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Statement of purpose

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

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

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

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

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

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–2,500 words, but longer pieces will also be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: review_editor@platypus1917.org. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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level of history and remains external to the events themselves. The consciousness of past events—e.g., “metropolitefs” [211]—as well as the “self-criticism” (199) contained in these essays is insufficiently critical. The context remains one of constant self-affirmation: modern Greek history is presented not as a series of defeats and failures but rather as the history of struggles culminating in the event December.

History is presented in an almost mythological manner, with December represented as its peak, recreating something like an eruption of natural forces. Its insurrectionist moment is presented as one that can change our lives along the lines of an unexpected tsunami impelling us towards freedom—too bad that it never really does, since freedom requires something more than blind movement! *Mutatis mutandis*, the anonymous power of capital comes to mind: a promise of emancipation never fulfilled and the blind hope that at some point it will be, despite all past disappointments. The poverty of events results in the poverty of theory, with images of December 2008 as the “culmination” of, or perhaps even surpassing, May ’68 (110 and 51).

It is worth examining in detail the two long essays, strongly characteristic of the volume as a whole, written by an “anti-authoritarian communist group from Athens”—“Children of the Gallery” ([PTG]—whom work is heavily influenced by Gilles Dauvé. In a somewhat mysterious fashion, the event of the uprisings is presented as a result of class transformations erupting spontaneously [that is to say, objectively]. The failure of the uprisings is presented again, of course, along the lines of a positivist sociological conception that dogmatically assesses the separation of subject and object and thus consciousness). According to this interpretation, the surprising failed due to socio-economic limitations and of this argument? The following conclusion is inescapable: as representatives of the Left, we are perfect and would achieve the world if not for these objective limits and the repressive state.

TPTG praise the “spontaneous and uncontrolled character of the rebellion” and they do not concern themselves with the problem that the lack of left-wing organization and leadership typically means unconscious right-wing—and thus regressive—organization and leadership. The foundation of their analysis “class” as a separate object, “class” determines everything. TPTG views political mediation as pathological (118 and 121), as if to accept or reject it is a matter of taste—as if, out there, something can exist immediately for us. Anarchists have never sympathized with dialectics!

With a penchant for extreme reductionism, TPTG explains the capitalist crisis as an exploitability crisis of “Letter from Greece” continues on page 7

anarchist work, albeit of certain flavors. December 2008 in Greece is treated as a glorious, although temporary "event," affirming a way of thinking and acting, and helping to sustain these for the future.¹ The book, we are informed, is about the "social antagonist movement" (14). So much wishful thinking is contained in these three words! The volume has many merits and is excellent for familiarizing oneself with aspects of contemporary Greek reality. That said, the remainder of this intervention will focus on some of the book's more problematic aspects.

Before doing so, we must briefly review the volume's main contents. The editors present this work as "a collective attempt to map the time between the revolt of December 2008 and the crisis that followed" (14), offering material on both the former and the latter in three parts. The first part—entitled "The site: Athens"—is an introduction to the context of December's events, offering a critical analysis of Athens in comparison to other cities across the world, as well as explicating the political atmosphere of the city and some relevant developments within it. The second part—"The event: December"—explores the events themselves. It begins historically, with the first essays covering the development of social struggles in Greece since the end of the capitalist transformations in the country, and the evolution of alternative media in the years preceding December. This approach leads to viewing December as the culmination of prior developments; the remaining essays in the second part draw attention also to what was radically new by shedding light on various aspects of what happened and what this means for Greece and the "movement" in general (as well as the way December is conceived abroad). The third and final part of the book—"Crisis"—provides a wealth of information about the Greek crisis, emphasizing the opportunities for change that it presents. According to the contributors, the crisis itself necessitates not only action but all point to potential fulfillments of anarchist conception of the crisis, and the attempts presented and described here are characterized as elements of reality—"data"—and "supposedly unaffected by our subjectivity: a chronology of classes, existential/practice feelings," etc. It is on the basis of such "data" that the contributors feel licensed to offer their political estimations. However, the most important factor of contemporary reality is constantly evaded: namely, ideology. Certainly, the necessity of ideology is difficult to address. Regardless of this difficulty, as an expression of our critical consciousness and self-understanding—and, hence, of politics as a real notion—reducible to the reactions of the oppressed—ideology must be taken into account. Insofar as there is any

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HERE IS A BAD THEORETICAL HABIT common among
 leftists: the confirmation of revolutionary aspirations
 through an unmediated verification by the "facts" or
 "data." The ghost of an "objective" reality obscures the
 effort to grasp the "concrete" as the combination of
 many abstractions and, instead, "a chaotic representa-
 tion [*Vorstellung*] of the whole" (Marx) is preferred,
 offering a temporary foundation for self-affirmation and
 miraculously turning a bad "reality into a good" one.
 A more critical way to regard "facts," related to the
 pursuit and maintenance of freedom in society, is
 forgotten if not defamed today. As Max Horkheimer once
 put it: "But in regard to the essential kind of change at
 issue, the critical theory aims, there can be no corre-
 sponding concrete perception of it until it actually
 comes about. If the proof of the pudding is in the eating,
 the eating here is still in the future. Comparison with
 similar historical events can be drawn only in a limited
 degree." While our ability to change the world
 diminishes, the problem of the self-serving fallacy of
 reference to the insuperable "objective" character of
 reality becomes more apparent.
 To cite some recent examples, various anarchists,
 under the rubric of the political tendencies of "commu-
 nization," found a verification of their theories in
 England's recent riots. This falls into a pattern:
 Napoleonic guerillas "verify" the aspirations of Maoism;
 the struggle of "indignados" verifies libertarian
 impulses; and, finally, the Arab Spring and the
 Wisconsin protests verify for the entire global "Left" that
 we are on the right track. People feel obliged to prove
 repeatedly that the "struggle continues," only to forget

"What is happening here exceeds us." (199)

Thodoris Velissaris

Review of Antonis Vradis and Dimitris Dalakoglou, eds., *Revolt and Crisis in Greece: Between a Present Yet to Pass and a Future Still to Come* (Oakland: AK Press & Occupied London, 2011).

Letter from Greece

Brief notes on Revolt and
Crisis in Greece and the
Greek situation

Issue #41 | November 2011

1 Letter from Greece

Brief notes on *Revolt and Crisis in Greece* and the Greek situation

Thodoris Velissaris

2 Whither Marxism?

Why the occupation movement recalls Seattle 1999

Chris Cutrone

2 Black nationalism and the legacy of Malcolm X

An interview with Michael Dawson

Spencer A. Leonard

Malcolm X, continued from page 2

Another instructive organization is not the Black Panther Party but the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit, particularly the theoretical works of James Boggs. This was an important starting point for many black, Latino, Asian-American radicals from the 1960s and 1970s. Boggs argued that the working class was already divided; white workers within organizations and on the shop floor were not willing to give up white privilege. So long as that continued, we still would have to be able to organize black workers, Latino workers, etc., along revolutionary lines. To do this it is necessary to have organizations that are national, or as we might say today, racial, in form—while nonetheless maintaining the long term goal of being to build a unified working class movement and unified working class organizations.

SL: How does that strategy immediately relate to trade unions that already exist among the working class?

MD: In most workplaces in the late 1960s and 1970s, that strategy meant black radical workers would belong to multiple organizations. They would belong to a black workers caucus, and to the union’s progressive caucus, and, of course, to the union as well. Unions in that period, such as United Autoworkers, had extraordinarily racist leadership that actively collaborated with management and police—in other words, management and the state—to oppress the rights and privileges of black workers. So black workers worked in multiple organizations, some that were exclusively black, and some that were multi-racial, with the dual goal of trying to build a unified workers movement and a movement for black liberation. This meant double shifts for black radical organizers. Black nationalist organizations grew not because of any theoretical fondness for nationalism per se, nor simply as a function of more uni-national or uni-racial organizations, but primarily because of white workers’ resistance to any type of program that required the white workers to give up the privileges they had, regardless of whether these programs consisted primarily of working class demands.

SL: In his 1963 debate with Malcolm X that we just quoted, Baldwin notes a distinction between power and equality, whereby an African nation cannot hope for respect unless it is independent and thus “equal.” He then goes on to argue that there is no parallel to the American context in the independence struggles of Ghana, the Congo, Kenya, and elsewhere. Malcolm X disagreed. How do we understand the concurrence of and possible relations between the anti-colonial struggles of the post-war decades and the black freedom movement in this country? Of course Malcolm X himself traveled widely in Africa and in the Middle East in 1964 precisely in order to gauge and strengthen those relations. Does Marable give his readers adequate resources to assess this activity? Or was Tariq Ali right to say by way of criticism,

The emphasis in Marable’s account on the Nation of Islam is not totally misplaced, but it is accorded far too much space, at the expense of any discussion of the overall social and political contexts, both U.S. and global, within which Malcolm operated. The result is seriously unbalanced: the events that shaped his continuing intellectual evolution—the killing of Lumumba and the ensuing crisis in Congo; the Vietnam War; the rise of a new generation of black and white activists in the U.S., of which Marable was one—are mentioned only in passing. This is a great pity, because in historical terms their significance far outweighs that of the audience sizes of various Nation of Islam meetings or the sectarian infighting which Marable discusses at length.⁵

Does the biography neglect to adequately contextualize Malcolm X in the wider struggles of his time, with the result of downplaying the significance (and political limitations) of his emerging internationalism?

MD: I generally agree with Ali’s criticism. One aspect often lost in the study of African-American political leaders, whether we’re talking about Malcolm X, W. E. B. Du Bois, or Martin Luther King, Jr, is the growing significance of their understanding of the world situation and where allies might be sought outside the United States, their growing feelings of solidarity with liberation movements, in Asia and Latin America as well as Africa. This was particularly true in the two strongest periods of black radicalism, the period before World War II and the 1960s and 1970s. Marable largely neglects the fact that black and other minority radicals of that generation had a totally different language available to them, a language of national liberation, anti-colonialism, Third World solidarity, and non-alignment coming out of the Bandung Conference. Moreover, in the 1960s and 1970s, there was not just one socialist state, as was the case for the pre-World War II generation. Radicals in the 1960s could turn to what at the time seemed multiple successful models. Preeminent here, of course, was China, which is why there was a significant Maoist movement from France to the United States. Marable neglects most of that.

There is a second, more theoretical question that you ask, which is to what degree are those models applicable to the U.S. I think we are still puzzling over that. There are some similarities that theoreticians such as Boggs have pointed out. If you look strictly from an economic point of view, for instance, there’s super-exploitation of black workers in terms of the extraction of super-profits that allow a deal to be made with American white labor, a process that is not unlike the type of super-profits extracted from colonial labor. But there are also serious liabilities in applying those models to the U.S. One such liability that Baldwin talked about, and that most activists at the time were aware of, is that minority populations within countries are not in quite the same situation as the Africans in South Africa, the Cubans in Cuba, or the Chinese in China, in which a national liberation movement is struggling to free the majority of the population. Few organizations in the 1960s and 1970s, except for some of the more staunch black nationalist organizations, ever had a view that black liberation could be won without solidarity across racial groups, including among progressive

whites. So, not only in terms of economics, but also in terms of politics and history, such models of national self-determination in former colonies do break down to a significant degree when applied to the U.S. Just as the vocabulary of the French Revolution was misapplied, or the vocabulary of the Chinese Revolution was misapplied, you also had the vocabulary of anti-colonial struggles that was misapplied, or at least mechanically applied to the situation of blacks and other groups in the United States. That said, the international situation provided important allies in the U.N. and elsewhere that pressured the U.S. government at key points during the history of the Civil Rights and black power movements.

SL: In your review of Marable’s book, you maintain that “[Malcolm X viewed] the struggle of Afro-Americans and other people of African descent [as] connected to that of the other oppressed peoples of the world, especially those who were waging national liberation struggles or who had seized victory in Third World socialist countries such as Cuba and China.” But did Malcolm X in fact have any meaningful relationship to radical anti-imperialism, much less to Marxism? Isn’t it a mistake to focus on Vietnam and China and to ignore his connections to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and his praise of the Saudi regime, to take the most obvious examples?

MD: Clearly, there are extraordinary shortcomings to the development of Malcolm X’s theoretical vision, including his embrace of Arab nationalism and autocratic monarchies and his equation of them to the national liberation struggle in Vietnam. Malcolm X says a little bit about the Sino-Soviet dispute that would so shape the left in the 1960s and 1970s, but his comments were along racial, not ideological, lines.

SL: I believe in “The Message to the Grassroots” he claims that the Russian Revolution was white nationalist, and this is revealed in the souring of Khrushchev’s relationship with Mao.

MD: Exactly. At the very end of his life, however, he began to emphasize that capitalism as an economic and political system is the problem. He also started to move away from the idea that white people, as a people, are evil, and came to embrace the ideal of the “John Brown” white person and the revolutionary potential of young, white Americans, in particular. But there is nothing like a coherent, systematic view in Malcolm X that one could call socialist. Part of the problem with Malcolm X’s legacy is that it allows black nationalists, Justice Clarence Thomas, black Marxists, Trotskyite groups, and Maoist groups all to claim descent from him.

There were paternalistic, patriarchal elements in Malcolm X’s politics that were perfectly consistent with traditional, conservative forms of nationalist politics. There were also elements that pointed in an anti-capitalist direction, but none of those had really crystallized. Rather, these contradictory elements coexisted. Consequently, part of his legacy involves different groups trying to work out the direction Malcolm X was moving in, and developing it further under new conditions. Malcolm X himself left virtually no organizational or institutional legacy. After the split with the Nation of Islam, he formed the OAAU and Muslim Mosque, Incorporated. But these organizations had just been formed.

SL: In light of what you just said, how do you see the relationship between Malcolm X and the Socialist Workers Party’ in New York City in 1964-65? How did the way in which that party came to adopt Malcolm X and publish his writings, most significantly in the volume *Malcolm X Speaks*, affect his legacy?

MD: *Malcolm X Speaks* profoundly shaped how Malcolm X is remembered on the Left. For many years, there was little available outside of the *Autobiography*, and his speeches and writings from the last two years of his life would have been far more obscure without *Malcolm X Speaks*. Of course, many of Malcolm X’s speeches remain unpublished. But those collected in *Malcolm X Speaks* are undeniably significant and give credence to the view that in his last years he was moving in a more post-nationalist, pro-socialist direction, though this movement may not be as coherent and neat as once portrayed by the SWP and other organizations on the Left. Nevertheless, *Malcolm X Speaks*, along with texts by Amílcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Mao Tse Tung, and others, provided a foundation for black radical thought at that time.

SL: I want to introduce another of Malcolm X’s most important contemporary critics, the labor leader Bayard Rustin, whose social democratic point of view gives occasion to discuss the accusation that Marable’s book is marred by the author’s own social democratic politics. Rustin, perhaps more than Marable, would have been sympathetic to a politics of revolutionary integrationism, as part of a Marxian approach.

In his book, commenting on a 1960 debate between Malcolm X and Rustin, Marable paraphrases Malcolm X to the effect that though the Nation of Islam was to be distinguished from earlier black nationalist movements, such as the movement of Marcus Garvey, they shared much in common. He then quotes Malcolm X as saying, “the difference is in method. We say that the only solution is in the religious approach, this is why we stress the importance of a moral reformation.” He also noted that Elijah Muhammad was “not a politician,” but a religious leader. Rustin criticized as “conservative, even passive” both Malcolm’s Garveyite separatism and, of course, his religious position, arguing that since the vast majority of blacks are “seeking to become full-fledged citizens,” the Nation of Islam was out of step with the black freedom movement in 1960. Opposing the traditional black nationalist demand for a separate black state and, indeed, black nationalism itself, Bayard Rustin also noted that “the great majority of negroes are feeling that things can improve here[,] until you have someplace to go, they’re going to want to stay” [176].

In a second debate in 1962, Rustin pressed his criticisms of the Nation of Islam by asking, “who can limit my right of association? Who can tell me who my friends ought to be? And yet the Muslims denounce James Farmer because he’s married to a white wom-

an.”⁶ Rustin went on to argue, in effect, that the Nation of Islam was ultimately a hindrance to black emancipation, which he regarded as possible only through integration. He also argued for the overriding necessity of being able to deliver real gains to working black people. What is the legacy today of a vision like Rustin’s? What were its weaknesses at the time, and what greater consequences have attended the loss of the struggle for radical and inter-racial working class socialism in the United States?

MD: Rustin’s criticism of Malcolm X in 1960 was mostly on point, although I think he made at least one major mistake, which I’ll get to in a second. One great tragedy of the McCarthy era was the erosion of the very strong alliance that had existed between 1900 and 1950 among the labor movement, the Civil Rights movement, and the radical movements. The Civil Rights movement went in one direction, the labor movement in another. This had very dire consequences for progressive politics in the United States.

By 1960-65, Rustin was one of the few strong social democratic voices in the Civil Rights Movement. He argued for economic equality—King wanted that and was willing to fight for it, as were others in the Civil Rights Movement—but Rustin had real ties to the labor movement. Most of the middle class civil rights leadership, many of whom, like Malcolm X, were religious leaders, remained skeptical of the labor movement’s significance, particularly given the often racist practices of the labor movement’s leadership. Because of Rustin’s radical politics and his insistence that the civil rights and labor movements needed each other, he was viewed with suspicion by labor and civil rights leaders alike. We lost a lot due to the fact that Rustin did not play a more central role. I think Marable gets that right.

Now we are in a period in which labor is much weaker, manufacturing has moved off-shore, and labor has never been more politically vulnerable, all of which make even PATCO and the Reagan presidency seem like the good ole days for the American labor movement. It will be hard to rebuild those ties, and what that would look like is something people still have to work out. What Rustin gets wrong, and I think this is a problem of social democracy more generally, including Marable’s own book and political stance, is the assumption that all nationalism is the same—an assumption shared by the Communist Party in the early 1960s. Certainly, the Nation of Islam was conservative and anti-political. It often told its own membership, as Marable documents, to stay out of political struggle, to refuse to oppose the suppression of African-Americans, despite its membership wanting to get involved in such struggles in Los Angeles, New York, and elsewhere. But there are other nationalisms of a different type that are progressive, that organized black workers. Such nationalisms are not separatist, but they do insist on organizing black people, as black people, for black liberation, often in alliance with other social forces, whether it is with other people of color, the labor movement, etc. Nationalists like the Black Panthers used to say we are Marxists who believe we all have to organize as nationalists to bring about a multi-racial working class revolution in the United States.

These different nationalist frameworks may have various flaws, but they are not the same, particularly in terms of the progressive potential some exhibit. By lumping them together in the manner of Rustin, Marable, or the Communist Party in certain phases of its history, you push all nationalism away. This neglects the potential for alliance with some of the most progressive sectors of the population. At least until the 1970s the left in the U.S. was fairly segregated, fragmented along racial lines in ways that ultimately hindered all types of mass movements and radical movements. Those on the American left who see all nationalisms as comparable and inherently reactionary create a huge problem for themselves, and repeat mistakes that go back at least to the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

SL: In a recent review of *Malcolm X: A Life Reinvented*, 1960s radical and black nationalist Amiri Baraka charges Marable with repeating Rustin’s criticisms. As Baraka puts it,

... to say of the Nation of Islam, that it was not a radical organization, obscures the black nationalist confrontation with the white racist oppressor nation. Marable thinks that the Trotskyists of the SWP, who were members of the CP, or Committees of Correspondence, are more radical than the Nation of Islam. This means that he has not even understood Lenin’s directives as pointed out in Stalin’s Foundations of Leninism.⁷

Baraka then quotes Stalin’s text to this effect:

The revolutionary character of a national movement under the conditions of imperialist oppression does not necessarily presuppose the existence of proletarian elements in the movement, the existence of a revolutionary or a republican program of the movement, the existence of a democratic basis of the movement.⁸

I want to repose the question of whether there is in fact a genuine continuity between Manning Marable’s treatment of Malcolm X and the social democratic politics of the 1960s and 1970s. Does this opposition between the views of social democrats such as Rustin and possibly Marable, on the one hand, and Amiri Baraka and others, on the other, capture what is essential about the ambiguous legacy of Malcolm X? If not, what opposition better captures the ambiguity?

MD: The first question is straightforward. Certainly, as Baraka points out in his review, there is an ideological and even organizational continuity between the social democracy of the 1960s and 1970s and the political position Marable takes in the early 21st century in analyzing Malcolm X. It is a position that explicitly rejects the view of national liberation struggles, at least in the United States, as being revolutionary or even a primary vehicle for progressive change within this country. But, in chalking up the limitations of Marable’s perspective to his background in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), I think Amiri is playing a little fast

and loose with the history. The conflict is not primarily between Leninism, Stalinism, or, as he puts it, Marxism, on the one hand, and democratic socialism on the other. This is not a Third versus Second International fight. The Communist Party of the United States had almost exactly the same view and analysis of the black revolution of the 1960s that Marable and the DSA have.

Rather than a fight between Leninism and social democracy, it is a struggle, with roots going back to the 1920s, between two strains of the American left. On one side are those who make the claim that the black struggle is revolutionary in its own right. Harry Haywood, author of *Black Bolshevik*, would be a good example of this. Like other early black members of the Communist Party or the Workers’ Party of America at that time, they came into the party with the ideal that the struggle of African-Americans was explosively revolutionary. They advanced a view that was rejected by most of the leadership in the Workers’ Party and Communist Party and they believed in it so strongly as to prompt them to look for allies in the Third International. Eventually they found them in Moscow. Out of that came the 1928 and 1932 Comintern resolutions, which proclaim, over the objections of many members, and particularly of the leadership of the Communist Party of the United States, that the black struggle is revolutionary in its own right. That view has a long tradition in African-American radicalism.

Counterposed to this view is one with a pedigree that reaches back into the history of American Communism and also into the history of the Socialist Party, as well as organizations that developed much later, such as the DSA. This view focuses on the unity of the working class even to the point of ignoring deep racism and sexism within progressive movements. Proponents of this framework emphasize, in the history of working class revolution and the working class movement in the United States, the need for unified and multi-racial progressive movements, but do not understand or downplay the actual history of racism and oppression in America. Nor do they understand the super-exploitation of black workers. They are willing to ignore the just claims of African-Americans in such a way that it impedes the multi-racial unity from developing.

Despite my earlier, perhaps somewhat catty criticism of Baraka’s commentary, I come out of a radical tradition that is much closer to his than to Marable’s, which is probably reflected in my review of the book. To clarify, my main criticism of Baraka’s review concerns the way he makes it sound as if there’s a Marxist-Leninist position and then there is a Social Democratic position akin to Marable’s. Baraka basically says that the Marxist-Leninist position is the correct one—that you go back to Lenin and Stalin to find the right position on the National Question. That is the right understanding of blacks in the United States, and it is what Malcolm X understood. Malcolm X’s may not have been a Marxist-Leninist position, but it was still a revolutionist position, in that it stood against imperialism and one can mobilize around that. Then there is this other, Second International, reactionary position, which is wrong, and which Marxist-Leninism needs to defeat.

What I would say, pace Baraka, is that it is not that clean. In fact, historically Marxists-Leninists have taken the same position that Baraka is criticizing, whether it is the Communist Party or the New Communist organizations in the 1970s. There are these two basic positions, but they do not map cleanly on divides in the international communist movement, or for that matter, in the progressive movement in the United States, in the way that Baraka suggests.

SL: What about Baraka’s implication that the Nation of Islam is somehow a richer legacy for the Left than the struggle by Left and Trotskyist parties for a revolutionary, socialist, interracial project for overcoming capitalism in this country?

MD: I think Baraka did not articulate his position in this piece as well as he might have. This argument has been going on for at least 50 years. Significantly, Baraka has said that the Trotskyists and others, on paper, may be the more revolutionary groups. What Baraka had in mind, I think, and certainly what I have heard many African-American activists claim, is that we have to look at populations on the ground, many of whom voice support for groups like the Nation of Islam and other black nationalist groups, and yet these populations that support the Nation of Islam are in fact a more reliable resource for progressive change than either the Nation of Islam, as such, or various sectarian groups. They are more likely to actually go out and do something. I don’t think Baraka is making a claim about whether it is desirable to have a multi-racial, progressive movement in the United States. Rather, he is claiming what many black activists would claim, which is that, in order to build such a movement, you are going to have to work with the populations and organizations on the ground. And that is a claim one can make empirically. **JP**

1. Michael Dawson, “Marable’s Malcolm X Book Puts Icon in Context,” posted at <theroot.com> 4/29/2011.
2. “1963 Debate with James Baldwin,” MP3 audio file, “Malcolm X: All Time Greatest Speeches Vol. 2,” Master Classics Records, 2008.
3. Verna Gates, “FBI to Probe Mississippi Killing for Hate Crimes,” August 18, 2011, available at <www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/18/us-mississippi-hatecrime-idUSTRE-77H6QE20110818>.
4. Dawson is here quoting from a famous opening section of the speech “The Ballot or the Bullet.” It reads as follows:

As long as you and I have been over here, we are not Americans yet. Well, I am one who doesn’t believe in deluding myself. I’m not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the table doesn’t make you a diner, unless you eat some of what’s on that plate. Being here in America doesn’t make you an American. Being born here in America doesn’t make you an American. Why, if birth made you American, you wouldn’t need any legislation, you wouldn’t need any

Letter from Greece, continued from page 1



The Greek left protests the murder of Alexis Grigoropoulos, December 2008.

labor power driven by the proletariat’s supposed resistance. The Greek crisis was provoked by proletarian struggles and December was responsible for accelerating these struggles [and, hence, the crisis] (253). Absent from this account is any reckoning with the decay and eventual death of the international Left over the course of the twentieth century. “Give me a place to stand and I will move the world.” TPTG have given themselves such a place. Namely, class: “the real cause of the crisis: the convulsive but persistent refusal of the global proletariat to become totally subordinated to capital” (270). What Lenin would have called their “economism” or “talism” is fully exposed in the ceaseless quest for “autonomous proletarian action” (270). As a comrade of mine remarked, people all around the world try desperately to organize themselves politically—except for people like TPTG!

TPTG, seduced by their own anti-Leninism, confuse the problems of the self-valorization of capital with the proletariat’s acts of resistance. If anything, crises are a product of bourgeois “equality” and its normally functioning exploitation. In the era of the First World War, it is true that the proletariat’s struggles brought about the crisis of capital, at its depths, but this was only due to the mediation [cursed for TPTG!] of the revolutionary leadership provided by figures such as Lenin and Luxemburg—and this crisis was, simultaneously, the eve of revolution [in the sense that revolution is bourgeois society in its acute crisis, not the total overcoming of bourgeois society].³ If catastrophes and crises continuously occur—but without any prospect of overcoming them—it is precisely because of our failure to successfully resist subordination to capital, not because we resisted it so well! It is the failure of the Left (that is, our failure) that accelerates the crisis. TPTG is like the boxing coach who, during a fight, keeps congratulating his semi-conscious athlete until the final devastating knock-out blow is delivered by the opponent.

The analysis of the crisis remains superficial throughout the book. This is by no means accidental, for there is no Left in crisis to expose acutely the symptoms of the crisis itself. So, for example, Yiannis Kaplanis’s contribution [and, on this count, the contributions of others as well] is for the most part descriptive. David Graeber’s chapter is transhistorical in perspective and thus fails to deal with the peculiarity of debt in capitalist modernity. “Money” and “debt” are not discussed and explored as mediations of value, but rather as ruling-class impositions on society and in terms of “the arbitrary nature of power.”⁶

It is not the case that the editors and contributors do not understand the problem of “the lack of a well-developed theory” (23). It is the case, however, that “revolt” is presented in these pages as an automatic process precisely because of our increased inability to change the course of world events. We seem to have internalized the famous image of the chess-playing automaton provided in the first of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940)—the very image that he used to criticize the false optimism of “historical materialism”! Fantasies of a practice without theory are supplemented by fantasies of a theory without practice: It is difficult to determine if this is merely an indication of thoughtless irresponsibility or also the expression of a real cul-de-sac. The problem, however, is fully revealed: For the editors, “more significant than the sequence of events is the occurrence of the events themselves” (24).

The situation in Greece

The contemporary situation in Greece is related to the aforementioned issues: the “Left” in Greece thinks of itself as possessing the most appropriate theory and praxis for emancipation today, and is waiting for the “masses” to follow its prescriptions. The fact that the “Left” as it is presently constituted (indeed, across the globe) is part of the problem, or indeed is *the central problem*, is never seriously considered. Once again, a dogmatically separated and fully equipped “observer” awaits her “object” of verification. “The struggle continues” in our minds in order to avoid reflecting on its extinction!

Rather than separately examining all aspects of the contemporary “Left” in Greece, we will briefly sketch an outline of its principal tendencies.

Despite the ongoing unprecedented (for post-war Greece) economic catastrophe, it is obvious that the Left is not advancing here in any sense. It is this unavoidable truth that provides the solid basis for a serious discussion of the Left’s decline in Greece (and across the world). Despite the massive offensive launched against the working class and the spectacular “resistance” to it, nothing yet has happened to benefit the Left or the working class. All are waiting for higher vote totals in the next elections to verify their significance. The fact that the right and even the extreme right are also waiting for an even greater increase in their share of the vote does not seem to bother anyone on the “Left.”

When the first symptoms of the Greek crisis, in its recent more acute and urgent forms, broke out, our problems as a “Left” in Greece emerged as well. While previously, when such urgent issues appeared, we felt free to luxuriate in our utopian speculations [as more or less paper exercises], things are now much more serious. Bourgeois class representatives present the situation as a black-and-white choice: either austerity or catastrophe. Of course, this is a lie—but in an alienated world, lies do not lose their strength simply by being revealed. Ideology is more real than any “actual” reality, and it must be taken seriously and worked through in order to possibly be overcome. If we are going to delegitimize the “Establishment” and its “solutions,” are we ready to offer any alternatives? If we are going to accelerate the crisis, could this lead to any progressive development? While pondering these questions, the words of Hal Draper return again and again: Marx argued “against both those who say the workers can take power any Sunday, and those who say never.”⁷ Can we indeed take power “any Sunday?” And, if not, how can we avoid falling into the abyss of thinking that we can never do so? And, to put it bluntly, how can we even try to think in such terms when the only “reality” available to work with is the one the “Establishment” is offering us?⁸ To deny austerity does not seem to open up a path to emancipatory social-political struggle but rather to a rogues’ gallery of right-wing pseudo-saviors, disoriented sections of the capitalist class, nationalists, bureaucrats, et al.

Karl Korsch’s words haunt the present situation: “Over a long period, when Marxism was slowly



Greek anti-austerity protests in Athens, June 2011.

spreading throughout Europe, it had in fact no practical revolutionary task to accomplish. Therefore problems of revolution had ceased, even in theory, to exist as problems of the real world for the great majority of Marxists, orthodox as well as revisionist”⁹—how much more true today! The “Left” in the crisis in Greece is eager either to suggest pseudo-radical/reformist solutions, pointing to earlier phases of capitalist development (*e.g.*, calls to nationalize the banks), or to attempt miraculously to be a true “revolutionary” agent in the absence of a real revolutionary situation or even a real possibility of one. In both cases, “actionism” and “impatience with theory” (to recall Adorno’s 1969 essay “Resignation”) reigns. Reformists and revolutionaries are trying desperately to prove that they are such in a period of “resistance,” when neither reformism nor revolution seems possible.¹⁰

From abroad, many leftists not well acquainted with the present dangers of authoritarianism in Greek society (and with their bank accounts probably safe in one of the leading capitalist countries) have recommended that Greece simply “default” [with the casualness of suggesting a nice evening walk!] and accept a period of deeper crisis, with the hope that things will be better for “emancipation” in the long run. It seems that these individuals want simply to oppose any capitalist development in order to prove that they are “anti-capitalist”—as if capitalism can be opposed from the outside, and as if they are posing an “alternative” to capitalism. They persist in the belief that “structural” or “systemic” change may lead to real politics, when in actuality the basis for such politics does not exist.

Let us consider a historical example of this reasoning. In the Arab world, various nationalist leaders were supported by leftists in previous decades in the hope that pure structural changes would improve emancipatory prospects. The Arab Spring, in its unfolding tragedy, demonstrates how the “ruse of reason” trusted by these leftists simply leads to more disasters. Our friends from abroad have forgotten that any “structural” change within or beyond capitalism necessarily involves issues

of [false] consciousness.

Turning our attention to some of the basic problems that left-wing politics in Greece has exhibited during the recent period, we must raise the issue of the continuing Stalinism of much of the Greek “Left.” The term “Stalinism” is not intended to point to issues of authoritarianism, although these remain problems as well. It is used, rather, in the sense of “socialism in one country” (and “nationalism”). Across a wide range of the “Left” spectrum in Greece, the contemporary situation is presented in the following light: the government consists of traitors or incompetent people and Greece will be able to perform fine (or, simply, better) economically on a national level in different political conditions (with regard to these conditions, opinion varies among tendencies pointing to a progressive government, a popular front, a popular power, or even “socialism”). This perspective tends to ignore, or to oppose abstractly, international developments, with the danger of making things worse.¹¹ Of course, most of these leftists would say that they aspire to an international struggle but nothing in their proposals and programs convinces one of this.¹²

The only “internationalists” that transcend this Stalinist national framework are either the capitalist exploiters themselves or reformists who cultivate illusions about the nature of capitalist social relations and institutions that supposedly can be “reformed” for the benefit of the majority. In both these aforementioned tendencies [“internationalist” and nationalist], what is common is the appeal to technocratic “solutions,” which begs the question of politics and emancipation.

Finally, there are segments of the “Left” trying to overcome the aforementioned Scylla and Charybdis of Stalinist nationalism and capitalist internationalism. But they remain without any serious political influence and, more importantly, try to deal with these problems abstractly, offering transhistorical prescriptions that involve copying and pasting combinations of the supposedly “correct” balance of theory and praxis. A mistake typical of such an approach is the invocation of the historical Bolshevik demand regarding the national debt—namely, to erase it (which they accomplished). But today’s ambitious “Bolsheviks” forget that the historical Bolsheviks made similar demands when not only Soviets but also the Second International existed!

In contemporary Greece, an agent of potentially emancipatory change does not exist. It is imperative to recognize our impotency so that we might overcome it. Right now, we pay witness to increased oppression but not to a historical consciousness capable of grasping it, working through it, and potentially overcoming it.

With regard to the issue of authoritarianism, what is meant (from a Marxist perspective) is the tendency of people to revolt against an authority only in favor of another one. The spectacular activism of the oppressed may involve an attempt to constitute another form of oppression. In Greece, we have witnessed various

dealing with this problem, there is not only a necessity to act but also a necessity to think, the latter possibly being of greater importance since no one seems to be doing it. Various forms of resistance are indeed necessary. Equally necessary, however, is a critical recognition of what the nature of this resistance is and what its prospects actually are. As Adorno once put it: “The deluded workers are directly dependent on those who can still just see and tell of their delusion. Their hatred of intellectuals has changed accordingly. It has aligned itself to the prevailing commonsense views. The masses no longer mistrust intellectuals because they betray the revolution, but because they might want it, and thereby reveal how great is their own need of intellectuals”¹⁵. **IP**

1. Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 2002 [1937]), 188–243.
2. Some contributors to the book, following Badiou’s notion so much in vogue today, view December as an “event.” The mystification and emptiness contained in this jargon is apparent when one realizes that for this kind of reasoning the Great French Revolution of 1789 and December are both “events.”
3. As explained in the glossary of the book [339], “*metapolitetsi*” (literally meaning “political transition”) is a term “used to describe the historical period of modern Greek history that follows the end of the colonels’ dictatorship (1974). Many believed the revolt of December 2008 to signify the end of *Metapolitetsi*.” Christos Lynteris’s article fails to adequately grasp the fundamental character of the present as the self-transformation of *metapolitetsi*, which was itself the self-transformation of Greece after World War II. To be more accurate, instead of labeling these historical developments as self-transformations we should refer to them as self-regressions, for nothing “real” about *metapolitetsi* is revealed by the current crisis. Apocalypse under these conditions is more obfuscatory: it is impossible.
4. Soula M.’s contribution is also problematic insofar as its perspective remains external, thinking of problems of bourgeois consciousness as characteristic mainly of the oppressors and not of December, in its momentous purity.
5. In this sense, Christos Lynteris’s assertion that Marx supposedly considered crisis “to be a structural trait” (209) is equally one-sided.
6. Graeber has recently published a book on this very topic: *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2011).
7. Hal Draper, “The Two Souls of Socialism,” *New Politics* 5.1 (Winter 1966): 57–84. Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/>>.
8. For decades, the Greek “Left” has simply been following capitalism’s orbit, trying to “resist” its dynamics, while the initiative was/is always left to the ruling class. Perhaps this was unavoidable, but it is positively reactionary to present this “resistance” as a series of successes.
9. Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970 [1923]). Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxism-philosophy.htm>>.
10. Similar issues were discussed lucidly by presenters on a panel on the problematic forms of anticapitalism today organized by the Platypus Affiliated Society. A transcript of the forum, “The 3 Rs: Reform, Revolution, and Resistance,” is available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2008/04/01>>.
11. For example, a reason why some sections of the “Left” demand an exit from the EU and the Eurozone is in order to implement an independent monetary policy, citing in support of such action the possibility of devaluing the currency and antagonistically increasing Greece’s share in international exports. In appropriate conditions, such developments could trigger more virulent forms of nationalism and much worse.
12. Quite popular at present is the idea of forming some sort of front (national or popular) to “resist” an attack that is considered similar to the Nazi occupation of Greece during the Second World War. This conception of capital as an aggressor outside the nation-state is unacceptable, especially for Marxists.
13. With regard to the KKE’s [the Communist Party of Greece—the largest “Left” party in Greece] authoritarianism, the problem again is not so much their strict manner of organizing [which is preferable to the non-organization of the anarchists] but with the illusions they cultivate, in particular that the problems of authoritarianism (or of post-1848 capitalism) can be resolved at the national level by a “popular front” under their leadership. This is the central problem with their sympathies for Stalin and is bound up with the ease with which they are capable of baptizing another form of capitalism or authority as “socialism.”
14. This “movement,” of course, given its importance, suffers from both its “anti-authoritarianism”—baptizing incoherence as merit and lack of organization and vision as hope (confirming again, today, that “direct democracy” is usually invoked so that people can maintain the illusion that everything will happen spontaneously and miraculously)—and its authoritarianism, which is on display in its hostility towards, and even rage against, trade unions and class issues in general.
15. Theodor W. Adorno, “Imaginative Excesses,” *New Left Review* 200 (July–August 1993): 12–14.

Malcolm X, continued from page 3

amendments to the Constitution, you wouldn’t be faced with civil-rights filibustering in Washington, D.C., right now.... No, I’m not an American. I’m one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism... I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don’t see any American dream; I see an American nightmare.

- [George Breitman (ed.), *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 26.]
5. Tariq Ali, “Leaving Shabazz” *New Left Review* 69 (May–June 2011): 159.
 6. “Bayard Rustin Debate,” MP3 audio file, “Malcolm X: All Time Greatest Speeches Vol. 3,” Master Classics Records, 2009.
 7. Amiri Baraka, “Review: Marable on Malcolm” May 13, 2011, available at <www.seeingblack.com/article_914.shtml>.
 8. Joseph Stalin, *Foundations of Leninism*, quoted in Baraka, “Review: Marable on Malcolm.”

What will happen after the “summer vacations” that followed the “spring offensives” (to recall the title of an old Murray Bookchin article)? As things stand right now, any development is likely to bring more catastrophes. In

Whither Marxism? Why the occupation movement recalls Seattle 1999

Chris Cutrone

THE PRESENT OCCUPATION MOVEMENT expresses a return to the Left of the late 1990s, specifically the 1999 anti-World Trade Organization protests in Seattle. They both have taken place in the last year of a Democratic U.S. Presidential administration, been spear-headed by anarchism, had discontents with neoliberalism as their motivation, and been supported by the labor movement. This configuration of politics on the Left is the “leaderless” and “horizontal” movement celebrated by such writers as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (*Empire, Multitude, Commonwealth*), John Holloway (*Change the World without Taking Power*), and others. A dominant theme in the self-understanding of the 1990s-era Left was, as in the current occupation movement, “resistance,” rather than pressing for reforms—let alone revolution.¹

From the 1990s to the present

The collapse of Stalinism in 1989 began a period of disorientation and retreat for the avowed “Marxist” Left in the 1990s. This changed in the late 1990s, as disenchantment with Clinton grew. Something similar has taken place ever since Obama’s election, amid the financial crisis, in 2008. The anti-war movement collapsed with the end of the Bush II administration. There is a lesson to be learned about the treacherous political effect of election cycles. The bailout of Wall Street at first prompted a right-wing response, the “Tea Party” movement. But, after some brief rumblings in campus occupations against austerity in 2009, ever since the Republicans captured a Congressional majority in the 2010 midterm elections, there has been a shift towards left-wing discontents, beginning with the Wisconsin State House occupation. Looking back, the movement that emerged in the late 1990s (finding an exemplar in Hugo Chavez’s “Bolivarian Revolution” in Venezuela²), blossoming in the 1999 Seattle protests, was dealt a sharp blow, right after the Genoa G-8 protests in summer 2001 that sought to build upon Seattle, by the 9/11 attacks. The standard narrative is that the anti-globalization

movement was spiked and diverted by the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath—perhaps even intentionally so, as the left-wing 9/11 “truth” movement (indicatively prominent in the current occupation movement) was paranoid that the U.S. (or Israeli) government, and not at Qaeda, had perpetrated the attacks. Anti-globalization protest became occluded in the “War on Terror” era.

2000s anti-imperialist “Marxism”

The Left that developed in the 2000s was in contrast to the 1990s. The 2000s Left saw the return of the “Marxist” political organizations, pulling the strings of the anti-war coalitions after the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, especially in the lead-up to and after the invasion and occupation of Iraq.³ The preceding 1990s Left consciousness expressed by Hardt and Negri et al. was displaced, precisely because the apparent reassertion of traditional great-power “imperialism,” regarding the U.S. neocons as the essential political players in the post-9/11 wars, defied notions of global neoliberal “Empire.” The anti-war movement of the 2000s meant a more traditional “Left” of political sectarian groups orchestrating a protest movement that had as its target a Republican U.S. administration. This meant that the anti-war movement inevitably became a shill for the Democrats, especially after Bush’s re-election in 2004, as most of the sentiment of “Left” opposition to the wars was taken from the so-called “realist” vs. neocon foreign policy perspectives of many Democrats, European statesmen, and even some Republicans.⁴

Post-Obama

Obama’s election dispelled the Left that yearned for a Democratic administration, revealing the bankruptcy of the “Marxist” Left opposing Bush’s wars. But the “anti-imperialist” turn in the 2000s had been regrettable from the perspective of the 1990s Left activists who had crystallized their experience in Seattle in 1999 and Genoa in 2001, as well as in the burgeoning “World Social Forum” movement.

The younger generation of leftists who came of age around the anti-war movement was divided between those who received their political education from Marxism vs. anarchism. The young leaders in the new Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were, for example, mentored in the Chomskyan and Parecon perspective of *Z-magazine* writers Michael Albert, et al. The new SDS struggled to be more than an anti-war cause. Anti-Marxism informed the new SDS’s “anti-ideological” bias, whose echoes return today in the occupation movement.⁵ Certainly the “Marxism” of the anti-war movement’s “anti-imperialism” was deeply problematic, to say the least. The financial collapse and deepening economic crisis after 2008 is better ground for the Left than the U.S. wars of the 2000s had been. The issue of *capitalism* has re-emerged. It is only right that such inadequate “Marxism” falters after the 2000s. Today, the “Marxist” ideological Left of sectarian organizations struggles to catch up with the occupation movement and threatens to be sidelined by it—as Marxist groups had been in Seattle in 1999. It is a measure of the bankruptcy of the “Marxist” Left that organizations could only rejuvenate themselves around the anti-war movement, in terms of “anti-imperialism,” submerging the issue of capitalism. But that moment has passed.

“Anti-capitalism”

In its place, as in Seattle in 1999, an apparently unlikely alliance of the labor movement with anarchism has characterized the occupation movement. Oppositional discontents, not with neoconservatism and imperialism as in the 2000s, but with neoliberalism and capitalism as in the 1990s, characterize the political imagination of the occupation movement. This is the present opportunity for Left renewal. But it is impaired by prior history. The issues of how capitalism is characterized and understood take on a new importance and urgency in the present moment. Now, properly understanding capitalism and neoliberalism is essential for any relevance of a Marxist approach.⁶ The discontents with neoliberalism pose the question of capitalism more deeply and not only more directly than imperialism did. A Marxist approach is more seriously tasked to address the problem of capitalism for our time.

The need for Marxism is a task of Marxism

Anarchism and the labor movement, respectively, will only be able to address the problem of capitalism in certain and narrow terms. Marxist approaches to the labor movement and anarchism are needed.⁷ The *need* for Marxism becomes the *task* of Marxism. Marxism does not presently exist in any way that is relevant to the current crisis and the political discontents erupting in it. Marxism is disarrayed, and rightfully so. The danger, though considerable, is not merely one of the labor movement and the broader popular milieu

Black nationalism and the legacy of Malcolm X

An interview with Michael Dawson

Spencer A. Leonard

Last fall, editor Spencer A. Leonard interviewed Michael Dawson, Director of the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture at the University of Chicago. The interview, which centered around a discussion of Manning Marable’s new biography of Malcolm X, was broadcast on September 30, 2011 on the radio show Radical Minds on WHPK-FM Chicago. What follows is a revised and edited transcript of the interview.

SL: Like many others in recent months, you have contributed to the controversy raging around Manning Marable’s book *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*. In your review of the book, you argue the importance of Marable’s firmly situating Malcolm X’s politics within “a long, primarily 20th century tradition of black nationalism.”¹ You then go on to say, “Marable ascribes the foundation of [Malcolm X’s] politics within the tradition established by the influential early 20th century nationalist, Marcus Garvey [founder of the largest black urban movement ever created, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, or UNIA] and the black Muslim organizations, of which the Nation of Islam was neither the first nor initially the largest... in urban black communities.” What does Marable’s book capture about the deep history of black nationalism that Malcolm X tapped into in the early 1960s? After Malcolm X’s death, how was his reception of it carried forward in the 1960s and 1970s?

MD: One controversial aspect of Marable’s analysis is his grounding of Malcolm X’s life and politics in a relatively unknown earlier history of black nationalism in the United States. This is an essential component of many forms of African-American political thought, including many forms of black radicalism. Marable attempts to recapture the degree to which black nationalism influenced progressive movements in the 20th century, including the New Left and the New Communist Movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Where I disagree is on the issue of whether there is anything left of the legacy of Malcolm X that might teach us something about rebuilding a black politics in the 21st century. Are we in fact beyond questions of self-determination, self-

defense, and black nationalism? Are these no longer germane to today’s problems and social conditions?

SL: In your review you argue that what was consistent in Malcolm X’s thought was “his outstanding ability, because of his own life experiences, to identify with and articulate the anger and demands of the poor and working class... masses of black people.” This distinguishes him, you argue, from other, mostly middle class civil rights leaders. You then add,

Another lasting legacy of Malcolm X was his insistence that black people as a people define themselves culturally, socially, and not least politically. Marable states that Malcolm X believed that black people constituted a ‘nation within a nation.’ Even as recently as early 2010, survey data inform that nearly 50 percent of African-Americans believed that they constituted a nation-within-a-nation and not just another American ethnic group.

What was most significant about Malcolm X and his ability to articulate the discontents of poor and working class blacks?

MD: Most black movements—radical movements of the New Left and the New Communist Movements included, but also earlier radical black movements—have historically been led by the middle class, sometimes with, but often without, the interests of the great majority of black working and poor people at the center of their agendas and organizing. Malcolm X took as his political starting point the interest of the person on the street, the worker, the homemaker, the small business person, in other words, the lower middle class and the working class. Certainly by the 1950s and 1960s, many were being pushed out of the American economy. Malcolm X understood that they would be central to whatever task black politics might set itself.

As to whether black people constitute a nation, Malcolm X did not originally theorize this, but he did argue that black people constitute a separate people based on their oppression and distinctive history in the United States. What holds the two issues together is that na-

tional movements throughout the world have often been captured by the middle class usually to the detriment of the great majority of members of the nation, whether they are peasants or workers or what have you, depending on which nation we are talking about. Malcolm X insisted both on the fact that black people constituted a nation and that the political interests of poor and working people should be at the forefront of any national movement.

SL: Of those who grappled with Malcolm X and his ideas in his own lifetime, one significant figure is James Baldwin, who, in his criticism of Malcolm X, argues that his black nationalism fails to adequately reckon with history. This is from a debate in 1963:

Whether I like it or not the issue of integration is a false one, because we have been integrated here since as long as we’ve been here. . . The history which has produced us in this country is something that, in any case we are going to have deal with one of these days. . . This country has lied about the Negro situation for 100 years. Now. . . the lies are no longer viable. . . No one in this country knows any longer. . . what he means by freedom. . . [or] equality. We live in the most abysmal ignorance. . . You cannot live for 30 years with something in the closet which you know is there, but which you pretend is not there without something terrible happening. . . Silence has descended upon this country.²

Was the crisis of history and of historical consciousness Baldwin identifies addressed in the years following 1963? Does Baldwin’s way of posing the issue constitute a powerful criticism of Malcolm X? In the age of Obama, have the legacies of racism and slavery been adequately addressed?

MD: Baldwin’s is a strong critique of Malcolm’s position in 1963, though I think he incorrectly thought that Malcolm X’s claim about African-Americans constituting a separate people was incompatible with the fact of black people’s integration into the American economy, first as slaves, sharecroppers, and agricultural workers in the South and, later, as industrial workers. Those facts of economic integration, along with hundreds of years of residing in the United States, do not preclude the possibility of black people’s constituting a separate nation. Malcolm X in his own work never rules out the possibility of staying in the United States both as citizens and as full and equal partners. What he did argue was self-determination, that you have the right to choose what your destiny is as a people, whether that means to stay, leave, or renegotiate the terms of staying. That’s why, in addition to the revolutionary nationalist groups such as the Black Panther Party, many Latino and Asian-American Marxist groups also supported the right to self-determination in the 1960s and 70s. The second point I want to argue is empirical. When black people are asked, as they have been many times for the last 30 years, “Do you think you are black, American, neither, or both?” the answer is, overwhelmingly, “both.” African-Americans have always felt a strong attachment to and stake in this country. But they also view

of the occupation movement feeding into the Democratic Party effort to re-elect Obama in 2012. Rather, the challenge is deeper, in that what is meant by *anti-capitalism, socialism*, and hence *Marxism* might suffer another round of superficial banalization and degradation (“We are the 99%!”) in responses to the present crisis. The Left may suffer a subtle, obscure disintegration under the guise of its apparent renaissance. Nonetheless, this is an opportunity to press the need for Marxism, to reformulate it in better terms and on a more solid basis than was possible during the anti-war movement of the 2000s. This is the gauntlet that both anarchism and the labor movement throw down at the feet of Marxism. Can Marxist approaches rise to the challenge?⁸ **IP**

1. See Michael Albert, Chris Cutrone, Stephen Duncombe, and Brian Holmes, “The 3 Rs: Reform, Revolution, and ‘Resistance’: The Problematic Forms of ‘Anti-Capitalism’ Today,” *Platypus Review* 4 (April 2008).
2. See Marco Torres: “The Dead Left: Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution,” *Platypus Review* 25 (July 2010).
3. See Kevin Anderson, Chris Cutrone, Nick Kreitman, Danny Postel, and Adam Turl, “Imperialism: What is It, Why Should We be Against It?,” *Platypus Review* 25 (July 2010).
4. See Cutrone, “Iraq and the Election: The Fog of ‘Anti-War’ Politics,” *Platypus Review* 7 (October 2008).
5. See Laurie Rojas, “Red-Baiting and Ideology: The New SDS,” *Platypus Review* 9 (December 2008).
6. See Platypus Historians Group, “Finance Capital: Why Financial Capitalism is No More ‘Fictitious’ than Any Other Kind,” *Platypus Review* 7 (October 2008); and “Friedrich Hayek and the Legacy of Milton Friedman: Neoliberalism and the Question of Freedom [In Part, a Response to Naomi Klein],” *Platypus Review* 8 (November 2008).
7. See Cutrone, “Against Dogmatic Abstraction: A Critique of Cindy Milstein on Anarchism and Marxism,” *Platypus Review* 25 (July 2010).
8. See Cutrone, “The Marxist Hypothesis: A Response to Alain Badiou’s ‘Communist Hypothesis’,” *Platypus Review* 29 (November 2010).

themselves as separate. This is due both to the common culture and history and to the ongoing oppression in civil society and from the state. As to whether that legacy still exists today, I read just yesterday about the lynching of a black autoworker in Mississippi by white teenagers.³ So, no, I don’t think we live in a post-racial society. Being an African-American still leads to lesser life chances, whether we’re talking about wealth, employment opportunities, health, education, the ability to live or work where one lives with the sanctity and safety in one’s own person, etc. This is racial. Despite the election of Barack Obama, we do not live in a post-racial world.

What has changed considerably, and not at all to the surprise of those whose analysis is similar to the one Malcolm X once had, is the sharpening of class differences among blacks. Today there is not only a strong black middle class, one no longer based on selling services to other black people, but also a fairly well-established black upper-middle class that has risen on the neoliberal tide. Finally, there is the development of a real black bourgeoisie—or, rather, you now have black members of the bourgeoisie. Even though you still see the racial dynamics that Malcolm X, and for that manner Baldwin, recognized intuitively, you also see increasingly economic divisions among black people. The development of a black upper middle class integrated into the mainstream economy, black members of the bourgeoisie, and neoliberal ideology dominating large segments of the black middle and upper classes are conditions that did not exist at the time that Malcolm and others were attempting to build black united fronts. In short, I think Baldwin is wrong to make it an either-or: “Either black people have a stake in the United States, or they constitute a distinct people.” Malcolm X took a more radical view when he said that black people were at the table, but were not diners.⁴

SL: The debate on the Left around the question of black nationalism and of self-determination has always hinged on how to cope politically with the legacy of slavery and racism, that is, the race-divided character of the working class. How does the advocacy of national self-determination for oppressed minorities relate to the project of constituting working class politics?

MD: On this topic I would recommend reading Abram Lincoln Harris, the black Marxist economist, and the work of Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore on the attempts of the Workers’ Party of America [later the Communist Party] to organize workers in the context of racial division within the working class. There are several historic tendencies that demand attention. The Socialist Party insisted on segregation, and insisted that black people keep quiet about racial divisions in the working class. The Communist Party had a tremendous problem, particularly in the 1920s, before the shift in political line, in trying to achieve a unified working class movement while navigating white workers’ insistence on, to be blunt, white supremacy in the Communist Party and within the working class.