We can differentiate between the long-term visions of social transformation and the short-term visions of the 20th century.

EH: What about the relationship of anti-fascism to anti-racism? Is there a uniquely American understanding of anti-fascism?

MB: In the 1920s and 1930s in Europe, the struggle against fascism was a struggle against anti-Semitism, especially in Germany. And it was a struggle against anti-imperialism, insofar as, for example, Mussolini’s Italy invaded Abyssinia.

There was a shift in the ‘50s and ‘60s. Initially, starting in Britain, the far-right shifted its focus from anti-Semitism to targeting migrants from the Caribbean, South Asia, and elsewhere. The National Front organized a campaign called “Keep Britain White.” In response, the spectrum of anti-fascism started to form alliances with anti-racist resistance of different immigrant communities. You can see how powerful these alliances were, for example, in the victory of the Battle of Lewisham in 1977.

Really, in Europe, there has been a recent demographic shift, characterized by an increased percentage of non-white and Muslim people. This is a different context than in the U.S., where the centrality of race in social struggle goes back centuries.

If you want to think of anti-fascism more broadly, then

This reflects an interesting contrast between two anti-fascist tendencies. The first is an official anti-fascist tendency. The first is an official anti-fascism represented by the state that formed out of the ashes of World War Two and opposed the far-right through legislation against Nazis and fascists in Western Europe. The second is a militant anti-fascism that emerged from below, and contested this far-right could be confronted by turning to the state, the police, or legislation. It emerged as a form of self-defense against neo-Nazi skinheads, and against attempts by far-right to burn down refugee centers, especially in Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when nationalist euphoria was high.

This anti-fascist resistance was largely led by the autonomist movement which pioneered the Black Bloc street tactic, whereby people participate in militant activity under a veil of anonymity behind uniformly black clothing. This was not originally designed as an anti-fascist tactic, it was used to defend squats, to participate in the anti-nuclear movement, and do other actions. But increasingly, in the late 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, Black Bloc was a formation that confronted neo-Nazis on the streets. Interestingly, it was a tactic that was not used in Britain, where anti-fascists preferred to dress in what they referred to as “casual,” whereby the police would not be able to differentiate

Mark Bray: In the interwar period, the various different socialist, communist, and anarchist groups, parties and unions were essentially forced to shift courses toward defending themselves against the onslaught of the far-right. Anti-fascism was a Left endeavor, but one that entailed the participation of mass popular parties, the formation of popular fronts, and the journey of the international brigades from around the world to defend the Spanish Republic from Franco and his fascist and Nazi allies. In the ‘70s and ‘80s there was a resurgence of militant anti-fascism in Europe. This was a response to the xenophobic backlash against migration from the Caribbean, South Asia, Turkey, and elsewhere.

Erin Hagood: You trace the transformation of the anti-movement from the interwar period to the present. Could you explain how anti-fascism has changed?

Mark Bray: In the interwar period, the various different socialist, communist, and anarchist groups, parties and unions were essentially forced to shift courses toward defending themselves against the onslaught of the far-right. Anti-fascism was a Left endeavor, but one that entailed the participation of mass popular parties, the formation of popular fronts, and the journey of the international brigades from around the world to defend the Spanish Republic from Franco and his fascist and Nazi allies. In the ‘70s and ‘80s there was a resurgence of militant anti-fascism in Europe. This was a response to the xenophobic backlash against migration from the Caribbean, South Asia, Turkey, and elsewhere.

What follows is an edited transcript of the interview.



Photo by Peter Marlow of an altercation between National Front supporters and anti-racist counter-protesters at the Battle of Lewisham in New Cross, 1977.

Not just snowflakes: Fighting the culture wars in the age of Trump
An interview with Mark Bray
Erin Hagood



Book Review: Philip Cunliffe, *Lenin Lives! Reimagining the Russian Revolution 1917-2017* (Alresford, UK: Zero Books, 2017)

Gregor Baszak

WHEN PRESIDENT TRUMP ANNOUNCED the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Climate Accord on June 1, 2017, for many liberals it meant that doom was upon us, that the earth was surely soon to be uninhabitable. Yet, if the Paris Accord was the best shot that our civilization had at survival, we were perhaps doomed from the start. NASA scientist James Hansen, at least, one of the earliest voices to raise the alarms about the effects of climate change, had deemed the Accord to be thoroughly inadequate to begin with.¹

Here's an alternative way in which the year 2017 might have unfolded:

It is an unseasonably warm November 2017 in Leningrad, although within planned temperature ranges. There is discussion among atmospheric engineers and climate planners whether to make minor adjustments to the cloud systems they are responsible for in order to reflect more sunlight away from the northern hemisphere, or whether to accelerate the construction of orbiting Lagrange space mirrors intended for longer term climate control.²

In this scenario, too, climate change is understood to be an administrative problem, albeit one that is administered by "climate planners" who consciously choose to set earth's thermometer at a specific temperature range. In the real world of today, Leningrad is St. Petersburg, Russia is governed by a neoliberal autocrat, and earth's climate is out of control. The counterfactual history envisioned above was penned by Philip Cunliffe, author of the new book *Lenin Lives!* Reimagining the Russian Revolution 1917-2017, published by Zero Books. As the title suggests, the book imagines an alternative history of the 20th century, one in which the October Revolution was soon followed by successful revolutions in the capitalist centers of the West, in England, France, Germany, and—the big prize—the United States.

Writing counterfactual history, Cunliffe notes, has so far been the domain of conservative revisionists. In one such infamous counterfactual, for example, Winston Churchill envisioned his dream scenario—the glorious ascendancy of a racialized Anglo-Saxon global empire, had Robert E. Lee only won the battle of Gettysburg [85]. Yet, as Cunliffe usefully points out, the notion of "what if" appears to have been inscribed into the very project of Bolshevism itself, a project "self-consciously predicated on counterfactuals" [20; italics in the original]. What, in other words, if Lenin's plan that a revolution in Russia would provide the spark that would light the flames of revolution in Germany and elsewhere had actually succeeded? Lenin didn't know quite what would happen in the wake of the October Revolution, but it was a gamble worth making. Human freedom required it.

Most of Lenin's life is devoted to envisioning in some detail a set of lat times bloody events throughout the course of the fictional 1920s to 70s in which piece by piece the capitalist nations of The West succumb to organized proletarian pressure and turn socialist. By the "late 1960s," humanity begins to colonize Mars [127]. By the 1970s, we have essentially completed the withering away of the state and the transition to communism [97].

Some of these scenarios are enlightening, some amusing [Churchill rotting away in exile in reaction-

ary Canada, for instance], some perhaps beside the point. The book's true value—and it is immense—lies, however, in recognizing that the dystopian experiences of the 20th century have all been conditioned by the definitive defeat of the world revolution in the early 1920s. Whatever personalities or causes appear to preoccupy the minds of the last remnants of the undead left today, we realize, would have been circumvented had the revolution succeeded. Left sectarian splits based on historical roles played by Trotsky, FOR, Stalin, Mao, or Castro have all been forestalled by the successful revolution. They all would have lived, Cunliffe acknowledges, although they would have led mostly insignificant lives, often not even amounting to footnotes in the alternative history books of Lenin Lives! Interestingly, the list of relative historical nonentities would have included Lenin himself, seeing how he would have ruled over the least essential, because most backward, country in the entire chain of global revolutions—a scenario that would have been to Lenin's own liking, of course.³

Another important realization, and in many ways the most crucial one, deserves quoting at length. Rather than a doctrine for Third World revolts, Marxism was, according to Cunliffe,

designed to uplift and in so doing transform and improve the most advanced societies, the wealthiest, most politically progressive and technologically sophisticated states, building not only on the civic and political freedoms of liberalism but also the economic achievements of capitalism. [90]

As those generations that followed upon the dystopic turns of the early to mid-20th century, especially the New Left generation and its children, had come to think, the last vestiges of the revolution were rather to be found in what would come to be called "the margins" of society. The belief that the "most oppressed" would also be the most revolutionary, Cunliffe helps us realize, is itself predicated upon the self-defeat of the Left throughout the 20th century. It is an expression of despair. *Lenin Lives!* will be precisely the most provocative where those shaped by contemporary post-colonial sensibilities will wonder how the redemption of human civilization could have possibly rested on the shoulders of developed bourgeois nations. Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine get reinterpreted in *Lenin Lives!* as the foundation upon which a hemispheric American socialist republic would arise—as the last act of the American Revolution [72-9]. Kudos to Cunliffe for upholding the American revolutionary tradition!

There is no New Left in Cunliffe's counterfactual history, no Stalinism to provide it with its intellectual and political foundations, no anti-colonial revolt upon which the apologists of defeat would place their hopes (the colonial possessions of a socialist United Kingdom immediately cease to remaining within a new planetary socialist federation [83]); no New Left reinterpretation of human history as essentially a war between homogeneous race groups⁴; no postmodern degeneration of thought that would cheerfully come to affirm the calamitous history we have inherited; and notably, too, no Frankfurt School, "the ruminations" of which "the world will be spared" [124]. What reads as an intentional swipe

at Theodor Adorno, who in the counterfactual world would watch the revolutions unfold from the sidelines, mostly devoting his time to writing about music, would naturally have been warmly welcomed by him. The problem with philosophy, Adorno notes in the opening lines of his *Negative Dialectics*, lies in the fact that it "lives on because the moment to realize it was missed."⁵ A successful socialist world revolution would have entailed the process of overcoming philosophy itself—its becoming "worldly" [and the world "philosophical"], as Karl Marx noted.⁶

At other words, "The continued historic significance of the Russian Revolution is testimony to its ultimate failure" [57]. That we have never outstripped the need to study the history of the Left—to study Lenin and Adorno, for example—is the result of the revolution's defeat, a defeat that continues to haunt us to this day. If we understand the task of socialism as one of initially transforming the most advanced capitalist nations, this transformation would occur on the basis of capitalism itself," as Cunliffe insists, not its one-sided negation through an abstract and primitivist "anti-capitalism." Yet, it is the latter undialectical attitude toward capitalism that the Left often adopts today. Consequently, this Left is largely made up of what Cunliffe diagnoses as "a morass of sub-anarchistic and ecological groups" [32], desperate as they are to scrape by on the margins of political relevance.

Absent a revolutionary Left, the way the crisis of society presents itself most acutely today is as "the suppression of capitalism itself" [12; italics in the original]. "As a social system," Cunliffe goes on,

propelled by social struggles between economic groups more than it is a system defined by market competition, it was inevitable that a shift in the balance of forces between these groups would impact the social system itself. It is defeat and the shattering of unions that helps explain the sinking of the richest countries in the world into low inflation economies with stagnating real wages. It is defeat that helps explain the fragmented and tiered labour markets of Europe that set groups of workers against each other. It is defeat that helps explain the decline of productivity growth, the failure to harness new technologies for economic growth and progress, and wilting rates of business investment. [12]

It is true, the dynamism of capitalism was indeed predicated on a historic condition in which the "contending classes" [13] were grappling for power. In the picture that Cunliffe draws, 19th century liberalism, at times a noble utopianism in its own right, has been superseded by the near universal accommodation to the crisis-proneness of capitalism in the 20th century. In this context, Cunliffe appears to imply, though, that the ultimate cause for the revolution's failure is that it succumbed to waves of "repression" first and foremost [7]. That "repression" played an important role is of course beyond doubt; any attempt at revolution will immediately spark a counter-revolutionary, as Cunliffe reminds us [8]. Often on the Left, however, blame is laid solely at the feet of the right—we would live in a better world today, if only it hadn't been for COINTELPRO, as is frequently said by elderly New Leftists.⁷ Cunliffe is eager to point out the pathologies of the Left today, though he spends too little time considering the political crises and debates of Second International social democracy that decisively contributed to the course which history ultimately took. There, too, what happened in the wake of the October Revolution is not all that needs to be said about the matter. Military contingency appears to trump deeply theoretical and political disputes in Cunliffe's narrative,

Ultimately, it is the gigantic "what if" of the historical necessity of socialism that continues to task us. *Lenin Lives!* provocatively forces us to consider the possibility that all of the crises evident today are merely the logical result of a society that has remained incapable of stripping itself of an outdated form—capitalism. When in the year 1850, Marx spoke of the necessity of "permanent revolution," he tasked his comrades with being as radical as reality itself."⁸ Capitalism already appeared as the revolution, one desperate, however, for its political transcendence in the global dictatorship of the proletariat. Whatever dynamism capitalism seems to set into motion, the fact that its own ultimate goal is nothing else but the valorization of capital means that innumerable economic and political crises will keep recurring, to the detriment of the contending classes. To let capitalism fulfill its promise, would mean to allow for its self-overcoming through socialism, a vision very elegantly outlined by Cunliffe. *Lenin Lives!* is tremendously effective at reminding us what had once been possible—and might again be so. [P

1 Oliver Milman, "James Hansen, father of climate change awareness, calls Paris talks 'a fraud,'" *The Guardian*, December 12, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/dec/12/james-hansen-climate-change-paris-talks-frud>.
2 Philip Cunliffe, *Lenin Lives! Reimagining the Russian Revolution 1917-2017* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2017), 24. Hereafter referenced parenthetically.
3 Lenin, after all, recognized that Russia would hold a dimmer

they claimed that Maoism was universally valid, and "consequently...the third, new, and superior stage of the ideology of the international proletariat."⁹ This statement was developed in 1993, when the RIM, a coalition of Maoist organizations, published Long Live Marxism-Leninism-Maoism! Declaring, "to the international proletariat and the oppressed masses of the world...our guiding ideology is Marxism-Leninism-Maoism...the new, third and higher stage of Marxism." The PCP used the suffix -ism to signify that there were lessons to be learned from the theoretical output of Mao and the events of the revolution in China that were "universally applicable to every particular context," and therefore constitute a qualitative change in the nature of the science. This same group, Moufawad-Paul says, set fire to the voting booths in the 1980 elections and declared a people's war [218]; many of the groups involved in the RIM summit would restructure as Maoist organizations and initiate their own people's wars.

Before he can describe how Maoism achieved an epistemic rupture, Moufawad-Paul must first describe what it ruptured through. He chooses Tom Clark's *The State and Counter-Revolution*¹⁰ as a paradigmatic explication of the boundaries of Leninism. Clark wrote following the dissolution of the Communist Workers Group (Marxist-Leninist) and his experiences, among other things, doing deadly battle with the Ku Klux Klan. The philosophical puzzle Clark unearths is the central problem of Continuity and Rupture; Marx alluded to it long ago when he wrote "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas."¹¹ Clark writes that the proletariat internalizes bourgeois ideology; without studying revolutionary theory, they will not know what is in their best interests, much less how to go about realizing them. To learn theory, the proletariat looks to "petty-bourgeois intellectuals" and as a result, the direction of such a movement will be determined "in the final instance" by petty-bourgeois ideology [96]. The alternative is for the working class to form their own revolutionary party, but preoccupied with the business of working, and with a limited conception of their long-term interests, any class struggle arising out of the working class itself has historically been confined to what Moufawad-Paul calls "union-based economism" [97]. A party formed outside of the working class is necessary, but the politics of such a party will not truly be representative of working class ideology. Moufawad-Paul summarizes Clark's text, and the contradiction that led to the fall of the USSR and the CCP: "on the one hand it is impossible for the proletariat to spontaneously develop a revolutionary party with a revolutionary ideology; on the other hand it is impossible for a party that the workers cannot possibly develop, and thus is developed instead by the petty bourgeoisie, to carry a revolution to its completion" [99].

Because Marxism is a Hegelian philosophy, we should not be surprised to find Moufawad-Paul resolving contradictions through a dialectical "unity of opposites." The synthesis that he sees as having affected the aufheben of Leninism into Maoism was the organizational technique of the mass-line, and the theory of Cultural Revolution behind it. The party learns the demands of the oppressed, and interprets these demands through

and what we're left with is a vision of socialism as essentially a techno-scientific fix for a society held back by a triumphant capitalist class. Yet, why did the revolutions in Germany, Hungary, and elsewhere collapse so quickly [albeit not without a fight]? Why did the October Revolution remain really just a spark and amount to nothing more? Can the roots of the Revolution's quick suppression not also be located in the fact that the political struggles against revisionism had actually not been won by its eminent combatants, Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, leaving the predominance of reformism in the Second International's member parties essentially intact? A more interesting "what if" to raise in this context might have been the one that asked what would have happened if Rosa Luxemburg had decided to split the Social Democratic Party of Germany long before World War I (perhaps the ground for another counterfactual). Her followers' patched-up response in the wake of the German Revolution of 1918-19 proved to be too little, too late, as the SPD's proto-fascistic right-wing had already wrested control over it long before the War.¹²

On the other hand, what's deeply commendable about the book is its ability to counter philosophical tendencies of the latter half of the 20th century, tendencies that argue for the end of "grand narratives," by precisely persisting in the need to narrativize the history of modern bourgeois society along those vastly grand scales. How else could we have a sense of where our politics might take us, if we did not permit ourselves the freedom to imagine the social totality [and our subject positions within it] to be transcendable? Since many on the Left today see society to be made up of a multitude of irreconcilable moments, forever determined by their identities"¹³, this same Left has ironically wound up proving Margaret Thatcher's dictum correct that there was no such thing as society. And since there is nothing else that binds us together, political change will at best be a matter of mere contingency, an "event," rather than the result of the conscious actions of political forces struggling over its direction.

Ultimately, it is the gigantic "what if" of the historical necessity of socialism that continues to task us. *Lenin Lives!* provocatively forces us to consider the possibility that all of the crises evident today are merely the logical result of a society that has remained incapable of stripping itself of an outdated form—capitalism. When in the year 1850, Marx spoke of the necessity of "permanent revolution," he tasked his comrades with being as radical as reality itself."¹⁴ Capitalism already appeared as the revolution, one desperate, however, for its political transcendence in the global dictatorship of the proletariat. Whatever dynamism capitalism seems to set into motion, the fact that its own ultimate goal is nothing else but the valorization of capital means that innumerable economic and political crises will keep recurring, to the detriment of the contending classes. To let capitalism fulfill its promise, would mean to allow for its self-overcoming through socialism, a vision very elegantly outlined by Cunliffe. *Lenin Lives!* is tremendously effective at reminding us what had once been possible—and might again be so. [P

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"Lenin Lives!" continues on page 4

Constituent Assembly, cont. from page 2

is as American as apple pie [and] hardly a sign that this imperialist ruling class is about to dispense with the stability of bourgeois-democratic rule"¹⁵—this just six months before the destruction of the World Trade Center caused a precipitous slide into authoritarianism and emergency rule. But now that the instablism is reaching a tipping point, it is the task of the working class to confront the emergency head on by taking charge of the state and restructuring it from top to bottom.

What a constituent assembly would mean

A call for a constituent assembly on the part of the working class would amount to a declaration of independence from the two-party system and the corrupt and arthritic Washington apparatus in general. Obviously, it would not emerge out of the blue but, rather, as a consequence of a growing class war. Almost certainly, it would be accompanied by a movement for a general strike, which would itself lead to the growth of workers' councils—otherwise known as soviets—as workers moved to take control of strike-bound communities and industrial installations. A constituent assembly would be a means of bringing all democratic elements—middle-class liberals, besieged minorities, the women's movement, etc.,—together under a working-class umbrella. The message to such groups would be crystal clear: bourgeois democracy is turning into a hideous caricature whereas proletarian democracy offers the only path forward. A constituent assembly, universally elected and organized on the basis of strict proportional representation, would mark the beginning of a vast democratic restructuring of American society led by the working class.

One reason the constituent assembly and the soviets parted ways in 1918 is that the Russian workers comprised only a small portion of the population, probably less than ten percent in all, in a society that was otherwise peasant-dominated. But in today's U.S., agriculture accounts for less than two percent of the labor force, while workers, which is to say all those who are compelled to sell their labor power as opposed to living off profits, have hovered at anywhere from 81 to 93 percent of the workforce since the 1920s.¹⁶

As one would expect in an advanced capitalist society, the working class and demos are essentially the same. As the Communist Manifesto puts it, "[t]he proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority"¹⁷—words that have never been truer than they are today. Where the Bolsheviks forced to choose between a constitutional assembly and soviet power, it is unlikely that their successors will be faced with any such reckoning. Instead of socialism or democracy, the working class is now in a position to strive for both. [P

1 Trotskyism vs. 'Constituent Assembly' Mania," *The Internationalist*, October 2007, <http://www.internationalist.org/constitu-entassemblymania07010.htm>.
2 'A Manifesto for Demotising Europe,' DIEM25, <https://diem25.org/manifesto-short-version/>.
3 Robin Wright, "Is America Headed for a New Kind of Civil War?," *The New Yorker*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/is-america-headed-for-a-new->

Not just snowflakes, cont. from page 1

term achievable goals like changing everyday discourse. We can change everyday perspectives on social justice issues by changing how we interact with each other.

One can think back to earlier decades when different terms for people of color or women were appropriate that are now no longer acceptable. People, decades ago, would admit to being in favor of segregation. But, if someone holds that perspective today, she would have to be very careful as to who she shared that with.

The barometer of social progress can be gauged in discourse. We should treat discourse seriously, and be attuned to the ways in which discourse can be used by Trump and the alt-right to make racism and sexism "great again." We can increase the social cost of being a bigot, a sexist or a Trump supporter to the point where, in the future, that cost outweighs people's desire to be open with their past. This creates a more conducive climate for an anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic politics in the future.

But, anti-fascism is also a politics of social revolution that argues about the illegitimacy of the state, the illegitimacy of the police, the need for popular organization from below, and the efficacy of direct action politics. Anti-fascism aims to sow the seeds for a broader, left-revolutionary movement that will transcend simply stopping boneheads and white supremacists and, hopefully, change society as a whole. Thus, many anti-fascists are also union organizers, environmentalists, and other kinds of organizers who are involved in a variety of social projects, aspiring to build an anti-capitalist movement.

EH: When you talked about the importance of discourse, it brought to mind Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies*, which makes the argument that the alt-right comes from the culture wars and the Left's preoccupation with discourse. These kids on the alt-right, she argues, think they are the rebels. How would you respond to that?

MB: In the last five decades, we have seen that the struggle for feminism, the struggle for civil rights, and the struggle for queer and trans liberation have all entailed struggles about discourse. The slow, but hopefully continual, progress that those justice movements are making in destroying traditional, patriarchal, white, heterosexual, capitalist privilege can be measured in discourse. It is good that in workplaces, universities, and polite discourse, certain words or stereotypes cannot be said.

The alt-right instrumentalizes and weaponizes the resentment of those whose privilege has been under attack. It appeals to straight, white, cis men who long for the days of lordling over their domestic domain and society. But, we cannot give into the notion that the Left is just arbitrating "political correctness" or invoking "cultural Marxism" or that we should simply open up free speech in a value-neutral, classically liberal notion where anyone feels free to say whatever they want and arguments can be made for white supremacy or for patriarchy.

We are in a culture war and people on the Left are not overly sensitive snowflakes but, rather, making sincere arguments for social justice.

kind-of-civil-war.

4 Ross Brooks, "3 Ways to Get Rid of President Trump before 2020," *Foreign Policy*, January 30, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/30/3-ways-to-get-rid-of-president-trump-before-2020-impeach-25th-amendment-conv/>. See also Mashia Gessen, "John Kelly and the Language of the Military Coup," *The New Yorker*, October 20, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/john-kelly-and-the-language-of-the-military-coup>.

5 U.S. Census, "Population Projections: States, 1995-2025," Table 1, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/census/library/publications/1997/demo/p25-1131.pdf>.

6 For a detailed discussion, see August H. Nimtz, *Lenin's Electoral Strategy: From 1907 to the October Revolution of 1917* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

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21 V. I. Lenin, "Letter to American Workers" (1918), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/aug/20.htm>.

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23 Quoted in Samuel Kernell, ed., James Madison: The Theory and Practice of Republican Government (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 349.

24 R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1740-1800*, Vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 469.

25 "Cyber Nuts and Democrats," *Workers Vanguard* 754 (March 16, 2001), 2.

26 Simon Mohan, "Class Structure and the US Personal Income Distribution, 1918-2012," *Metroeconomica* 67, no. 2 (May 2016).

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ished role if more developed capitalist nations were to go socialist. "It would also be erroneous to lose sight of the fact that soon after the victory of the proletarian revolution in at least one of the advanced countries, a sharp change will probably come about: Russia will cease to be the model and will once again become a backward country [in the 'Soviet' and the socialist sense]" ("Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder, available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwcf/>).

4 An early example of this can be found in Susan Sontag's racist assertion that "The white race is the cancer of human history; it is the white race and it alone—its ideologies and intentions—which eradicates autonomous civilizations wherever it spreads, which has upset the ecological balance of the planet, which now threatens the very existence of life itself." Contribution to the symposium "What's Happening to America," *Partisan Review* 34, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 57-8. Italics in the original.

5 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), 3. See also Chris Cutrone, "Adorno's Leninism," *Platypus Review* 37 (June 2011), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2011/06/01/enlins-leninism/>.

6 Karl Marx, "To Make the World Philosophical," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 9-11.

7 In his 1920 pamphlet "Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder, Lenin emphasizes "the need for a very long and very persistent struggle on the basis of capitalism" [available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwcf/italics> in the original].

8 Consider as well that seemingly no leftist account of 20th century America can go without mention of McCarthyism, as if by the 1950s we had still been dealing with a vibrant Communist mass party and its imminent rise to power. Due to Stalin's catastrophic misleadership of the Communist International, there was hardly any political party for socialism left in the United States by the time of the witch hunts.

9 See Sebastian Haffner's extraordinary account in *Failure of a Revolution: Germany 1918-1919* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1968). 10 It is no exaggeration to stress the fatalistic side of an identity-based politics. As both Jason D. Hill and Thomas Chatterton Williams have been able to show, what's deeply embedded in the race-first politics of Ta-Nehisi Coates, for example, is the pessimistic belief that "white supremacy" is an eternal and unshakable truth, the only "grand narrative" there is, if you will. In the process, both writers point out, Coates manages to strip any potential political actors seeking to combat injustice of actual agency. See Jason D. Hill, "An Open Letter to Ta-Nehisi Coates: The Dream is Real," *Commentary*, September 13, 2017, available online at <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/open-letter-to-ta-nehisi-coates/>, and Thomas Chatterton Williams, "Ta-Nehisi Coates Gives Whiteness Power," *The New York Times*, October 6, 2017, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/opinion/ta-nehisi-coates-whiteness-power.html>.

11 The full quote goes thus: Although the German workers cannot come to power and achieve the realization of their class interests without passing through a protracted revolutionary development, this time they can at least be certain that the first act of the approaching revolutionary drama will coincide with the direct victory of their own class in France and will thereby be accelerated. But they themselves must contribute most to their final victory, by informing themselves of their own class interests, by taking up their independent political position as soon as possible, by not allowing themselves to be misled by the hypocritical phrases of the democratic petty bourgeoisie into doubting for one minute the necessity of an independently organized party of the proletariat. Their battle-cry must be: The Permanent Revolution.

"Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League," available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1984/communist-league/1850-a01.htm> [emphasis in the original].

1 Josh Moufawad-Paul, *The Communist Necessity* (Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2014), 14.

2 Revolutionary Internationalist Movement, "Long Live Marxism-Leninism-Maoism!," #20 (1995) available online at http://www.bannedthought.net/International/8IM/AWTW/1995-20/IL_mlm_20_eng.htm.

3 Communist Party of Peru, "On Marxism-Leninism-Maoism," *Les Materialistes* (30 March 2014) available online at <http://lesmaterialistes.org/english/communist-party-peru/fundamental-documents>.

4 Tom Clark, "The State and Counter-Revolution," *Encyclopaedia of Anti-Revisionism* (1983) available online at <https://www.marxists.org/history/encol/ccn-la/tom-clark/index.html>.

5 Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," [1932] available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/>.

Continuity and Rupture, cont. from page 3

is the motor of history" [12], a party of the new type will preserve a political line determined by class "in the final instance" [149]. Mindful of class reductionism, Moufawad-Paul refers to the "final instance" as an abstract reduction "that allows us to understand the concrete" [151].

Throughout Continuity and Rupture, Moufawad-Paul has argued that the revolutionary party is essential, but that it bears a dangerous contradiction. Maoism resolves this contradiction through theoretical insights not limited to the GPCR. Now Moufawad-Paul moves on

Constituent Assembly: 1917–2017

Daniel Lazare

NO ACT DURING THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION is more controversial than the decision to suppress the Constituent Assembly in January 1918. A century later, no question is politically more relevant.

The reason is that such bodies are making a comeback. In 2007, Jan Norden’s Internationalist Group reported that constituent-assembly “mania” was underway in Oaxaca, Bolivia, Argentina, and elsewhere,¹ while since then they have convened in Nepal, Ecuador, Iceland, and Venezuela. The left social-democrat Jean-Luc Mélenchon made the call for a constituent assembly the centerpiece of his French presidential campaign last spring while Yanis Varoufakis has called for one for the entire European Union.²

Why the enthusiasm? The answer, of course, is that bourgeois political institutions are reeling in the wake of the financial crash and subsequent economic slowdown, and that voters are beginning to realize that the problem lies not with this or that candidate but with the politico-economic structure as a whole. As pressure mounts, repression intensifies, and institutions like the EU grow ever more ossified, the sense is spreading that the apparatus must be revamped from top to bottom and that, rather than leaving it to various “experts,” the only ones capable of doing the job are the people themselves.

Hence the growing number of calls for a constituent assembly, a kind of super-legislature whose purpose is not to pass specific laws but, rather, to change how laws are made, how political power is allocated, the purpose of the state, and so forth.

So far the movement has yet to reach the United States, a surprise in itself since nowhere else is the structural crisis more acute. Where European governments in general were revamped after World War II, the U.S. has been laboring under the same plan of government since 1787. Constitution-worship probably reached an all-time high during Watergate when Democratic Congresswoman Barbara Jordan ringingly declared: “My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total, and I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution.” But the consequences of such constitutional faith have been calamitous. Congress is paralyzed, political tension is soaring, while two of the last five presidential elections have ended in dispute, i.e. the 2000 election in which a Republican-controlled Supreme Court stepped in to halt the Florida vote count and declare George W. Bush the winner even though he was clearly trailing and the 2016 contest in which a constitutional fluke enabled Donald Trump to enter the White House despite losing by nearly three million popular votes. Since then, U.S. politics have undergone a Weimar-like breakdown characterized by talk of impeachment, Russian hacking, the Deep State, and even a second civil war.³ Formerly, the question of a military coup was a topic fit only for spy novelists and cranks. Now prominent journals discuss it openly.⁴

Two factors add to the general combustibility. First, U.S. ruling institutions are increasingly minoritarian. The Electoral College triples the weight of the least populous states while the Senate is so malapportioned that, under current rules, 41 members representing as little as 11.5 percent of the population can stop any bill in its tracks. Even in the supposedly more equitable House, the GOP has created roughly a five-percent advantage for itself via relentless gerrymandering at the state level. Second, the majority is powerless to combat a growing minority dictatorship due to a constitutional amending clause that effectively eliminates any possibility of structural reform. Because the Constitution’s Article V requires that any amendment be approved by two-thirds of each house of Congress plus three-fourths of the states, just thirteen states representing as little as 4.4 percent of the population can block any structural change, no matter how minor. By 2025, less than a decade from now, the figure is projected to drop to under 4.1 percent, meaning that one person in 25 will wield absolute veto power over the remainder.⁵

The result is a perfect storm in which the political structure grows more change-averse the more necessary change becomes. For the moment, a constituent assembly is the farthest thing from the American mind. But the more the contradictions intensify, the more they will have to think about such an option for the simple reason that there is no other way around the constitutional logjam. All routes are blocked, not only the ordinary amending process but a constitutional convention as well since Article V says its recommendations must also be approved by three-fourths of the states. The only recourse, therefore, is to go outside the system by convening a special legislative body that is elected by the people as a whole in order to act on the document as a whole—under its own authority, that is, rather than that of Congress or the states.

The fact that such an assembly would be frankly unconstitutional renders the prospect all the more explosive. Historically, the classic analogy is with the Estates-General, the ancient French body called in 1789 to approve new taxes, which then took the unprecedented step of transforming itself into a national constituent assembly when the clergy and nobility agreed to meet jointly under the aegis of the Third Estate. This, too, was unconstitutional since it was at odds with established law according to the best authorities of the day. But rather than doing away with the new national assembly, the effect was to open up a constitutional void that a host of new forces hastened to fill.

A constituent assembly in the 21st-century U.S. would do likewise. If so, what should the Left’s attitude be? Should socialists campaign for a constituent assembly the way Lenin did before, during, and even after the Bolshevik seizure of power?⁶ Or, like the Spartacist League and its various offshoots, should they oppose it on the grounds that “the constituent assembly is not a democratic demand but a call for a new capitalist government?”⁷

The answer is the former. The idea that a constituent assembly is not a democratic demand is preposterous. Indeed, it is the ultimate democratic demand since it subsumes all others having to do with racial and gender equality, workers’ rights, political representation, etc. No less absurd is the notion that a constituent assembly would somehow serve to reinforce capitalism. Since the only force capable of pushing for such a body in the current context is the working class, the effect would be the opposite: to present American society with the starkest possible choice between political regression

under the current sclerotic structure on one hand and progress via workers’ democracy on the other.

Political versus constitutional change

The question of basic structural change versus narrower political reform is as old as Marxism itself. In his defense of the Paris Commune, Marx held that it was axiomatic that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes,” but that it had to create new institutions fitted to its rule.⁸ Twenty years later, Engels criticized the German Social Democratic Party’s Erfurt program for assuming that the working class could move forward within existing bourgeois political boundaries: “These are attempts to convince oneself and the party that ‘present-day society is developing towards socialism’ without asking oneself whether it does not thereby just as necessarily outgrow the old social order and whether it will not have to burst this old shell by force, as a crab breaks its shell, and also whether in Germany, in addition, it will not have to smash the fetters of the still semi-absolutist, and moreover indescribably confused political order.”⁹ In 1895, Lenin called for a Russian constitution to bring about “the direct participation ... of all citizens in the government of the state, the guaranteed right of all citizens freely to assemble, to discuss their affairs, influence affairs of state through the associations and the press.”¹⁰ After the outbreak of war with Japan, Trotsky called in 1904 for “a general political strike all over Russia ... to stop the war and to call for a National Constituent Assembly.”¹¹

Classical Marxist thinkers, beginning with Marx himself, thus always thought big, arguing that an economic transformation is impossible without an equally sweeping political transformation to go with it. Obvious as this may seem, the rise of workers’ councils, or soviets, during the Russian revolution of 1905 seemed to complicate matters. Soviets were a new type of authority, instruments not of democracy in general but of a specific form of class rule. They made the demand for a constituent assembly seem passé.

Was it therefore a question of either a workers’ dictatorship or democracy in general? Lenin, for one, saw the relationship as complementary rather than competitive. Since it was the job of the working class to usher in democracy, it was the task of the soviets to usher in the constituent assembly, the chief democratizing agent. As he put it in his April Theses:

I attacked the Provisional Government for not having appointed an early date or any date at all, for the convocation of the Constituent Assembly, and for confining itself to promises. I argued that without the Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies the convocation of the Constitutional Assembly is not guaranteed and its success is impossible.

Where Kerensky hesitated to disturb the existing state structure, workers’ soviets would usher in a constituent assembly so as to make a clean democratic sweep.

But then, after campaigning for seats in a new constituent assembly even after the seizure of power on November 7, the Bolsheviks dissolved the assembly three months later when revolutionary parties found themselves in a minority. For Mensheviks and other rightists, this was proof of Lenin’s cynicism and his determination to further the Bolshevik dictatorship at all costs. Democratic rhetoric was nothing more than a smokescreen for totalitarianism, as generations of Americans have been taught. But in fact the party found itself in a difficult spot. Events were racing ahead with lightning speed, civil war was erupting, and, rather than reflecting the rising revolutionary temper, Lenin and Trotsky both argued that the make-up of the new assembly reflected conditions of several months earlier.

Rosa Luxemburg, for one, found such arguments “very fine and quite convincing.” But she wondered why the new government did not take the logical next step:

Since the Constituent Assembly was elected long before the decisive turning point, the October Revolution, and its composition reflected the picture of the vanished past and not of the new state of affairs, then it follows automatically that the outgrown and therefore still-born Constituent Assembly should have been annulled, and without delay, new elections to a new Constituent Assembly should have been arranged.¹²

Lenin might not have disagreed since he had stressed in his *The State and Revolution* that “[t]he way out of parliamentarism is not, of course, the abolition of representative institutions and the elective principle[.]” But growing chaos made Luxemburg’s proposal impractical. As Trotsky observed,

The greatest degree of disorganization was taking place at the front[.] Desertions were increasing every day; the masses of soldiers threatened to leave the trenches, whole regiments at a time, and move to the rear, devastating everything on their way. In the villages, a general seizure of lands and landholders’ utensils was going on. Martial law had been declared in several provinces. The Germans continued to advance, captured Riga, and threatened Petrograd. The right wing of the bourgeoisie was openly rejoicing over the danger that threatened the revolutionary capital.¹³

Under such circumstances, a constituent assembly would have become a rallying point for the Right, a force not for change but, ironically, for the restoration of the status quo ante. Indeed, that is just what happened when, abandoned by both the Bolsheviks and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, a remnant of the assembly decamped for Ufa in the extreme south and came under the control of the brutal warlords Alexander Kolchak and Anton Denikin.

Post-1917

This is not the end of the story, however. After the civil war, the question of a constituent assembly seems to have gone into abeyance, not only in Russia but in the Communist movement in general. Instead of criticizing liberal constitutionalism, the emphasis was now on overthrowing it altogether via the slogan “all power to the soviets.” Nonetheless, Trotsky revived the demand

with regard to the Chinese and Spanish revolutions and continued to zero in on structural distortions that robbed the working masses of their democratic rights even when he did not mention constitutional assemblies per se. As he observed in his 1925 pamphlet, *Whither England?*:

The vicious geometry of the election districts gives a Conservative vote twice as much weight as a worker’s vote. Thus, the present English Parliament is a crying distortion of the will of the people, even if we understand the latter in the bourgeois-democratic sense. Has the working class a right, still standing on the principles of democracy, to demand vigorously from the present privileged and at bottom usurping House of Commons the immediate introduction by the latter of a truly democratic suffrage? If Parliament should answer unfavorably, which we consider inevitable ... would the proletariat then have the ‘right’ to obtain from the usurping Parliament, by means of a general strike, the introduction of a democratic suffrage system?¹⁴

After reforming the House of Commons, workers would no doubt turn their attention to the House of Lords, the monarchy, and other features of the Westminster system as the revolutionary confrontation with the state deepened and grew. A few months after an attempted fascist putsch in France, Trotsky called for a workers’ militia among other things, but also urged workers to emulate the Convention of 1793 by attacking both the presidency and the French Senate—“which is elected by limited suffrage and which renders the power of universal suffrage a mere illusion”—and to concentrate all power in a single chamber instead. He wrote,

Workers adhering to democratic socialism must further understand that it is not enough to defend democracy; democracy must be regained. The moving of the political center of gravity from parliament towards the cabinet, from the cabinet towards the oligarchy of finance capital, generals, police, is an accomplished fact. Neither the present parliament nor the new elections can change this. We can defend the sorry remains of democracy, and especially we can enlarge the democratic arena for the activity of the masses, only by annihilating the armed fascist forces that, on February 6, 1934, started moving the axis of the state and are still doing so.¹⁵

By seeking to “enlarge the democratic arena,” was Trotsky attempting to institute “a new capitalist government”? Obviously not. Rather, he was calling on workers to take the decrepit bourgeois state by the scruff of the neck and give it a good shake so as to slough off all features that did not serve their interests. As he put it in March 1935:

[T]he dictatorship of the proletariat by its very essence can and should be the supreme expression of workers’ democracy. In order to bring about a great social revolution, there must be for the proletariat a supreme manifestation of all its forces and all its capacities: the proletariat is organized democratically, precisely in order to put an end to its enemies. The dictatorship, according to Lenin, should ‘teach every cook to direct the state.’ The heavy hand of dictatorship is directed against the class enemies: the foundation of the dictatorship is workers’ democracy.¹⁶

Teaching every cook to direct the state means mobilizing the working masses to collectively redesign the state to advance their rule. This is not to say that the masses should not also collectively redesign the economy, social mores, and the like. Clearly they should. But revamping the political structure is a no less important part of the process.

The American crisis

The inequities of the British Parliament or the French Senate pale next to those of the United States today. The U.S. Senate is an eighteenth-century monstrosity that, by granting each state equal representation regardless of population, accords the same weight to the three percent of the country that lives in the ten smallest states as the 55 percent that lives in the ten largest. The Electoral College is heavily slanted in favor of underpopulated rural states like Wyoming, Alaska, and the Dakotas while the constitutional provision in Article I that gives the states near-total leeway in apportioning congressional districts has led to the skewing of the House of Representatives as well.

Democracy is shrinking as a consequence. Yet such inequities go unnoticed in the liberal-left press. While defending affirmative action at every turn, *The Nation* magazine has never said one word, as far as this writer is aware, about a racist Senate that favors rural whites over urban giants like California and New York. This may not be surprising since *The Nation* is a fossilized relic of the 1930s Popular Front for which the Constitution serves as the highest pinnacle of human attainment. But the silence of the Marxist press is harder to explain. Workers Vanguard has never mentioned the problem of a fantastically unrepresentative Senate either, and neither, for that matter, have the ex-Healyites over at David North’s World Socialist Web Site. The Electoral College gets little attention even though it is also weighted in favor of rural white interests while the even more egregious Article V gets even less. Leftists view racism as a miasma that spreads across the U.S. like a low-lying fog. But they are remarkably incurious with regard to the specific structural features that not only perpetuate it but also render it more extreme with each passing decade.

Other aspects of the breakdown also go unnoticed or are at least misunderstood. Gridlock is blamed on Republican recalcitrance or an excess of partisanship, but never on a pre-modern concept of checks and balances that fairly guarantees that the different branches of government will pull in different directions. The two-party system is widely despised, with some sixty percent of Americans longing for an alternative according to Gallup.¹⁷ But leftists rarely criticize a “first-past-the-post” system that strongly discourages “wasting” one’s vote on a minor-party candidate in presidential elections as well as in countless congressional and state contests. In order to achieve any degree of viability, a third party would have to break through in scores, if not hundreds, of elections simultaneously, a supremely difficult task in the best of circumstances but one that is now all but unachievable thanks to impediments and restrictions that politicians imposed during the so-called Progressive Era to fend off challenges to the “Repocratic” duopoly.¹⁸ Leninists have been calling for a labor party since the days of bathtub gin. But they will continue doing so as long as the constitutional superstructure upholding the two-party

system remains undisturbed.

Politically blocked, labor finds itself reduced to an appendage of an ailing Democratic Party. Despairing of any socialist alternative, workers are easy prey for rightwing demagogues like ex-Trump adviser Steve Bannon who promises a “day of reckoning” for the Washington establishment.¹⁹

The struggle for democracy

“Marx and I, for forty years, repeated ad nauseam that for us the democratic republic is the only political form in which the struggle between the working class and the capitalist class can first be universalized and then culminate in the decisive victory of the proletariat.” So wrote Engels in 1892.²⁰ Since the October Revolution occurred in a country that had barely crossed the bourgeois-democratic threshold, we might wish to modify Engels by saying that it is not a democratic republic that is an essential prerequisite but, rather, the struggle for one. But this means doing what leftists have so far showed little taste for, i.e. politically confronting a hopelessly antique constitutional framework that is dragging U.S. society down into the lower depths of authoritarianism.

Lenin was never more dictatorial than in insisting that he was as capable of error as any other Marxist. With this in mind, we might take issue with his characterization of the American Revolution as “one of those great, really liberating, really revolutionary wars of which there have been so few.”²¹ In reality, the American Revolution was a much more ambiguous affair than he perhaps realized. Samuel Johnson’s famous quip—“How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?”—still resonates. In the South, the British offer of freedom to any slave who joined their forces spread panic among “Patriot” planters. In 1780, the Virginia legislature offered 300 acres and a slave to any military recruit who signed up for the duration.²² Even in the North, the revolution was less a matter of moving forward to a new kind of society than of protecting a land that was already considered to be free and pristine.

The Constitution of 1787 was thus a conservative-democratic document whose goal was not to create freedom but to preserve liberties that already existed. It did so not by installing popular sovereignty but by negating it via innumerable checks and balances and separations of power. The goal, as Madison admitted with admirable frankness in the tenth *Federalist Paper*, was to prevent the coming together of a democratic majority that would be seized all too easily by “a rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project”—improper, that is, to the degree they threatened private wealth. As he put it in a letter to Jefferson a few weeks after the Philadelphia Convention: “Divide et impera, the reprobated axiom of tyranny, is under certain qualifications, the only policy, by which a republic can be administered on just principles.”²³ Americans had to divide and conquer themselves so as to safeguard property against the dangers of runaway democracy.

Where Lenin thought of the U.S. as the ultimate expression of modern capitalism, consequently, it is actually something more complex, an ungainly mix of the pre- and ultra-modern, radical in certain respects but ultra-conservative at its core. Rather than ushering in a new age of popular democracy, the U.S. Constitution was in many ways the last blast of the ancien régime. As the historian R. R. Palmer pointed out in his magisterial study, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, Jefferson was ideologically closer to the Aristocratic Revolt, with its emphasis on decentralization and checks and balances, that preceded the revolution than he was to the revolution itself, while Hamilton, the great loser in the 1790s struggle for power, was much more of an unconscious Jacobin than he or his compatriots realized.²⁴ One of the National Assembly’s first acts was thus to reject a Jefferson-style plan of government based on separation of powers while the Jacobins then pushed through centralist, pro-industrialist policies that Americans would have recognized as Hamiltonian had they not been so ideologically blinkered.

U.S. political structure is thus trickier, more paradoxical, more cut-off from the classic European model, than Marxists have realized, which may explain why they have made so little progress in cracking it open. It may also explain why U.S. society now finds itself in such a dead end. The Constitution served capitalism well by placing popular democracy within firm legal limits. Instead of giving the bourgeoisie a free hand in organizing society, it did them one better by mobilizing the people to organize it on their behalf. Capitalism acquired a depth of popular support that radicals on the other side of the Atlantic found all but incomprehensible. But now U.S. capitalism faces a sea of troubles: declining profitability, imperial overstretch from the Middle East to the Sea of Japan, an enviro-industrial crisis stemming from over-dependence on fossil fuels, and a growing structural crisis back home. It needs calm and steady leadership. But thanks to a broken-down constitutional mechanism that should have been fixed years ago, it has wound up with a real-estate can artist with little idea how the world works. The ruling class has thrown everything it has at Trump in an effort to bludgeon him into submission. It has hit him with accusations of collusion with Russia based on little more than the say-so of the intelligence agencies. It has mobilized the CIA and corporate press to cook up an endless stream of pseudo-scandals involving “fake news” and supposedly improper communications with Moscow diplomats. It has surrounded him with military men to keep him in line. Yet nothing seems to work. Undaunted, Trump staggers on, bombing Syria, threatening to “totally destroy” a nuclear-armed North Korea, stepping up military aid to a Ukraine under the growing influence of Nazi-led militias, and alienating crucial partners like Germany’s Angela Merkel.

The result is unprecedented: a ruling class that is unable to rule. A political void has opened up that the Far Right is hastening to fill. Liberals, characteristically, have responded by focusing their ire on Trump and hence ignoring the role of Democrats in pushing him to the right on such key issues as hostility to the Assad regime, support for Saudi Arabia, and military backing for Kiev’s efforts to recover its lost provinces in the east. While leaping to the defense of workers, women, and minorities, elements farther to the left have ignored the structural elements that are contributing to the crisis. The Spartacists, for instance, seem no more concerned now than they were nearly two decades ago when they dismissed the 2000 electoral crisis as “a tempest in a teapot,” declaring that “stealing an election