Marx after Marxism

An interview with Moishe Postone

Conducted by Benjamin Blumberg and Pam C. Nogales C., January 23, 2008.

Moishe Postone is Professor of History at the University of Chicago, whose seminal book Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory *investigates Marx's categories of commodity, labor, and capital, and the saliency of Marx's critique of capital in the neoliberal context of the present. Rescuing Marx's categories from intellectual and political obsolescence, Postone brings them to bear on the global transformations of the past three decades. In the following interview, Postone stresses the importance of an analysis of the history capital for a progressive anti-capitalist Left today.*

BB: We would like to begin by asking some questions about your early engagement with Marxism and the impetus for your contribution to it. Very basically, how did you come upon Marx?
MP: I went through various stages. My first encounter was, as is the case with many people, the *Communist Manifesto*, which I thought was… rousing, and not really relevant. For me, in the 1960s, I thought it was a kind of a feel-good manifesto, not that it had been that in its own time, but that it no longer was really very relevant. Also, hearing the remnants of the old Left that were still around campus—Trotskyists and Stalinists arguing with one another—I thought that most of it was pretty removed from people's concerns. It had a museum quality to it. So, I considered myself, in some vague sense, critical, or Left, or then the word was 'radical,' but not particularly Marxist. I was very interested in issues of socialism, but that isn't necessarily the same as Marxism.

Then I discovered, as did many in my generation, the 1844 *Manuscripts*. I thought they were fantastic… At that point, however, I still bought into the notion, very wide spread then, that the young Marx really had something to say and that then, alas, he became a Victorian and that his thought became petrified. A turning point for me was an article, "The Unknown Marx," written by Martin Nicolaus while translating the Grundrisse in 1967. Its hints at the richness of the Grundrisse blew me away.

Another turning point in this direction was a sit-in in the University of Chicago in 1969. Within the sit-in there were intense political arguments, different factions were forming. Progressive Labor (PL) was one. It called itself a Maoist organization, but it was Maoist only in the sense that Mao disagreed with Kruschev's speech denouncing Stalin, so it was really an unreconstructed Stalinist organization. The other was a group called Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM), which tried to take cognizance of the major historical shifts of the late 1960s, and did so by focusing on youth and on race. It eventually split; one wing became the Weathermen. At first friends of mine and myself kind of allied with RYM, against PL—but that's because PL was just very vulgar and essentially outside of historical time. But the differences I and some friends had on RYM were expressed tellingly after the sit-in. Two study groups emerged out of the sit-in, one was the RYM study group, called "Youth as a Class," and the other I ran with a friend, called "Hegel and Marx." We felt that social theory was essential to understanding the historical moment, and that RYM's emphasis on surface immediacy was disastrous. We read [Georg] Lukács, who also was an eye-opener—the extent to which he took many of the themes of some conservative critics of capitalism—the critique of bureaucratization, of formalism, of the dominant model of science—and embedded them within Marx's analysis of the commodity form. In a sense this made those conservative critics look a lot more superficial than they had looked beforehand, and deepened and broadened the notion of a Marxian critique. I found it really to be an impressive *tour de force*. In the meantime I was very unhappy with certain directions that the Left had taken.

BB: To begin with a basic but fundamental question, one that is very important for your work, why is the commodity form the necessary category of departure for Marx in *Capital*? In other words, why would a category that would appear to be, in certain guises, an economic category be the point of departure for a critique of social modernity capable of grasping social phenomena at an essential level?
MP: I think what Marx is trying to do is delineate a form of social relations that is fundamentally different from that in pre-capitalist societies. He maintains that the social relations that characterize capitalism, that drive capitalism, are historically unique, but don't appear to be social. So that, for example, although the amazing intrinsic dynamic of capitalist society is historically specific, it is seen as merely a feature of human interaction with nature. I think one of the things that Marx is trying to argue is that what drives the dynamic of capitalist society are these peculiar social forms that become *reified*.

BB: In your work you emphasize Marx's differentiation between labor as a socially mediating activity, i.e., in its abstract dimension, on the one hand, and on the other, as a way of producing specific and concrete use-values, i.e., participating in the production of particular goods. In your opinion, why is this, for Marx, an important distinction from pre-modern forms of social organization and how does it figure in his theory of Modern capitalist society?
MP: Well, this is one place where I differ from most people that write about Marx. I don't think that abstract labor is simply an abstraction *from* labor, i.e., it's not labor in general, it's labor acting as a socially mediating activity. I think *that* is at the heart of Marx's analysis: Labor is doing something in capitalism that it doesn't do in other societies. So, it's both, in Marx's terms, concrete labor, which is to say, a specific activity that transforms material in a determinate way for a very particular object, as well as abstract labor, that is, a means of acquiring the goods of others. In this regard, it is doing something that labor doesn't do in any other societies. Out of this very abstract insight, Marx develops the whole dynamic of capitalism. It seems to me that the central issue for Marx is not only that labor is being exploited—labor is exploited in all societies, other than maybe those of hunter-gatherers— but, rather, that the exploitation of labor is effected by structures that labor itself constitutes.

So, for example, if you get rid of aristocrats in a peasant-based society, it's conceivable that the peasants could own their own plots of land and live off of them. However, if you get rid of the capitalists, you are not getting rid of *capital*. Social domination will continue to exist in that society until the structures that constitute capital are gotten rid off.

PN: How can we account for Marx's statement that the proletariat is a revolutionary force without falling into a vulgar apprehension of its revolutionary character?
MP: It seems to me that the proletariat is a revolutionary force in several respects. First of all, the interaction of capital and proletariat is essential for the dynamic of the system. The proletariat is not *outside* of the system, the proletariat is integral to the system. The class opposition between capitalist and proletariat is not intended by Marx as a sociological picture of society, rather, it isolates that which is central to the dynamism of capitalism, which I think is at the heart of Marx's concerns.

Second, through its actions, the proletariat—and not because it wants to—contributes to the temporal and spatial spread of capital. That is to say, the proletariat is one of the driving forces behind globalization. Nevertheless, one of the differences, for Marx, between the proletariat and other oppressed groups, is that if the proletariat becomes radically dissatisfied with its condition of life, it opens up the possibility of general human emancipation. So it seems to me that one can't take the theory of the proletariat and just abstract it from the theory of capital, they are very much tied to one another.

BB: I would like to turn to the seminal thinker Georg Lukács, in particular his essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," first let me ask a general question, what do you take to be the most important insight of this essay?
MP: Well, Lukács takes the commodity form and he shows that it is not simply an economic category but that it is the category that can best explain phenomena like those that Weber tried to grapple with through his notion of *rationalization*, i.e., the increasing bureaucratization and rationalization of all spheres of life. Lukács takes that notion and provides a historical explanation of the nature of that process by grounding it in the commodity. That opened up a whole universe for me.

Lukács also brilliantly shows that the forms that Marx works out in *Capital* are simultaneously forms of consciousness as well as forms of social being. In this way Lukács does away with the whole Marxist base-super structure way of thinking about reality and thought. To use slightly different language, a category like commodity is both a social and a cultural category, so that the categories are subjective and objective categories at the same time.

BB: Could you explain your critique of Lukács's identification of the proletariat as the socio-historical subject?
MP: Lukács posits the proletariat as the Subject of history, and I think this is a mistake. A lot of people confuse subject and agency. When using the term "Subject," Lukács is thinking of Hegel's notion of the identical subject-object that, in a sense, generates the dynamic of history. Lukács takes the idea of the *Geist* and essentially says that Hegel was right, except that he presented is insight in an idealist fashion. The Subject does exist; however, it's the proletariat. The proletariat becomes, in this sense, the representative of humanity as a whole. I found it very telling, however, that in *Capital* when Marx does use Hegel's language referring to the *Geist* he doesn't refer to the proletariat, he refers to the category of *capital*. This made a lot of sense to me, because the existence of an ongoing historical dynamic signifies that people aren't real agents. If people were *real* agents, there wouldn't be a dynamic. That you can plot an ongoing temporal pattern means that there are constraints on agency. It seems to me that by calling capital the Subject, Marx argues for the conditions of possibility that humans can become the subjects of their own history, but that's with a small "s." Then there wouldn't be this ongoing dynamic, necessarily. Rather, change and development would be more the result, *presumably*, of political decision-making. So right now humans make history, but, as it were, behind their own back, i.e., they make history by creating structures that compel them to act in certain ways.

For Lukács, the proletariat is the Subject, which implies that it should realize itself (he is very much a Hegelian) whereas if Marx says capital is the Subject, the goal would be to do away with the Subject, to free humanity from an ongoing dynamic that it constitutes, rather than to realize the Subject.

PN: It has been our experience that "reification" is commonly understood as the mechanization of human life, expressing the loss of the qualitative dimension of human experience. In other words, reification is understood *solely* as an expression of unfreedom in capitalist society. However, the passage below, from "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," suggests to us that, for Lukács, the reification of the driving societal principle is also the site for class consciousness, in other words, that transformations in the objective dimension of the working class can *only* be grasped in reified form.

> The class meaning of these changes [i.e., the thoroughgoing capitalist rationalization of society as a whole] lies precisely in the fact that the bourgeoisie regularly transforms each new qualitative gain back onto the quantitative level of yet another rational calculation. Whereas for the proletariat, the 'same' development has a different class meaning: it means the abolition of the isolated individual, it means that the workers can become conscious of the social character of labor, it means that the abstract, universal form of the societal principle as it is manifested can be increasingly concretised and overcome. . . . (1) For the proletariat however, this ability to go beyond the immediate in search for the 'remoter' factors means the transformation of the objective nature of the objects of action. (2)

1. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p 171, emphasis in original
2. *History*, p 175, emphasis in original

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Issue # 3
March 2008

The
Platypus Review

www.platypus1917.org/theplatypusreview

The Platypus Review

The Editorial board of *The Platypus Review* is motivated by a sense that the very concepts of the "political" and the "Left" have become so inclusive as to be meaningless. The Review seeks to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches to these categories of thought and action—*not out of a concern with inclusiveness for its own sake*, but rather to provoke productive disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation.

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 an emancipatory politics today. Doing this work implies a reconsideration of what we mean by "the Left."

The editorial board wishes to provide an ongoing public forum wherein *questioning and reconsidering one's own convictions is not seen as a weakness, but as part of the necessary work of building a revolutionary politics*. We hope to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying the variety of positions and orientations currently represented on the political Left, in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that do not find a place within existing Left discourses, locally or internationally.

The unabridged editorial statement can be found at,
http://platypus1917.org/archive/article30

Submission guidelines

Articles can range in length from 500–1,000 words. We will consider longer pieces but prefer that they be submitted as proposals.
Please send articles, event calendar listing submissions, and any inquiries about this project to:

platypus1917webzine@yahoogroups.com

REVIEW

Angela Davis
"How does change happen?"

Chris Cutrone

ON THE FRIGID WINTER EVENING of Thursday, January 24, Angela Davis, a former Communist Party activist associated in the 1960s–70s with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party, and current Professor in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California at Santa Cruz, gave the annual George E. Kent lecture (in honor of the first black American tenured professor) at the University of Chicago Rockefeller Chapel, to an overflow audience from the campus and surrounding community. The title of Davis's talk was "How Does Change Happen?," and, with the looming February 5 Super Tuesday primary elections to determine Democratic Party candidacy for President of the United States, Davis took as her point of departure the current contest between the first effective candidacies by a woman and a black American, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Davis also noted, with wry irony, that the current Republican presidency of George W. Bush is by far the most "diverse" administration in U.S. history.

But Davis stated that such apparent present overcoming of historical social limitations of race and gender was "not the victory for which we have struggled." This observation of the disparity between social-political struggles and their outcomes formed a central, strong theme of Davis's talk. Davis elaborated this further through discussion of how "collective demands are transformed into individual benefits." In Davis's estimation, individual women and black and Latino Americans such as Clinton, Obama, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and Supreme Court Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Clarence Thomas and others have benefited from historically more collective struggles against racial and ethnic discrimination and restrictive gender roles, without greater social justice or equality or collective empowerment being achieved.

Thus Davis came to discuss the question that she said has been presented to her on many occasions by her students of whether the struggles of the 1960s had been "in vain." While Davis acknowledged that it could certainly appear to be so, she said that she did not wish to "believe" that this was indeed the case. So Davis raised the question of in what ways the 1960s New Left had succeeded, and how it had failed to achieve its goals.

In addressing such issues, Davis placed the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s–60s in greater historical context, pointing to the "cross-racial" struggles of the preceding 1920s–30s Left, for example the organizing of sharecroppers in Alabama by the Communist Party, which Davis said had laid the groundwork for the subsequent Civil Rights movement. This was the strongest point in Davis's talk. However, perhaps the weakest point came when Davis tried to show such continuity of background in her further historical narrative, after the 1960s, in which she contended that the Black Panther Party's free breakfast community programs for black schoolchildren had led to the implementation of U.S. federal government Head Start programs. Similarly, Davis's defense of affirmative action programs since the 1960s did not serve her intention of showing how demands for structural change and collective empowerment had been diverted into more depoliticized individual benefits, for affirmative action had never been an anti-poverty measure and had always been geared specifically to meet "middle class" demands against institutional discrimination.

This contrast in Davis's characterization of different historical moments of movements against anti-black racism in America, in the 1920s–30s and the 1960s–70s, up to the present, posed the issue of how adequately social-political struggles for improving the social conditions of black Americans and reforming American society can be understood as having been against "racism"—though of course such struggles involved confronting legal segregation and other historical forms of institutionalized racism. In her talk, Davis used the category of "race" unproblematically to reference an irreducible reality of "difference" that she took everyone to already recognize. Davis oscillated between conflicting prognoses of the present, whether anti-black racism has been ameliorated or worsened since the 1960s. The category of "race" works ambivalently in discussing two obvious changes since the 1960s: that legal and institutional racism as well as common racist attitudes have been overcome or diminished while social conditions for most black Americans have worsened. But this only begs the question, which should be at the core of trying to think about how political and social change can and does happen, of the very adequacy or lack of such categories as "race" and "racism" to address the problems facing black Americans and their greater social context today.

In the context of the global economic downturn since 1973, in which the average per capita purchasing power of American workers to meet their needs has decreased by as much as 30 percent while incomes have been massively distributed upwards to a small elite, the possibilities for the simultaneous if paradoxical outcome of overcoming legal and institutional racism while conditions for most black Americans have worsened, could be understood better in terms of changes in capitalism that have involved satisfying, even if in limited ways, historical demands for change in American society such as an end to "racial" (and gender) discrimination. In America, black "race" has coded for poverty and hence realities of socioeconomic "class," and anti-black racism has functioned to rationalize or at least naturalize poverty in the U.S., masking fundamental structural problems of American society, but this might function differently today than in the past, especially in light of the much-deplored separation of the concerns of the black "middle class" from the greater lot

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REVIEW

Iran
"Insights into its Religion, Politics and Power."

Pam C. Nogales C.

THE WELL ATTENDED EVENT was held inside of the new auditorium housed in the recently buit expansion of the Spertus Insitute on Michigan avenue. The talk adressed the political character of Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79. The evening's first presenter, Dr. David Menashri, an esteemed political adviser and director of the Center for Iranian Studies at Tel Aviv University, set the tone for the evening by commenting that he could not help but feel optimistic about the prospects of Iran. Menashri pointed to the burgeoning cultural activities taking place in the country, including a growing film industry and what he characterized as a resilient activists culture. The second presenter, visiting fellow Mehdi Khataji, did not share this sentiment, and, in the course of his introduction, Khataji presented an antinomical prespective on the legacy of this period. Over the course of their discussion what surfaced was a sober back and forth on the historical development of political power in Iran and its implications for the present.

Dr. Menashri opened his remarks by recounting the demands of the Iranian Revolution, that "there were two key issues for the Iranian people during this period, bread and freedom," both of which, in his estimation, have yet to be adequately addressed by subsequent or present-day political leadership, and are often mistakenly substituted for ideological demands. In delivering this statement Dr. Menashri momentarily shelved the political character of the revolution, and made no mention as to what the objective socio-economic conditions were in this period. In the absence of this context, the Islamic Revolution was presented as the sole expression of a popular demand by the exploited. However, although one could not deny that these sentiments were common among those who lived under the tyranny of the Shah, it was those who had materially benefited from the process of rapid capitalist modernizations during the 1960s and 70s who organized and led the revolution. Moreover, and in contradiction to what is commonly expected from the content of revolutionary demands, when faced with the prospect of an economic collapse, the leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatullah Ruhollah Khomeini, boldly stated, "Good. In the time of the Prophet, people ate only one date per day." This begs the question, was the Islamic Revolution really the necessary political expression of demands for "bread and freedom?"

Dr. Menashri then proceeded to question the ideological character of the revolution, "To what extent was the Islamic revolution really *Islamic*?" In answering this question, Menashri emphasized that the fundamentalist radicalism active during this period was only *one* of the political expressions of popular demands. Pursuing his point further, Menashri introduced the "healthier" tendency within this movement, a politics centered on "pragmatism," and argued that the real crux of the matter was, and continues to be, the tension between such a politics and one centered on ideological dogma. This conflict served to illustrate the factional divide in the nation between the orthodox Islamists, sometimes called the "crusaders," and the pragmatists, a divide that expresses the contradiction between the ideologically retrogressive character of an Iranian politics harking back to a pre-modern form of social organization, and modern international pressures which condition the actions of the political leadership. This problematic is a rehearsal of the kind of ideological ferment found in Iran during the lead-up to the Revolution, i.e., a regressive political imagination in response to the thoroughgoing capitalist development taking place in the country during the Shah's modernizing "White Revolution" in the decades leading up to the events of 1978–79.

The second presenter, Mehdi Khataji, argued that one could imagine the way in which this "pragmatism" in post-revolutionary Iran served as a poor vehicle for political change. Khataji emphasized how pragmatism in the context of the Islamic Revolution acted in ways that have actually worsened the conditions for a progressive politics. Khataji spoke of how this political tendency first came to a head at a moment in which the Islamic Republic was in jeopardy, both materially and ideologically. It was at this point, in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war, that this political tendency was given a renewed purchase. However, it was a controversial response to the crisis facing Iran's war-ravaged economy after 1988. In light of these conditions the pragmatists suggested that Iran should adopt a more conciliatory attitude toward the West, and argued that it was in the best interest of the Islamic Republic to allow some degree of privatization of the major industries. In so doing, the pragmatists were adhering exactly to what had been established as a top priority by Khomeini in the last years of his regime, to secure the practical survival of the *Islamic* Republic.

To illustrate, Khataji raised the formation of the Expediency Council, established in 1988 by the orders of Ayatollah Khomeini. It was formed to resolve the constant disagreements between the Parliament and the Council of Guardians, i.e., the appointed body of religious lawyers who ensure that all legislation is in conformity with Islamic laws. Both the introduction of this assembly body and the constitutional revisions made during this period were attempts to ameliorate the tension which arose in the post-revolutionary moment over what measures to take in the face of a potential national crisis. The mediation enabled by the Expediency Council allowed for a more efficient decision-making process. It did so, however, by deepening the autocratic power of the Supreme Guide, the unelected leader of the country, which endowed Khomeini with a more pervasive supervision and commanding influence over all dimensions of political rule. Was this furthering of the authoritarian character of the regime not a "pragmatic" response?

Overall, the pragmatists left a hazy effect in the years subsequent to 1988. Iran recoiled from the prospect of deal-

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MARCH 2008

The Platypus Review features a monthly calendar highlighting cultural, political and educational events of interest to Chicago leftists. Event reviews—open to submissions—accompany the calendar in each issue, providing a space for reports-back, follow-ups and critiques. Send events and review proposals to:

platypus1917webzine@yahoogroups.com

03/08 SATURDAY 7PM
The Platypus Affiliated Society presents: One State: A conversation with Raja Halwani and Richard Rubin, in conjunction with the exhibition *On Naji Al-Ali,* curated by Haseeb Ahmed.
Around The Coyote Gallery
1935½ W North Ave.
www.aroundthecoyote.org

03/09 SUNDAY 10AM
Rosa Luxemburg Revisited
Presentation by Peter Hudis
Third Unitarian Church
301 N Mayfield
News and Letters
www.newsandletters.org

03/09 SUNDAY 2PM
Chicago Greens Gathering
New World Resource Center
1300 N Western
312-719-5719 or 773-306-5402
Info: http://wesgreen@ripco.com

03/09 SUNDAY 4PM
Film: Breaking Ranks
Documentary on 4 AWOL United States soldiers in Canada
Organized by Logan Square Neighbors for Justice and Peace
Grace Church
3325 W Wrightwood
www.lsnjp.org

03/10 MONDAY 12PM
Human Rights:
Women & Children's Health in Rwanda
With Lucy Quacinella and Dr. Mardge Cohen
Presented by Children and Family Justice Center of Bluhm Legal Clinic
Northwestern University School of Law
Parrillo Courtroom, R155
www.law.northwestern.edu/humanrights

03/11 TUESDAY 4:30
New Women and Old Communities:
Gender and Coal Mining in Postwar Poland
Malgorzata Fidelis,
Assistant Professor of History at the University of Illinois
Presented by The Gender and Sexuality Studies Workshop
University of Chicago
5733 S. University Avenue
genderstudies.uchicago.edu/

03/11 TUESDAY 7:30PM
Ida: A Sword Among Lions
Paula Giddings discusses her new biography of Ida B. Wells, the first female African American newspaper publisher, co-founder of the NAACP, & anti-lynching activist
Presented by Women & Children First
5233 N Clark
www.womenandchildrenfirst.com

03/11 TUESDAY 7PM
The American Presidency
Presidents, The Press, and Public Perception
Cost: $10
$8 members
The Chicago History Museum
1601 N Clark
www.chicagohistory.org

03/11-14 TUE-FRI
On the Global Waterfront
Suzan Erem, the Charleston 5 Author, discusses her compelling new book on the Charleston, SC longshoremen's struggle to defend their union in the late 1990s
3/11 7 PM Oak Park Library, 834 N Lake St
3/12 5 PM UNITE! Here Hall, 333 S Ashland
3/13 6:30 PM DePaul Loop, 1 E Jackson
www.ontheglobalwaterfront.org

03/12 WEDNESDAY 4PM
Women, Activism, and Urban Environment
A discussion with LaDonna Redmond and Cheryl Johnson
Women's and Gender Studies Dept. Panel
Roosevelt University, Auditorium Building, R320
www.roosevelt.edu

03/12 WEDNESDAY 5PM
TJ Clark Lecture:
Picasso in the Later 1920s
Presented by Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities
Northwestern University
Pick-Laudati Auditorium of the Block Museum, 40 Arts Circle Drive
www.humanities.northwestern.edu/news/lectures.htm

03/12 WEDNESDAY 7:30PM
After Post-Zionism:
Building The Israel That Coud Be
With Hillel Halkin
Presented by Crown Family Center for Jewish Studies
Northwestern University
Pick-Staiger Concert Hall
www.wcas.northwestern.edu/jewish-studies/

03/13 THURSDAY 7:30PM
The Legacy of the "Ultraleft," Part II:
Workerists and Gauchistes around 1968
Mess Hall, 6932 N Glenwood
49th St Underground, Finding Our Roots, Industrial Workers of the World
www.49underground.org

03/14 FRIDAY 3PM
Women's Internationalism and Orientalism:
Indochinese Women's Conferences of 1971
Judy Tzu-Chun Wu of Ohio State University examines the formation of multi-racial and transnational women's alliances
Newberry Library, 60 W Walton

03/14 FRIDAY 3PM
Jeffrey Helgeson of University of Illinois at Chicago: Will Our People be Any Better off After this War?
Spaces of Opportunity in Black Chicago, 1938-1947
Newberry Library, 60 W Walton

03/15 SATURDAY 2PM
Civic Cinema: King Corn
Screening and Discussion with Claire Pentecost and Ladonna Redmond
Chicago Cultural Center, 77 East Randolph Street Claudia Cassidy Theater (2nd Floor)
Free and open to the public. Reservations are required and can be made by emailing events@prairie.org or by calling 312.422.5580. www.thepublicsquare.org.

03/18 TUESDAY 7PM
The American Presidency
Beyond the White House: The Presidency Revealed Through Presidential Travel
Cost: $10; $8 members
The Chicago History Museum, 1601 N Clark
www.chicagohistory.org

03/19 WEDNESDAY 5PM
6+ women's art collective talk
The collective has been developing projects in and about Palestine for two years.
Upcoming exhibition, March 12- April 25
Columbia College's Glass Curtain Gallery
www.6plus.org

03/19 WEDNESDAY 6PM
Stop Funding War and Occupation!
Troops Home Now!
Chicago Iraq War Protest will meet at Federal Plaza on Adams & Dearborn
http://chicagomassaction.org

03/20 THURSDAY 6PM
The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order
Discussion with Parag Khanna
University of Chicago
International House, Home Room
1414 East 59th Street
Chicago, IL 60637
Free Registration
http://www.ccfr.org

03/22 SATURDAY 8PM
Fundraiser for Arrested Anti War Protesters
Decima Musa, 1901 S. Loomis
$20 suggested donation
8th Day Center For Justice

03/25 TUESDAY 7PM
The American Presidency
Heroes, Statesmen, Philanderers, and Fools: The American Presidency in Popular Culture
Cost: $10; $8 members
The Chicago History Museum, 1601 N Clark
www.chicagohistory.org

03/26 WEDNESDAY 5:30PM
War and Peace in the Middle East:
Lessons for American Leadership
InterContinental Hotel
505 N Michigan Ave
Young Professionals $10
Members: $20
Nonmembers: $30
http://www.ccfr.org/

03/28-30 FRI-SUN
Midwest Social Forum
Spring Organizers Retreat
Organizing Communities Across Boundaries, An Organizing Teach-in.
Wonderland Camp and Conference Center
Camp Lake, Wisconsin (near Kenosha)
registration deadline: 3/14
www.mwsocialforum.org

03/29 SATURDAY 10AM
Tamms Year Ten Campaign:
Organizing Meeting
Saints of Humboldt building
2638 W Division
yearten.wordpress.com

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The Platypus Affiliated Society
School of the Art Institute Student Government
University of Chicago Student Government

PLATYPUS ANNOUNCEMENTS

Marxist reading group meetings
Sundays, 1pm
The School of the Art Institute of Chicago
112 S Michigan Ave, RM920
University of Chicago
Reynolds Club
5706 S. University Ave.
basement conference room 019

03/09
Adorno-Marcuse debate on the 1960s New Left
Readings from their 1969 correspondence

03/23
Leszek Kolakowski, "The Concept of the Left" (1968)

04/13
What was the New Left?
Readings by C. Wright Mills (1960) and Carl Ogelsby (1969)

On-going weekly coffee breaks
Every Wednesday 4–6PM
Caffe Baci
20 N. Michigan Ave.

Film screenings
Screening and discussion series on the 1960s Left and its problematic legacy today

Columbia Revolt (1968)

Finally Got the News: The Detroit Revolutionary Union Movement League of Revolutionary Black Workers (1970)

Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin (2003)

Rebels with a Cause (2000)

The Weather Underground (2002)

Co-sponsored by the Students for a Democratic Society and Platypus

Schedule of screenings and locations at:
http://platypus.uchicago.edu

Issue # 2 retraction
The editorial board of *The Platypus Review* regrets that an incorrect version of "The Failure Of Pakistan" was printed in the February issue. We would like to apologize to the authors of "The Failure Of Pakistan" for this unfortunate oversight. Readers should refer to our website, *www.platypus1917.org/archive/article72* for the correct version.

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of black Americans since the 1960s. In her talk, Davis missed an opportunity to challenge and educate her audience in favor of calibrating her comments to what she seemed to perceive to be her audience's conceptions of social-political problems. But such conceptions are in fact the effects of ideas like Davis's that bear the undigested legacy of failed politics on the Left since the 1960s. As Adolph Reed pointed out in an article on the Hurricane Katrina disaster, "The Real Divide" (*The Progressive*, November, 2005), "As a political strategy, exposing racism is wrongheaded and at best an utter waste of time," a distraction from addressing the necessary socioeconomic and political problems facing black Americans.

Davis's talk lacked a sense of how capitalism as a specific problem and context for social politics subordinates and molds issues like racism historically. But the questions Davis raised in her talk nevertheless pointed in directions of how such an understanding of capitalism might help overcome the apparent paradoxes of changes in the problem of racism since the 1960s.

In the 1960s, Davis had studied with members of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, in Frankfurt, Germany with Theodor Adorno and subsequently in San Diego with Herbert Marcuse. Adorno had discouraged Davis from leaving her studies to participate in student activism while Marcuse had encouraged this. (1) But we might say retrospectively today that had Davis heeded Adorno's advice instead and given herself the opportunity for a more thorough critical investigation of the role of changes in capitalism in how historical changes such as the transformation and amelioration of anti-black racism could be understood more adequately and hence politically effectively, then Angela Davis, along with other radical intellectuals like her, could have contributed to better thinking and politics that might have helped us avoid the present situation in which one is left with the unsatisfying choice between proclaiming the historical end of racism and trying to address present social-political problems with antiquated and inadequate categories like "race." **IP**

1. Angela Y. Davis, "Marcuse's Legacies" (1998), in John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb, eds., *Herbert Marcuse: a critical reader* (Routledge, 2004), 46-47.

Introduction to the history of the Left

Changes in the meaning of class struggles

Platypus Historians Group

WHY DO WE NEED A "HISTORY OF THE LEFT?"—Platypus differs from other tendencies and organizations on the Left to the extent that we find it necessary and desirable to reexamine the history of the Left to help understand problems on the Left in the present. For focusing on the history of the Left and its problems, Platypus has been accused by a variety of Marxists of obscuring the "fundamental social divide" of the "class struggle" of the "proletariat" vs. the "bourgeoisie," in favor of emphasizing the ideological and political difference between the Right and the Left. (1)

A central insight of Platypus is that the existence of class society and its forms of oppression and exploitation do not necessarily generate, in response, an effective let alone emancipatory politics. The "materialist" conception of the history of the Left, offered by "orthodox" Marxists, claims that the Left emerges directly from struggles against oppression, whether of a "class" nature or otherwise. We consider this to be inadequate, and, moreover, a stumbling block for understanding what it would mean to struggle for social emancipation in the present.

The first fact that must be addressed by anyone trying to understand the history of the Left is that, although class society is thousands of years old, and, in this sense, one may indeed claim in the words of Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* that "the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle," such "struggles" either led nowhere or led to new social forms of oppression, that may, at best, have contained within them the seeds of further historical development. But it is only within the last couple of hundred years, since the late 18th Century (where our subsequent series on the history of the Left will begin)—and so in the history of *capital*—that the possibility of getting beyond *all* forms of social oppression has been put forward by mass social movements as a this-worldly possibility—and not as a utopian philosophical ideal or as the vision of a religiously promised Messianic future. The modern working class is not merely an object of society, like the slaves of the past were, but is an agent in the history of capital. This is where the "Left" and its history come in.

The history of capital may be seen as having a dual character: On the one hand, it opens up new possibilities for human degradation, for example, its stimulation of technical "progress" even threatens the very survival of the human species and its environment. But, on the other hand, it opens up a potential realm of human freedom that no previous stage of history could have offered. Thus socialism will either fulfill the promise of the best aspects of modern, (historically) "bourgeois" and "capitalist" culture, in socialism, or else the potential barbarism that always lurks under the surface of even the most successful phases of modern society threatens to render an emancipatory anticapitalist politics, or "Left," impossible.

The history of a single name can illustrate the problem of understanding the history of the Left: Spartacus, the Spartakusbund, and the Spartacist League (U.S.). While Spartacus led a massive slave revolt against the Roman Republic in the 1st century BCE, his revolt to free all slaves was historically doomed to failure. As such, Spartacus is a classically tragic historical figure. The fate of Spartacus's revolt revealed the (historical) truth of his society. While his struggle was heroic and admirable, it was incapable of being successful for reasons of social structure and historical development. (In a similar way, one may admire the Warsaw ghetto uprising against the Nazis in WWII, although, as they themselves knew, their struggle was just as hopeless, but for other, more contingent reasons than for Spartacus: we can sympathize with their similar attempts to "do the right thing," no matter how "impractical" it proved to be.)

With the Spartakusbund of the radical internationalist Marxist German Social Democrats Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht during first World War 1914–19, however, the tragedy is of a completely different order. Here the tragedy is not that of a necessary failure but of an *unnecessary* one. The tragedy of Spartacus is that he and his fellow slaves could not alter the structure of the social-historical development of Roman society. The tragedy of the Spartakists, who were crushed during the failed German Revolution at the end of WWI 1918–19, is that if they had succeeded the pattern of modern history would have been radically different than what came to be. It is the unnecessary character of the resulting outcomes of Nazism and Stalinism that makes the German Spartakists' defeat in 1919 so tragic.

With the Trotskyist group the Spartacist League/U.S., founded in 1966 and named after the German Spartakists who were in turn named after the leader of the great slave revolt, we come to be in a late, tertiary phase in the history of the Left. Unlike its predecessor namesakes, the Spartacist League has encountered no great defeat through which the truth of its historical moment could be revealed, for the SL has never been in a position to influence history at all. Its politics are rather the virtual politics of a propaganda group —like all other sectarian "Marxist" groups of the late 20th Century—and hence one can judge such groups only by the content of their *ideas*, in the absence of their effective historical action. This is where Platypus's emphatically theoretical and ideological project of *critique* of the Left and development of critical historical *consciousness* of the Left might come into play.

For "orthodox Marxists," the meaning of a Leftist politics comes down to a belief in a *deus absconditus*—a "hidden god"—the "class struggle," which will, in the end, supposedly force the working class to take up its Historic Role. In the meantime all that such "Marxists" need to do is "hold the line" and repeat themselves like automata until someone, someday listens. This is called "historical"—or even "revolutionary"—"continuity." In this way, the "progressive politics" is understood in terms of struggles against oppression instead of in terms of social *emancipation*.

Platypus rejects the assumption that "resistance" is necessarily a good thing. Nor, alas, can we take comfort, as our "Marxist" predecessors could, in the "struggles" of "the working class." We do not believe that the problems of the Left over the last few decades, since the 1960s, can be understood as the result of "defeats" like that suffered by Luxemburg's Spartakusbund in 1919. Platypus's focus on questions of historical "regression" reveals a radically different problem and explanation from that of "defeat," although conditioned by it. We argue that the greatest problems the Left faces—including the prospect of its own extinction—arise from within the Left itself and are deeply rooted in its own history. Indeed, for us, the Right is a secondary phenomenon and its victories are the result of *failures* of the Left. Hence our focus is primarily on criticizing the existing "Left" and the history of its problematic self-understanding, rather than "fighting the Right." We do not share the false optimism that the "struggle continues," but face the stark reality that the struggles that defined the historical Left ended a while ago, in failure. We try to understand the meaning of this historical *discontinuity* for the present.

In our next and first proper installment of this series on the history of the Left, we will turn to the historical origins of the "Left" in the late 18th Century. **IP**

1. See, for example: Spartacus Youth Club (Chicago), "Platypus: Pseudo-'Marxist,' Pro-Imperialist, Academic Claptrap" (November 6, 2007).

The problem of nostalgia in Todd Haynes's *I'm Not There*

Ryan Hardy

***I'M NOT THERE* IS THE MOST RECENT** effort by American director Todd Haynes, who in his relatively short career has progressed from his notorious early effort, *Superstar*, through a celebrated period as an icon of the New Queer Cinema, and onto mainstream Hollywood success with the Oscar-nominated *Far From Heaven* and now *I'm Not There*. Having previously tackled David Bowie in *Velvet Goldmine*, with *I'm Not There* Haynes turns his lens on one of the most iconic American musicians of the 20th century, Bob Dylan.

Haynes was clearly aware of the challenges involved in encapsulating the life and work of Dylan into a single film, and accordingly *I'm Not There* is divided into six interspersed sections involving six different actors playing characters based, in different ways, on the life and music of Bob Dylan. The film's casting choices were somewhat controversial, especially the inclusion of Australian actress Cate Blanchett and the young black actor Marcus Carl Franklin in the role of Bob Dylan.

Despite such concerns, the choice of six diverse and talented actors allows Haynes to take a very wide view of both Dylan and his times. Each segment follows a different period of time, with some overlap. The "Woody Guthrie" segment, starring Franklin, is set in 1959 and the "Billy The Kid" (Richard Gere) segment appears to be set even earlier than that. Three segments, which for me are the most important, deal primarily with the 1960s, those of "Jude Quinn" (Blanchett), "Robbie Clark" (Heath Ledger) and "Jack Rollins" (Christian Bale). The sixth and least prominent segment, featuring British actor Ben Whishaw as "Arthur Rimbaud," functions as a narrative device and lacks an obvious temporality.

I'm Not There is an excellent film. All six leads are very strong, and Cate Blanchett in particular is outstanding. As a director, Haynes confirms his mastery of technique and his deeply satisfying attention to detail He meticulously and effectively recreates several iconic moments from Dylan's life and ensures a wonderful visual diversity

in the film. From the stark black and white of the "Jude Quinn" segments, echoing both D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* and Fellini's *8½*, to the lush nature photography of "Woody Guthrie" and "Billy the Kid," *I'm Not There* is a genuinely beautiful film. But it is a beautiful film with a problem: nostalgia.

To some extent this problem must have been unavoidable, as *I'm Not There* is set primarily in the recent past and is fairly obviously a celebration of Dylan's life and music. It would be slightly obtuse to suggest that Haynes falls victim to nostalgia simply by making a film like this. Nostalgia is not simply a fondness for a past epoch, it also reflects a negative attitude towards the present. And Haynes's view of the present does seem essentially negative.

This is shown by the fact that the film's three major narrative strands, although presented in a non-linear way, all seem to follow an essentially downward trajectory. After his triumphal arrival in England, Jude Quinn eventually dies in a random motorcycle accident. Jack Rollins, once "Folk's Troubadour of Conscience" flees into obscurity and re-emerges, in the seventies, as a preacher of a terrifyingly apocalyptic brand of Christianity. Robbie Clark, whose storybook courtship with the exotic Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg) coincides with his rise to stardom ends up a rough-looking divorced adulterer. As with Quinn and Rollins, Clark finds his nadir in the seventies. The other three characters, less overtly based on Dylan, meet more ambiguous fates.

The future for Haynes's sixties characters is dark. Due to a complex but fundamentally positive depiction of the sixties, *the film* is not, overall, a dark film. Across its varying storylines, *I'm Not There* presents a dazzling, seductive impression of America in the sixties. Haynes captures it all, from Jude Quinn's Carnaby Street suits to actual documentary footage of the Greenwich Village folk scene and the Vietnam War. Haynes solidifies this impression with the inclusion of other sixties icons, such as the Beatles and Allen Ginsberg, as well as thinly-disguised caricatures like "Alice Fabian" (obviously Joan Baez, played for great comedic effect by Julianne Moore).

Yet beyond the fashion and beyond even the music, politics are central to Haynes's vision of the sixties. Even when played for laughs, as in a bizarre scene depicting Black Panther founders Bobby Seale and Huey Newton debating Dylan's "Ballad of a Thin Man," the heavily-politicized atmosphere of the sixties pervades *I'm Not There*. And it is politics that seem central to Haynes's apparent nostalgia for the era he depicts. Like many people—young and old—Haynes seems to feel keenly the lack of "revolutionary" politics today, seemingly so common in the sixties. The Black Panthers, the anti-war and civil rights movements and the rise of women's liberation are all depicted in *I'm Not There* as defining the spirit of those times.
Although Haynes finds much to cheer in the sixties, he is alert to both the contradictions of these movements—whether in the middle-class naiveté of the young folk enthusiasts or Robbie Clark's puerile misogyny butting against his wife's moderate feminism He also shows the inherently conservative nature of the nostalgic impulse. Haynes tackles this issue head on early in the Jack Rollins narrative, through fictitious folk promoter Morris Bernstein (Peter Friedman): "There was a certain tendency in the folk music for nostalgia about the Depression, and the radicalism that came out of it." By identifying the folly of nostalgizing a relatively dark period in American history, Haynes demonstrates that he is aware he may be charged with doing the same thing, albeit with a period marked by political upheaval and imperialist war rather than economic crisis and social dislocation. Unfortunately, by evincing a fundamentally positive view of the sixties and a bleak view of the present Haynes does indeed fall into the trap of nostalgia.

The fundamental yet entirely understandable problem is that that given the choice between the tumult of the sixties and the grim malaise of the present, Haynes, like many others, would happily return to the former. In the face of our current era's seemingly limited possibilities for meaningful progress, it might be only natural to retreat into an imagined version of the past. It would be difficult indeed to argue that present conditions suggest more revolutionary possibility than those of the sixties, and the threat of nostalgia should not deny the possibility of drawing a distinction between the two eras in the hopes of unearthing some contemporary hope. But Haynes does not and perhaps cannot make this leap, and so we are left with the bleak fates met by Clark, Quinn and Rollins; if their future is our present, then, for Haynes, it's no future at all.

But it would be unfair to leave Haynes mired in the past; *I'm Not There* hints at some sort of future possibility. Following Quinn's death, Haynes closes with the fate of "Billy The Kid," a character who inhabits a timeless setting that is definitely not the sixties. As Billy rides a train away from his rural hideout he discovers the dusty guitar case of Woody Guthrie, emblazoned with the slogan "this machine kills fascists." As he dusts it off, he delivers the final lines of the film: "It's like you got yesterday, today and tomorrow all in the same room. There's no telling what can happen." **IP**

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ing with the West and instead turned to Russia and China. Thus, it continues to work with a rigid state-centric model, away from of any neoliberal considerations that may have ensued from dealing with the West. The reforms put forth in the decades after the death of Khomeini in 1989 could hardly budge the repressive apparatus of the established order, one that continues to go unchallenged, and is able to renew itself, if needed, by means of agreements with international powers that turn a blind eye to insular repression.

It should be noted however, that the United States was not at all interested in pursuing the democratization of Iran. During the years of the Iran-Iraq war, the U.S. jockeyed back and forth between establishing ties with the Iranian mullahs—on the basis of a shared interest, i.e., combating the Left—and funding groups like the Front for the Liberation of Iran. The latter was an extreme right wing group that fought for the restoration of the Shah, and whose leader had presided over the reversion of Iranian oil to foreign control after the CIA-backed coup in 1953. The U.S. pursued all of this while engaging in arms dealings with both Iran and Iraq, the proceeds of which were diverted to the Nicaraguan contras. This duplicitous endeavor came apart at the end of 1986 when one faction of the Iranian government leaked the story, and the Regan administration turned its attention, and support, to the Iraqi regime. Faced with this horrific history, one can't help to ask, what could have happened if the United States would have pushed for progressive reforms in a country like Iran, or Iraq, instead of propping authoritarian regimes? Moreover, what kind of alternative role can a world hegemon play when faced with such repressive politics such as Iran's?

In the face of Dr. Menashri's formulation, "Whenever there has been a clash between ideology and interest, in almost all cases interest won over ideology," one finds it difficult to conceive of what an effective politics may consist of, given this anemic framework of what is possible institutionally in Iran. It became painfully apparent by the end of the evening that this talk hinged on the presumption that imagining a politics outside of what already exists would result in pure abstraction, a pipe dream without a practical purchase. But perhaps the most telling symptom of the absence of a Left as an international force was the bleak prospect of imagining a politics that could challenge the international context, in which such isolated practices of political repression as those of the Islamic Republic of Iran are able to endure. Whether the realities of global capital could or should be challenged by a progressive political force, to the benefit of people in Iran, was completely off the table.

In a 2005 interview conducted by Danny Postel, Fred Halliday addressed the role of liberals in Iran before the revolution by saying, "In any historical materialist perspective, the 'liberals' reflected a more progressive position than the reactionary ideas and policies of Khomeini... The Left's mistake was not to see this; it was an error comparable to that of the German Communists who, in the early 1930s, allied with the fascists to destroy the social-democrats." In light of this formulation, and in the face of the present geo-political situation, i.e., in the absence of a progressive internationalist movement, what kind of political position can the Left have in regards to liberal political demands in a place like Iran? This problem raises meaningful questions in regards to the content of progressive politics, that is, it calls for pushing beyond a political response constrained by the opposition of "ideology" vs. "interest." **IP**

Ba'athism and the history of the Left in Iraq

Violence and politics

Ian Morrison

SINCE THE 1960s the saturation of brutality and violence in Iraq has caused considerable confusion among Leftists in regards to both its political meaning and causes. One cannot fully understand the character of Saddam Hussein's Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party without taking into account that it achieved political power by systematically killing off the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and quelling other political dissent with acts of extreme cruelty. The eight year battle of attrition instigated by Hussein, known as the Iran-Iraq War, caused over half a million Iraqi deaths, and the ethnic cleansing campaigns directed against the Kurds resulted in countless more. It is estimated that during the 1988 Anfal Campaign alone over 100,000 Kurds were massacred. In addition to the many catastrophic events that mark the history of Ba'athist society, it is perfectly clear that Hussein's one-party-state was maintained through the use of relentless day-to-day violence directed against its citizens.

Kanan Makiya's groundbreaking study of Iraqi Ba'athism, *Republic of Fear*, documents instances of institutionalized violence used to terrorize Iraqi society. In the 1998 introduction, Makiya recounts a law passed in the chaotic aftermath of the first Gulf War mandating that the state brand the mark of an X on the forehead of repeat offenders of crimes such as theft and desertion; the first offense of such crimes was punished by amputation of the hand. When a doctor who performed amputations for the state was murdered by one his patients the medical community was outraged and called a strike. However, after the state threatened to cut off the ear of any doctor who refused to enforce the law, the protest was called off. (1)

Iraqi Ba'athism, and the struggle against it, continues to confound today's Anti-War movement. Ramsey Clark, former United States Attorney General under President Lyndon B. Johnson and founder of ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism), exemplifies the problematic stances that the movement has assumed. In 2004 Clark volunteered to defend Hussein at his trial before the Iraqi Special Tribunal, speaking out against the unfairly "demonized Saddam Hussein." The sight of a prominent opponent of the Iraq War publicly defending Hussein should have caused serious alarm among the Left for the obvious reason that it directly challenged solidarity between the Anti-War movement and the Iraqi Left, which struggled against dictatorship for three decades.

The ideological roots of Ba'athism were formulated by its founding leader Michel 'Aflaq, who during his education at the Sorbonne, first developed his political eclecticism. His speeches and writings often contradict each other but the most pronounced feature of 'Aflaq's thinking is his appropriation of Johann von Herder's notions of the "soul" or "spirit" of the Nation, which he imbued with Arab/Islamic chauvinism. This is coupled with a revision of Lenin's theory of Imperialism in what has become a typical formulation since the period of de-colonization. 'Aflaq writes, "contrary to what happened in the West, the revolt of the Eastern peoples carries in the first place a liberatory humanitarian character, because it is directed against Imperialism... and whereas oppression in the West falls only on classes, the East is made up of Nations that are oppressed." (2) 'Aflaq carefully mitigates the issue of domestic class conflict; he accounts for internal strife by attributing its cause to an omnipotent external power. The notion of an uniquely "Arab socialism" coupled with nationalism also helped fuel powerful forms of racism, by galvanizing anti-Semitism and helping justify the campaigns against the Kurds. Anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism became common scapegoats for social ills often despite any logical relation to the problems in question. It should be noted that such theories created a clear divide between the Ba'athists and the Communist Parties, as the latter sought to base their politics in class struggle, domestic and international.

In the key moments after the 1958 revolution, when the ICP was at the height of its power, two paradigmatic conflicts between the Communists and the Nationalists greatly undermined the ICP's potential as a progressive, unifying political force. Social animosities overflowed when the ICP sought to suppress a pan-Arab revolt in Mosel, in which political activity decayed into ethnic and civil violence. The Iraqi historian Hanna Batatu wrote that during the Mosel conflict, "It seemed as if all social cement dissolved and all political authority vanished. Individualism, breaking out, waxed into anarchy. The struggle between nationalists and communists had released age-old antagonism, investing them with an explosive force and carrying them to the point of civil war." (3) The outbreak of violence first in Mosel, then in Kirkut, where Kurdish members of the ICP lashed out against their traditional rivals the Turcomans, played an essential part in legitimizing the Ba'athists.

After these two events it was reported that communists had killed civilians and committed acts of torture. In a statement just after the Kirkut incident the ICP wrote:

> *In well-known articles published a long time ago we stressed that "the method is the touch-stone." But is seems that there is a deliberate intent to confuse this correct and firm attitude... with the impetuosities of some simple nonparty masses...We utterly condemn any transgression against innocent people.... or the harming or torture even of traitors.... We condemn theses methods on principle....*(4)

Nevertheless the political regression was in full swing such that the ICP's follies allowed the Ba'athists to capitalize on the populist violence and disarray. In February of 1963 the Ba'athists mounted their first coup (with smaller numbers than the ICP had in 1959), and launched an effort to liquidate the ICP. Reflecting on the forms of violence directed at the ICP in 1963 Batatu writes that,

> *It is, of course, possible that the reaction of the Ba'athists might not have been as fierce, had the Communists been "prudent" or, if one prefers, "timid," and offered no resistance on the day of the coup. But in truth the violence of 1963 is largely explicable by the violence of 1959, which, on a close reading of history, certainly did not mark a new departure in the political life of Iraq....If one is inclined to attribute the violence, at least in part, to doctrinal influences, then one would have also to explain how these doctrines happened to arise, and why minds or masses of people came to be susceptible to them, in both the immediate Iraqi and the more distant and wider contexts.* (5)

The violent disarray and instability proved to be the optimal breeding ground for the Ba'ath Party. It is incumbent upon the Left today to understand the roots of such violence, and to look at how these doctrines arise and realize their political outcomes.

Furthermore, it is important to take a step back, and look at how the Left emerged in Iraq, because there is no doubt that the Left is in a period of rebuilding. Historically, the Iraqi Left emerged in last the years of World War I. At that time, Husain ar-Rahhal, known as the father of Iraqi Marxism, was studying at a German high school in Berlin. According to party lore, ar-Rahhal, sitting in a Berlin pastry shop, looked on as workers began to fill the streets during the Spartakist Uprising in January 1919. His fellow schoolmates and political radicals introduced him to *Die Freiheit*, one of the Social Democratic Party newspapers. When he returned to Iraq he began reading *The Labor Monthly*, which was published by Palme Dutt, an Indian born member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and a fierce opponent of the British Empire. Ar-Rahhal enthusiasm for theory led him to start the first Marxist study circle in Iraq at the Baghdad School of Law.

Ar-Rahhal's circle became one of a plethora of Iraqi groups that emerged in the 1920s. Some groups stemmed directly from the Second International, others from the Communist Committee of Syria and Lebanon. Two former Massachusetts Institute of Technology students founded another key circle. The various groups solidified during the boycott of the British owned Baghdad Electrical Light and Power Co. when they focused their energy towards reforming and reclaiming civil society.

The early catalysts of the Left, labor reform and theoretical fermentation, are the demands of our time. In the post-Saddam era it is absolutely essential that the Left discern between progressive and reactionary forms of political action, as well as anti-Americanism, in their call for immediate troop withdrawal. As the International Secretary of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, Hadi Saleh said, "Extremists who target trade unionists kill them under the notion that they are collaborating with a state created by the Americans... It's a risk for all civil society organizations." The fate of Saleh, who was tortured and killed by reactionary-sectarian forces, shows how high the stakes are. (6) Groups like US Labor Against the War, who have brought Iraqi labor organizers to America and fought to repeal the law against unions in Iraq, demonstrate that solidarity can be tangible and progressive. The anti-war movement desperately needs to hold fast to its self-proclaimed universal principles, acts of solidarity, demands for labor reform and calls for national reconciliation if it is to be a force for progressive politics. **IP**

1. *Republic of Fear* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), ix-xi.

2. Quoted in *Republic*, 243.

3. *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A study of the Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'thists and Free Officers* (London: SAQI, 2004), 866.

4. Quoted in *The Old Social Classes*, 921.

5. *The Old Social Classes*, 993-4.

6. Quoted in David Bacon, "Iraqi Unions Defy Privatization," *The Progressive*, October 2005.

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The passage above seems to imply that for Lukács class consciousness is not imminent to the experiential dimension of labor, i.e., that a Leftist politics is not an immediate product of concrete labor, rather, class-consciousness emerges out of the dissolution of this immediacy. From this, we take Lukács to mean that reification is double-sided, in that it is both the ground for a potential overcoming of the societal principle under capital, *and* an expression of unfreedom. It's both.

BB: In other words, reification is not really a structure that has to be done away with so that outlets of freedom and action can emerge, but it's actually the site, the location, from which action is possible in capitalist modernity.

PN: That said, in what way does a one-sided appropriation of Lukács's category lose hold of its critical purchase?

MP: Well, this is a nice reading...I'm not sure it's Lukács. But that may be beside the point. If you read that longer quote, "the bourgeoisie regularly transforms each new qualitative gain back onto the quantitative level of yet another rational calculation," for Lukács *that's* reification. What you've done here is taken the notion of reification and you've come to something I actually would be very sympathetic to, which is the idea that capitalism is *constitutive* as well constraining. It opens possibilities as well as closes them. Capitalism itself is double-sided. I'm not sure whether Lukács really has that, but that's neither here nor there.

Lukács emphasizes the abolition of the isolated individual, and this is important for me. There is a sense in Lukács that the proletariat *doing proletarian labor* could exist in a free society, and I don't think this is the case for Marx. Marx's idea of the social individual is a very different one than simply the opposition of the isolated individual and the collectivity. For Marx the social individual is a person who may be working individually, but their individual work depends on, and is an expression of, the wealth of society as a whole. This is opposed to, let's say, proletarian labor, which *increasingly*, as it becomes deskilled, becomes a *condition* of the enormous wealth of society, but is in a sense, *its opposite on the level of the work itself.* "The richer the society, the poorer the worker." Marx is trying to imagine a situation in which the wealth of the whole and the wealth of each—*wealth* in the sense of capacities and the ability to act on those capacities—are congruent with one another. I am not sure Lukács has that conception... I'm not sure.

BB: In some ways I think that the second quote does bring into the field certain issues with the projection of proletariat labor *continuing*... It depends on interpretation I suppose, because he says, "for the proletariat however, this ability to go beyond the immediate, " which is enabled through a process of reification, "in search of the 'remoter' factors means the *transformation of the objective nature of the objects of action*," now, if "object" is solely taken to mean the material product of concrete labor, it would be against Lukács's sense of the commodity, by which, as we've already established, he means both a category of subjectivity *and* objectivity, so the object of action is also the proletariat itself.

MP: Yes, but you'll notice in the last third of Lukács's essay, which is about revolutionary consciousness, there is no discussion at all of the development of capital. Everything is the subjective development of the proletariat as it comes to self-consciousness. That process is not presented as historical. What is changing in terms of capital—other than crises—is bracketed. There is a dialectic of identity whereby awareness that one is an object generates the possibility of becoming a subject. For me, in a funny way, in the third part of the reification essay history comes to a standstill, and history becomes the subjective history of the Spirit, i.e., the proletariat becoming aware of itself as a Subject, not just object. But there is very little—there's *nothing*—on the conditions of possibility for the abolition of proletariat labor. None. There is no discussion of that at all. So, history freezes in the last third of the essay.

PN: Is it possible to struggle to overcome capitalism other than through necessary forms of misrecognition that this organization of social life generates? In other words: If consciousness in capitalist modernity is rooted in phenomenal forms that are the necessary expressions of a deep structure which they simultaneously mask, then how can mass-based Left-wing anti-capitalist politics be founded on anything other than *progressive forms of misrecognition*, i.e., as opposed to reactionary forms of misrecognition, ranging from populist critiques of finance capital, to chauvinist critiques of globalization, to localist or isolationist critiques of centralized political and economic power?

MP: That's a good question. I don't have an easy answer, so maybe I'll start by being very modest. It seems to me that the first question isn't, "what is *correct* consciousness?", but, rather, "what is *not adequate*?" That in itself would help any anti-capitalist movement immeasurably. To the degree to which movements are blind to the larger context of which they are a part, they necessarily are going to generate consequences that are undesirable for them as well.

Let me give you an example from liberal politics. I was thinking of this recently. After 1968 when Hubert Humphrey, who had been Lyndon Johnson's vice-president, was basically given the throne, the progressive base of the Democratic Party—who where very much opposed to this kind of machine politics—attempted to institute a more democratic process of the selection of the candidate for the party. It was then that the primaries really came into their own—you had primaries before, but they weren't nearly as important. The problem is that in a situation like the American one, where you do not have government financing of elections, primaries simply meant that only people who have a lot of money have any chance. The consequences of this push by the progressive base of the Democratic party were profoundly anti-democratic, in many respects machine politics were more democratic. So what you have now is a bunch of millionaires running in all the primaries, or people who spend all of their time getting money from millionaires. Now, there was nothing the matter with the idea of wanting, within the liberal framework, to have a more democratic process to choose candidates. The context was such however, that the reforms that they suggested rendered the process more susceptible to non-democratic influence. The gap between intention and consequence that results from a blindness to context could be extended to many parts of the Left, of course.

PN: You give specific attention to the rise and fall of the Soviet Union in your work with reference to the "temporal structuring and restructuring of capitalism in the 20th century." Now, I understood "temporal structuring and restructuring" as an indication of how the political dimension mediates the temporal dynamic of capital, affecting the way that capitalism appears subsequently.

In this sense, both forms of state-centrism, the Western Fordist-Keynesian synthesis and the Soviet Union, may in fact look the same because they were both, in one way or another, responding to a crisis in capital. Could you speak about the character of this political mediation?

MP: Yes, they were responses to a crisis. I think one of the reasons why the Soviet model appealed to many people outside of the West, was that the Soviet Union really developed a mode of creating national capital in a context of global capital very different from today. Developing national capital meant creating a proletariat. In a sense, Stalin did in fifteen years what the British did in several centuries. There was immense suffering, and that shouldn't be ignored. That became the model for China, Vietnam, etc. (Eastern Europe is a slightly different case.)

Now, the revolution, as imagined by Trotsky—because it's Trotsky who really influences Lenin in 1918—entailed the idea of permanent revolution, in that, revolution in the East would spark revolution in the West. But I think Trotsky had no illusions about the Soviet Union being socialist. This was the point of his debate with Stalin. The problem is that both were right. That is, Trotsky was right: there is no such thing as "socialism in one country." Stalin was right, on the other hand, in claiming that this was the only road that they had open to them once revolution failed in the West, between 1918–1923. Now, did it have to be done with the terror of Stalin? That's a very complicated question, but there was terror and it was enormous, and we don't do ourselves a service by neglecting that. In a sense it becomes an active will against history, as wild as claiming that "history is on our side."

This model of national development ended in the 1970s, and, of course, not just in the Soviet Union. The present moment can be defined as a post-Cold War moment, and this allows the Left to remove an albatross that had been hanging around its neck for a long time. This does not mean that the road to the future is very clear, I think it's *extremely* murky right now. I don't think we are anywhere near a pre-revolutionary, even a pre-pre-revolutionary situation. I think it becomes incumbent on people to think about new forms of internationalism, and to try to tie together, intrinsically, things that were collections of particular interests.

BB: If one accepts the notion that left-wing anti-capitalist politics necessarily has as its aim the abolition of the proletariat—that is, the negation of the structure of alienated social labor bound up with the value form of wealth—what action should one take within the contemporary neoliberal phase of capitalism?

How could the Left reconcile opposition to the present offensive on the working class with the overarching goal of transcending proletarian labor?

MP: The present moment is very bleak, because as you note in this question, and it's the $64,000 question, it is difficult to talk about the abolition of proletarian labor at a point where the meager achievements of the working class in the 20th century have been rolled back everywhere.
I don't have a simple answer to that. Because it does seem to me that part of what is on the agenda is actually something quite traditional, which is an international movement that is also an international workers' movement, and I think we are very far away from that. Certainly, to the degree to which working classes are going to compete with one another, it will be their common ruin. We are facing a decline in the standard of living of working classes in the metropoles, there is no question about it, which is pretty bleak, on the one hand.

On the other hand, a great deal of the unemployment has been caused by technological innovations, and not simply by outsourcing. It's not as if the same number of jobs were simply moved overseas. The problems that we face with the capitalist diminution of proletariat labor on a worldwide scale go hand in hand with the increase of gigantic slum cities, e.g., São Paolo, Mexico City, Lagos. Cities of twenty million people in which eighteen million are slum dwellers, that is, people who have no chance of being sucked up into a burgeoning industrial apparatus.

BB: Are we in danger then of missing a moment in which Marx's critique of modernity would have a real significance for political action?

In other words, if the global condition sinks further into barbarism, the kind expressed by slum cities, might we—if we don't seize this moment—end up in a worse situation twenty, thirty years down the line?

MP: I'm sure, but I don't know what 'seizing the moment' at this moment means.

I'm very modest at this point. I think that it would help if there was talk about issues that are real. Certain ways of interpreting the world such as, "the world would be a wonderful place if it weren't for George Bush, or the United States," are going to lead us nowhere, absolutely nowhere. We have to find our way to new forms of true international solidarity, which is different than anti-Americanism. We live in a moment in which the American state and the American government have become a fetish form. It's similar to the reactionary anti-capitalists who were anti-British in the late 19th century—you don't have to be pro-British to know that this was a reification of world capital. **IP**