To the victor, the spoils

Review of Artforum's May 2008 issue "May '68"

Benjamin Blumberg

"We succeeded culturally. We succeeded socially. And we lost politically.... I always say: 'thank God!' — Daniel Cohn-Bendit in interview on 1968, conducted by Yascha Mounk for The Utopian (2008)

"[0]ne asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor.... Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror.... There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain." - Walter Benjamin,

"Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940)

IN ITS MAY 2008 ISSUE, the most commercially successful art criticism publication, Artforum, dedicated its pages to the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of May 1968. The publication presented contributions by many of the leading figures in contemporary critical theory, all of whom have a distinctive sense of indebtedness to that brief period four decades ago, dubbed by Herbert Marcuse as the "Great Refusal." Included in the issue's contents are the reflections of the art historian, Arthur C. Danto, who, while faculty at Columbia University in 1968, witnessed firsthand the student uprising and occupation of several campus buildings; the philosopher Antonio Negri, one of the paragons of postmodern anti-capitalist political theory who earned his stripes as an activist throughout the 1970s in Italy's Autonomia movement; and Sylvère Lotringer, founder of the journal Semiotext(e) which is credited with bringing the lessons of the Parisian May '68 into the currents of American intellectual life in the form of French postmodernist theory. In addition to these authors, the issue includes reflections provided by several others who claim varying degrees of notoriety and specialty within the web of postmodern critical theory: Ti-Grace Atkinson, Chris Kraus, Michelle Kuo, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Tom McDonough, Liam Gillick, Sally Shafto, Tom Holert and

In the issue's editorial statement, Tim Griffin explains

that Artforum's intention was to "[look] at May 1968 specifically in historical counterpoint...[in order to bring] the questions of '68 to bear on today." Such a "reflexive" approach, Griffin claims, is a corrective to the intellectual danger that "in approaching these events today, one is inevitably in jeopardy of addressing not the events of 1968 so much as the stories already spun about them; and...one is also in jeopardy of...either succumbing to vapid nostalgia or dismissing the time as the stuff of myth." Against these reductive modes of interpretation, Griffin counterposes the underling approach taken by the issue's contributors. He explains, "[f]or throughout these pages, essayists repeatedly underline the ways in which the very creative models and concepts that propelled '68...are now threads in the vast fabric of commerce and industry. Regardless of whether these observations provide a measure of the success of May's enragés or of their appeasement...lessons for today become apparent. What then are the lessons revealed by reflection on

the persistence of 1968's significance? Is it enough to simply point out that the modes of thought which activated consciousness in '68 have now become integrated and coopted? Or, despite the best efforts of the critical inheritors of 1968, do we still lack substantial critical reflection on why 1968 still "bears" on today?

A partial key to this shortcoming is found in the predilection toward the defining ideas, passions, and actions of 1968 exhibited by Artforum's contributing essayists. For instance, in his column "Before the Revolution," Arthur C. Danto nostalgically remembers the occupation of several of Columbia University's buildings as "the great student uprising," characterized by its "singular political inventiveness." Chris Kraus, assessing the 1970s radical sex-publication *Suck*, gives the glib formulation: "Perhaps the greatest promise of May '68 arose with an eruption of spontaneity that...suggested it might indeed be possible to live differently.

Danto and Kraus's banal phrases of admiration indicate one side of the underlying problem with the perspective offered by Artforum. Although willing to recognize that '68's inventions and awakenings have been subsumed by "commerce and industry" in today's society, the essayists nevertheless assume that 1968 was a breakthrough in regards to its own moment. This assumption remains essentially unaltered, even though the essayists are canny enough to modify it by pointing to the inconclusiveness of their understanding of exactly what constitutes 1968's progressive content. As Sylvère Lotringer claims in his essay chronicling the Parisian events of '68, "[s]omething happened in the "joli Mai" of 1968—just what precisely remains subject to debate. Yet no one doubts that it was...one of the



Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Paris, May 6, 1968, surrounded by other student protesters on the way to a hearing before the disciplinary commission of the

most seminal political events of the twentieth century." Lotringer's essay and the interview he conducts with Antonio Negri enjoy the chief role of portraying for readers of Artforum the discernable features of 1968's breakthrough. What is decisive for Lotringer is the sense that 1968's progress corresponded to "profound [social] changes" in which, "[e]verything was breaking down and shifting around, as in a kaleidoscope." Lotringer understands the events of 1968 as expressions of a newly emergent political consciousness, which, paraphrasing Herbert Marcuse, he explains was based on the notion that because "[a]dvanced industrial societies [have] successfully managed to integrate the working class...only radical minorities could be counted on... to practice the 'great refusal.'" The implication is clear. The organized working class had ceased to be the revolutionary bulwark, and therefore it was incumbent upon anti-capitalist theoreticians and practitioners to reinvent politics

Of course, Lotringer and the other essayists are not so one-sided as to completely cut the working class out of their conception of revolution. Instead, acknowledging the former Marxist theoretical system—or at least their idea of it—they offer rationalizations for what Lotringer

calls their "tinkering." In his conversation with Lontringer, Negri does not style his political theory as post-proletariat; instead he claims that the proletariat has been fundamentally transformed through the "rejection of Taylorist and Fordist organizations of labor" coupled with the rise in importance of "immaterial labor." Such statements, while seemingly insightful, are in fact equivocations. Only vulgar Marxism is rendered obsolete by the recognition that postmodern capitalism may have transformed the proletariat and the concrete labor it does. In its best exemplars, Marxism theoretically explains why the proletariat—and the society determined by its existence— is necessarily subject to ceaseless transformations (which remain however out of its conscious control). The proletariat's dynamism is equally decisive for Marxist politics, which sets itself the goal of bringing the dynamic under conscious control in order to initiate a process of global transformation into a new form of social "metabolism." Despite Negri's recognition that the proletariat is subject to change, he cannot see it as the actual element of continuity binding our moment to past arrangements of capitalism. Instead, he argues that 1968 "was a jump, a division in history, a rupture." By

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The Platypus Review

Taking stock of the multifaceted universe of positions and goals that constitute Left politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that perhaps a deeper commonality under lies this apparent variety: what exists today is built on the desiccated remains of what was once felt to be possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accu-

mulation of positions on the Left, and to evaluate their saliency for an emancipatory politics of the present. Doing this work implies a reconsideration of what we mean by "the Left". This task necessarily begins from what we see as a prevalent feature of the Left today: a general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disen chantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us. 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 inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke productive disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past might be elevated to an ongoing critique that seeks to clarify its object.

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. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commit ment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

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@vahoogroups.com

Senior Editors: Pam C. Nogales C Editors: Benjamin Blumberg Soren Whited Ashleigh Campi Tana Forrester

Designer: Pam C. Nogales C

Marco Torres Copy Editors: Ashleigh Campi

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The Hundred Days campaign: the present and future of SDS

An interview with Rachel Haut conducted by Laurie Rojas on August 12, 2008

From July 24th until July 28th 2008, the new Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) had its third annual national convention in College Park, Maryland. At the convention, national campaigns were presented and voted on by the attendees. A major campaign introduced at the convention was the Hundred Days campaign, which seeks to organize and engage newly politicized Americans in politics beyond the campaign season. During the first one hundred days of the next administration the campaign will organize two nationwide weeks of action to ensure that the people remain involved in politics after the election cycle. Laurie Rojas, member of Chicago SDS, collaborating author of the Hundred Days campaign and editor of the Platypus Review interviews Rachel Haut, labor researcher, member of the New York non-student SDS chapter, and collaborating author of the Hundred Days campaign.

Laurie Rojas: One of the most important decisions made during the 2008 SDS National Convention was the passing of the national structure. You were the author of one of the three main decision-making structure proposals, can you talk a little about the most essential characteristics of the structure proposal you submitted?

Rachel Haut: The structure proposal that I submitted and later combined with a structure submitted by two students from Florida SDS was the most minimalistic structure offered. I felt that because there were so few people participating in national SDS, we really didn't have the capabilities to do anything else outside the convention at this time. So, the structure proposal that we wrote would make our annual conventions the decision making body. Working groups get to carry out the decisions made in the convention throughout the year, and make decisions through that mandate. There were a couple of more details of course, but that was the gist of it.

LR: Retrospectively, why do you think your structure proposal did not pass? Why didn't it receive majority support?

RH: I felt like all the other proposals had a clear ideological line, and ours didn't, and that's why ours would work. A lot of people at the convention thought we were capable of having a national structure that could make decisions throughout the year. I don't think that. A lot of times they posed the question of what would happen if an emergency situation came up. I don't think that there are going to be a lot of situations that require a national organization to just jump in. So that wasn't a concern of mine, but it was for others. I guess they wanted more structure and a mechanism that could facilitate building the national

organization while still encompassing our values and principles. Which, at face value, the proposal that passed at the convention didn't encompass, but with the amendments proposed during the convention, the structure was

LR: What do you think will be some of the challenges presented by the new structure we just passed, with the amendments included? I am afraid that the national working committee is going to spend three to four months just figuring out how they are going to make decisions internally, what decisions they should be making, etc.

RH: One of the big challenges is actually getting the structure to work. I guess we are just going to have to wait and see if people are going to step up and actually do what they committed to and create a decision-making process within the national working committee. I am not too concerned that they're going to take too much power; I am more concerned that they are just not going to do anything that they said they would and we will come back to the convention next year and have nothing. I do believe that there are people who have been with SDS for a while and that do have an agenda. Most of the people with experience in the national working committee don't have an agenda. However, there are a few people that might not even have enough experience to know how to hold these

LR: What do you mean having an agenda?

RH: They are members of FRSO, the Freedom Road Socialist Organization, a Maoist organization. FRSO had a split in 1999; there is a FRSO "soft" and a FRSO "hard." The FRSO hard has a couple of members in the national working committee. I believe that Maoism is in opposition to a democratic society, and thus their position or reason for being in SDS is opportunist. We are attempting to build a student movement not a Maoist movement.

LR: During the convention, people pointed out who the members of FRSO were, as well as who the "crazy" anarchists were. But I never had the opportunity to have an ideological discussion about what kind of differences existed in the organization. There were no conversations where I had a clear representation of differences; I don't really know the politics or the ideological inclination of the different kinds of anarchists or Maoists in the SDS. I don't have an image of what they stand for. Why do you think the ideological conversation is avoided? Because it is avoided, and people are really careful to make sure the conversation doesn't go there. I want to know why we're steering away from an ideological discussion when it might clearly affect decisions at the national level.

RH: One of the SDS facilitators at the convention told me that the ideological differences need to be discussed and she wanted to do something about it. I said that I didn't know if this was the right time. She asked why. I said that the kind of conversation concerning building a democratic society has to happen, especially an ideological conversation--because there are differences. However, I think it is inappropriate to have conversations about ideological differences when we still have Maoists in the organization. Why should we be having these conversations with them, including them in the discussion, if their ideology is in direct opposition to building a democratic society? To say that the Maoists can be part of the ideological debate would mean to condone them being in this organization, which is something I don't do. In the New York City SDS I have spoken numerous times with SDSers who are not Maoists about having the Maoists or certain kinds of anarchists in our organization, because both sides hurt us. If we want to build a democratic society, and we want to be relevant, both of these opposing forces are working against us. There are varying degrees of anarchism, definitely, as well as varying degrees of socialism. But, I think ideas that conflict with our vision and our goals need to be clearly defined and excluded before we can actually start talking about our ideological differences formally as a national organization.

LR: For me, it is important to somehow clearly define where certain types of politics stand and how they affect the organization. This concerns me because there is a lack of clarity about how these differences express themselves. Maybe if these distinctions or ideological differences were put on the table it would allow us to better understand what the organization stands for. Perhaps, we missed a moment to not only separate the politics or the ideology that doesn't fit the organization, but to more clearly define the goals of the organization itself. Do you really think it would have been damaging to have the Maoists, the anarchists, and everybody else in the room be able to realize whether or not we share goals?

RH: Possibly, except we don't have a mechanism to be able to say to somebody: "you are not interested in building a democratic society and you are not welcome in this organization." To put that on that table, but to have no way of questioning it would be premature, or possibly dangerous. I have had lengthy discussions about the fact that SDS has a vision statement, which is very good, well worded, and defines who we are as an organization: we are not a vanguard. What could it mean to write, propose, vote, and implement campaigns that would incorporate our vision? It could possibly allow us to start dealing with these forces. The Student Power campaign and Hundred Days campaign are both working on making us relevant, and are following the vision statements. These campaigns will allow us to grow as an organization. These factional forces on either side are going to eventually drop out or be outnumbered.

LR: So the fear right now is an ideological confrontation could be a major conflict, and that it might precipitate a seriously divisive moment between people who want to handle the problem differently. So is there fear of a major split?

RH: I don't think that there should be a split; I think that we should just start implementing our vision of strategic campaigns. And we should focus less on certain campaigns, like the proposal to protest McCain that was submitted by FRSO, which is a reactionary campaign that does not achieve a goal. We can be a less viable organization for these people if we are not achieving their goals. We can continue to organize, to build power without catering to any of those forces, we don't need to have protests to actually get things done, just protests as tactics. This is probably the best first step we can take.

LR: Another significant moment of the convention happened around the campaign proposals. Chicago SDS and NYC SDS chapters submitted campaign proposals that seek to use the coming elections, especially the Obama rhetoric of "hope" and "change," as a pivotal moment for SDS to coordinate actions, build alliances, organize nationally, and hence grow stronger. In hopes of making our campaign stronger we combined our proposals, and presented them at the national convention. How did the idea for the Hundred Days Campaign emerge in NY?

RH: I think it emerged after talking to some people from Chicago SDS at the Left Forum (March 14-16, NYC). We started the conversation there, went off in different directions, created two different proposals, and then we merged them again. Dave Shukla and I spoke on the SDS panel at the Left Forum about building a revolutionary student movement. Afterwards, some of the people from Chicago came up to us. We got pizza and we started talking about organizing something around the elections and about how we've got to be relevant. Originally, the woman who initiated

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Intersectionality" continues on page 4

empathize with him. agenda, and then work with him to find an alternative front him for trying to make the conversation about his the corner say what it is he has to say, be willing to conlearn and grow. I have to let old white male leftists in ference—to think intersectionally, we have to let others Harper's statement taught me that, to embrace difimportant as the conclusion I drew from his statement. se ton si biss and this." What he said is not as been less offensive," or "If she had thought about it this she had framed her comment this way, it would have said something constructive to the group like, "Well, if handled the situation much better than her. Harper there was a young white man in the room, Harper, who

She then referenced an earlier session where a fective response. They fucking up." She confessed that this is not an efreaction is to say, "Get this motherfucker out the room. prevents the conversation from developing, her first room and a white woman says something racist, which

confront the woman and became angry. She said

young white woman said something racist. Kaila didn't

able. Kaila, like myself, confessed that when she is in a about organizing but got something far more valu-I asked this question and didn't really get an answer ful groups were as collectives around which to organize. cerning the embrace of difference, I wondered how use-Given this historical reality, and Kaila's comments con-American women theirs, and Asian women theirs.

white women do their thing, Chicana's theirs, Native race woman's movement. Black women do their thing, nonwhite feminists. Consequently, there is no cross unpack their racism and learn from the experiences of of situations where white women have refused to torically, the woman's movement is rife with examples groups than struggling across and against them. His-In practice, it's easier and safer to think about separate Our support for self-determination is partly selfish.

little intersecting.

what they need, we can all get together. There is very are black lesbian workers, and think that once they get tives, without paying any attention to the fact that there of these separate groups as self determining colleclesbians, transgender folk, or disabled people. We think ancy as workers, black people, women, gays folks and think of the agents of revolution as monolithic groups level, all been influenced by Marxism-Leninism, tend to radical circles. Radical organizers, who have, at some what her position meant for the way we organize in Because what Kaila said made sense, I questioned

not focus on sameness as a prerequisite for political begin to embrace difference as a place of strength, and She urged us to take Audre Lorde's suggestion that we presence but also because of her way of dress and age. have a hard time with her not only because of her racial

of Louisville and said that her white female colleagues her experience as a faculty member at the University she brought up genuer and sexuality. She talked abou black men in black studies would call her divisive when her divisive when she brought up black things and how yet white colleagues in women's studies would call she's been a part of. She shared how, as an undergrad, oppressions in various academic and political spaces ing with the tack of conversation concerning intersecting

I came back on Sunday and had a transformative experi-The conversation after her keynote was so engaging that school, was the keynote and I hadn't seen her in years. SEXions, because Kaila Story, an old friend from grad School University Social Justice Conference, Inter-This past April, I attended the third annual New

Kaila's keynote was largely personal narrative deal-

line utilizes an intersectional analysis are typically led by capitalist. Consequently, organizations whose political triarchal in addition to being white supremacist and advantaged because we live in a society that is pato understand that most of us are both oppressed and oppressions. On the other hand, most men still fail by oppression at different locations within a nexus of the ways in which they as white women are impacted a handful of white feminists have begun to examine have followed up with Beal's project. In recent years, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Gloria Anzaldua Over the next forty years women like Audre Lorde, irrelevant to the struggle for black women's liberation. racist, aspects of the white women's movement were women's movement were not anti-capitalist and antimiddle class and that, because aspects of the white they served as the medical testing ground for the white experienced a unique form of sexual repression because had always worked. Beal also argued that black women tation because, unlike white middle class women, they that they experienced a unique torm of economic exploiwomen the Moynihan report painted them to be and Manifesto Beal argued that black women were not the intersectional political thought. In The Black Woman's Black Women's Manifesto marks the birth of modern raced women were impacted by sexist oppression, The to raise questions about the different ways differently Female. While Beal was certainly not the first woman Women's Manifesto; Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and en's Alliance founder Francis Beal wrote The Black IN 1969, SUCC member and Third World Wom-

Matthew Birkhold

transformation Intersectionality and On the corner: "Obama" continues on page 2

cence of their politics. Even Reed evinces this effect. nm, or rather lear what he mignt represent: the ot Left" is that they cannot decide whether they really want in character. The problem that Obama presents for the is appropriate or realistic, and both are equally hysteric ways, through idolization or demonization. But neither People on the "Left" respond to Obama in ambivalent and how the "Left" is responsible.

Obama represents, we need to ask why this might be so, ing Obama more generally. If Reed is correct about what the "Left," which Reed has raised as an issue surroundneeds to be grasped in light of ideology, specifically on struggles for racial justice to reforms of political economy The diminished possibility of substantially linking

on the existing "Left."

be addressed first are the effects of the Obama candidacy This is a serious matter to consider. However, what must reproduced inequality rooted in political economy." between notions of racial disparity and structurally will likely sever the last threads of any connection Read Obama presidency (maybe even just his candidacy)

In his recent article, Reed writes that, instance of the "cultish" quality of the Obama campaign. which had been hampered by hyperbolic accusations, for and less rhetorical engagement than his prior critique, on-line at: www.blackagendareport.com) marks a deeper to be going" (in the Black Agenda Report, July 16, 2008, Reed's most recent article, "Where Obamaism seems social interests of black Americans.

Obama candidacy might be a setback for the political and

ers nave been pernaps tess open about saying, that the Reed's criticisms have articulated something that oth-מות ווטג או פנפוות נט מפ פווץנוווווץ מעג אוופג צוופ וב. טעפו פגג, perhaps out of Reed's respect for the fact that Clintor as some kind of backstop against the Obama effect by Obama went too far in his endorsement of Clinton but Reed's attempts to scotch illusory hopes raised to the blindness of enthusiasm surrounding Obama, in his emergence in Chicago politics. Reed has pointed Reed has been keen to disenchant Obama from early (i.e., not even "reformist") Democratic Party politics. only a marketing ploy of otherwise typically "centrist" the Obama phenomenon is no social movement, but Reed has been quick to point out the obvious, that he endorsed Hillary as a "lesser evil" over Obama. years ago to "not vote for a Clinton for anything" when false notes, not least Reed going back on a pledge made Democratic Party primary election season hit some phenomenon. Reed's journalistic criticisms during the has published several articles critical of the Obama best thinker in American politics for a generation tor Adolph L. Reed, Jr. — he is perhaps the single political scientist and critical intellectual commenta-For instance, the usually discerning and astute black especially regarding the significance of his blackness. There is as much anxiety as hope stirred by Obama, has been as significant as the embrace of his candidacy. achieve social justice. Rejection of Obama on this basis who claim to want to overcome anti-black racism and But it has proven confusing for most on the "Left," THE ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA will be an event.



The end of "black politics" Obama: Progress in regress

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The Platypus Historians Group

"One cannot separate the ability to know the world from the ability to change it, and our capacity to change the world is on a very small scale compared to the heroic days of the Communist International

-James Robertson, founder of the Spartacist League (U.S.), "In Defense of Democratic Centralism" (1973)

Zombies and Sectarians

What does it mean to say, as Platypus does, that "the Left

It represents the desire for a tabula rasa, for a start from scratch. It is the admission that there is no living tradition, no movement to join in the Marxist Left; That it has been defeated and that it has self-destructed. It means that the Maoisms and Trotskyisms that today stumble around like zombies in the form of tiny sectarian groups have either given themselves to dishonestly cheerleading for the Green and Democratic parties or simply have become antiquarian societies reciting old revolutionary pieties with the mechanical enthusiasm of Hare-Krishna monks; While at the same time the "radicals" and "anarchists" that prescribe dropping out of society by building "alternative communities" "outside of capitalism" have rationalized their powerlessness into a lifestyle that poses as politics.

The Left is dead—and whatever undead elements of it continue to stagger among us deserve to be put down before they demoralize and stupefy a new generation.

But it must be said: calling for the end of a previous model of Leftist politics is nothing new. Both the "down with the old, in with the new" and the "return to fundamentals" move is familiar on the Left. Examples of this abound in academia—but also in the militant Left, with examples such as the rejection of Soviet Marxism that characterized the New Left of the 1960s and the "return to Lenin" or "return to Marx" theories of Western Maoist groups in the same era. Also, worst of all, from the false sense of "emancipation" and "freedom from the past" that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the "death of communism" gave to most on the self-described Left—a sense of triumphalism that is still with us

For a Left that has gone from its death agony to its rigor mortis while fighting the good fight, the wish to escape the past has meant the willingness to repeat its mistakes; either by the unreflective disowning of past failures (e.g., New Left anti-communism) or simply by tailing behind events too large to control or influence (post-soviet triumphalism). To reach for the new without having mastered the old is an indication of a desire to close one's eyes to the way that the past continues to haunt the present, wresting it from our control.

For these reasons, Platypus looks at the past neither as something to turn away from nor as a tradition to uphold. Instead we see it as the set of failures which have determined our own existence and our own project. We

see our task as the investigation of these failures, from the most obtuse ones to the most brilliant ones, for the purpose of critically considering the possibilities for Leftist politics today.

With this in mind, we have offered a set of starting points and critical positions that that have met with hostility and accusations from the walking-corpse-Left. Our interest in rescuing the deep roots of Marxist thought in the high liberalism of thinkers like Kant and Hegel has made us mere "liberals" in the eyes of the undead. For them, we simply cannot truly be "radicals," since we don't reject "bourgeois ideology" tout court.

A more interesting accusation has taken place when

zombie sectarians such as the ISO and the Spartacist League have called us "pro-imperialist" and "neo-conservatives" in response to our critique of the dishonesty, nihilism and stupidity of the American and European antiwar movements. These movements, we have argued, have tended to fall into support for the "war as bad business" anti-war argument of the Democratic Party—or worse, have tacitly supported the fascistic, right-wing forces that oppose the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan. The possibility of explaining both the nature of today's American imperialism and the (all too sane) demented politics of the Islamist opposition to the US in a single unitary critique of present social reality seems to be beyond the perspective of the dwindling anti-war movement and the sectarian "revolu-

tionary" groups that cling to this movement for dear life. There is a bit of historical irony in that the authoritarianly Manichean worldview of today's "Left," labels anyone who raises any of these concerns a "neo-con." Ironic because the emergence of neo-conservatism was indeed an artifact of the Left's own self-destruction, since the initiators and first followers of this tendency were Left-liberals and ex-Trotskyists that had come to reject a "Left" that by the 1960s had little to offer but the unviability of Moscow on the one hand, and, on the other, the New Left's refusal to think.

Second International Radicalism and Trotsky:

"The last man standing

The third label Platypus gets branded with is the most interesting one, and the one closest to the truth: that we

In fact, Platypus is in no way a Trotskyist organization, but we think that Leon Trotsky's thought and the heroic—and losing—struggle that he fought after his exile from the Soviet Union are necessary for an understanding of the thwarted potential for emancipation represented by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

Trotsky and his project in exile represented "the last man standing" of a kind of historical consciousness that we in Platypus have come to refer to as Second International radicalism. This was the consciousness of a political task in a specfic moment in history that is best

represented by the names Lenin, Luxemburg, Korsch Liebknecht, and Trotsky: all of them dissenting members of the conservative Second Socialist International. During the lead-up to the First World War, the Second International, having the largest membership it had ever had, recoiled from its avowed commitment to proletarian revolution: Each member party of the International supported their government's war effort. Second International radicalism, instead of seeing in the war an unfortunate event out of its control, saw it as precisely the crisis of the capitalist system that indicated an opportunity for proletarian revolution. It was a crisis in which the growth of the contradictory forces of capital gave birth to a series of imperialist conflicts that culminated in the largest war mankind had ever seen. With the international bourgeois order in disarray and a powerful workers movement, the Second International radicals thought that it was the moment for the insurrectionary struggle that would topple

This understanding of the situation was what led Lenin's Bolsheviks to take power in October of 1917, after a workers' and soldiers revolt, triggered by Russia's defeats in the war, succeeded in ousting the Tsar. This was also what led Rosa Luxemburg's revolutionary party, the Spartakusbund to attempt, and fail, to grab hold of the leadership of the proletarian revolution in Germany in 1918-19.

bourgeoisie's rule.

For most of the Second International socialists, Lenin's coup was an irrational gamble. And a gamble it was—though not wholly irrational. In the vision of Lenin and Trotsky, the Soviet Union was meant to be merely a foothold into the crisis of the War, a foothold that would come into fruition only if proletarian revolts took power in other Western European nations. This was necessary because it was certain that as soon as the Bolsheviks established their regime, the imperialist governments that surrounded them would attack and easily destroy it. This attack in fact happened, when Germany, Britain and Japan lent their support to the various right-wing military coups that were attempting to take down the Bolsheviks after 1918. And since revolutions across Europe that the Bolsheviks so desperately needed either did not take place or were violently put down—as in the case of Germany—the Bolsheviks saw themselves forced to fight tooth and nail

They were—miraculously—not destroyed. But holding on to power had its cost. The regime was isolated. After Lenin's death, despite the attempts of Leon Trotsky's Left Opposition to steer the Soviet Union back into a world-revolutionary perspective, Stalin was able to take complete control and lead the regime into capitulating and accepting "socialism in one country" by 1928. This was a policy that destroyed any kind of revolutionary perspective by making the Soviet Union into a nation state whose condition of permanent social and economic crisis fostered the growth of a bloody, repressive, totalitarian bureaucratic regime.

From his exile in 1928 to his assassination in 1940 Trotsky struggled to build a movement from outside of the Soviet Union whose aim would be to strengthen non-Stalinist international communism around the world and to rescue the Soviet Union from its conservative regime. His movement, which came to be known as the Fourth International, despite a growth of membership in the United States and France, was too weak to really take off, and after Trotsky's death suffered splintering and disorganization—a process of decay that slowly transformed Trotsky's movement into the petty and squabbling, cultish and hysterical, Trotskyism of today.

Trotsky was not only the single political figure that was able to maintain a revolutionary perspective of the Second International radicals in a time of reaction. He was also the last surviving exemplar of the revolutionary political consciousness produced by what was arguably the single moment in history up to date when the transition to socialism was a real possibility: 1917-1921. By the 1930s Lenin was dead. Luxemburg and Liebknecht had been brutally murdered, Karl Korsch had become fervently anti-soviet, and Georg Lukacs, the most important theoretician of this moment, had weakened and adapted himself to Stalinism. Only Trotsky and his movement stood—in exile and with little power—without succumbing to either of the two dominant perspectives on the Soviet Union of the time. The first one was support for Stalin's conservative, Thermidorian regime. The second, the kind of liberalism that in observance of the need of democracy and human rights, wished to see a restoration of bourgeois rule in the region.

For Trotsky, the fight against Stalinism was the fight to make the Soviet Union a revolutionary force once again. The fight to preserve the Soviet Regime and avoid the restoration of bourgeois rule was necessary, since, as he predicted, such restoration would only bring about a right-wing dictatorship. Something that in fact belatedly came true in the form of Vladimir Putin's ominous hold over Russia today.

If a deepening of the contradictions of capitalism and an increase in the possibility of socialism can be traced in a line that goes from the European Revolutions of 1848, to the Paris Commune of 1871, to the founding of the Second Socialist International in 1891, to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917; and if this line is only broken by a line of regress brought into being by the World Wars, Nazism and the Cold War; then Leon Trotsky's political consciousness can be seen as the last vestige of a Left not yet in decay. Trotsky's movement was thus the last exemplar of a movement that was the highest expression in theory and practice in emancipatory politics since Marx

This is the Left that informs Platypus's critique of the

Trotsky-ism in Regression

But doesn't this estimation of the history of the Left leave us only the option of becoming a Trotskyist organization like the ones whose mode of operation these days is to accost hapless protesters with shrill accusations of Menshevism before asking them to buy their newspaper for a dollar? If the tradition behind Trotskyism is in fact the richest one in emancipatory politics, why is the Trotskyism of the present so rotten?

We would indeed be in a great place politically if, as some of the necro-sectarian Trotskyists of today claim, what we needed to do was simply to build a Leninist proletarian party. But in the era of decline of opportunities for emancipatory politics that began in the 1930s and

"Trotskvism" continues on page

Hundred Days, continued from page 2

the discussion had the idea of doing something right after Election Day. She said we should protest, and we responded that we couldn't protest the first black American president, but perhaps we could have teach-ins. I am not sure whether it was Dave or I who had the idea for the Hundred Days campaign. At the same time people from Chicago were starting to talk about doing student actions together, and even a week of action was mentioned in those early conversations. We finally came together because we had the same goals; they had just been written a little differently.

LR: I know perfectly well who those people were, Pam Nogales, Greg Gabrellas and Ben Shepard, I remember them coming back and telling us about the Left Forum conversation. Now, as you and I already know our proposal did not pass at the national convention, although we did have majority support. We are still working on getting full SDS support and trying to get it passed by the new national working committee. Why do you think this campaign should be a national SDS priority?

RH: In order to become a viable student organization and powerful force for social change we must be relevant to the elections. How many thousands of students are getting excited about the elections, voting for the first time and getting involved in politics for the first time? I worked on the Nader campaign in 2000, and I remember a couple of people with buttons and pins. But now on the subway in New York I see thousands of Obama pins everywhere. You do not see McCain pins everywhere. You never saw Bush pins or Kerry pins everywhere. It's a social phenomenon that's really coming from a grassroots base. I've seen bake sales for Obama. There is an incredible development of grassroots fundraising; about 90% of his donors are from small contributions, although about 55% of the money he is getting is from corporations. People hear a great message of hope and change. We also want change, we know that this society isn't working and we want to propose alternative solutions that go beyond electing someone to take our power away. So for lack of a better word, we have to capitalize on this. If we don't do the Hundred Days cam paign we might be a larger organization, but we wouldn't have changed much.

LR: I also felt that the Hundred Days campaign will allow us to reach out to newly politicized students nationally. If we get full SDS national support for the Hundred Days campaign and succeed in making the two weeks of action happen, what visible changes and benefits can we expect for SDS?

RH: It will push SDS to organize at another level. That's why we really have to push the campaign, because the campaign is the best way to build a relevant national organization. We will learn how to talk with different people, how to bring people into our organization, and how to collaborate with different kinds of organizations. We need to make our organization accessible and appealing

to new people, and slowly integrate them into the process on the basis of their skills and interests. We need to bring people in through the discussions that politicized us. We need to meet students where they are at. Beyond working with students, it is absolutely essential to work with other organizations that build other social movements. We don't have the ability to organize workers, but we need coalitions with organized labor and its base. SDS needs to develop into a force for change on the national scene, capable of keeping the Obama presidency accountable and responding when it fails. I think this campaign is a great beginning, because it provides the opportunity to build coalitions and fellowships with other groups with the long term goal in mind of gaining political power.

LR: After the Hundred Days, how will we be able to judge the success of this campaign?

RH: If we have developed working relationships with other organizations that would be a success. Also, being able to figure out what could have improved so that we can do better next time. Knowing that SDS can be part of something big, knowing that we don't have to lead it, but that we can be a part of shifting this country to the left, that would

LR: I want to pull away from the campaign, and look at the big picture in the form of a comparison with SDS in the 60's and SDS now. What do you think are some of the most pressing unresolved problems that SDS faced in the 60's that we still face in the present?

RH: Well, first, it's still predominantly white. A couple of different things come to mind. There are a large amount of students in SDS now who are enamored with the 60's, who fetishize it, specifically the Weather Underground, and all of their tactics. I believe that the conditions of capitalism have greatly changed since the 60's movement. We're in a kind of contradictory situation because the SDS in the 60's has this great legacy that gives us energy and provides a lot of potential. But it is also a burden. People repeat the same mistakes just because the 60's were cool. They do these tactics because SDS in the 60's grew so big. But it failed. Now, under the different conditions of capitalism, we are still repeating the same tactics, and expecting different results -- being in a counterculture that's into drugs and having orgies and trying to make SDS cool again. I don't see people learning from the lessons of the past, realizing that although SDS grew a lot, it failed. Those tactics might work for a little while, but we need to have long term strategies. We need to build a movement for the long haul that can be about students getting involved in

LR: What is your vision of SDS in 5 years?

organization building a democratic society. There has been a lot of emphasis on tearing things down, with the proposals presented at the national convention like "stop I-69", or stopping the war, instead we need to start building something that can replace capitalism. Let's build a democratic structure that can mirror the society we want to see developed. I want to see SDS building a movement that teaches people how to organize SDS on campuses across the nation, including in technical schools. We must be a cool, sexy organization that is at the same time efficient at involving new people, and getting them active in campaigns that can achieve immediate short term goals while building something bigger. SDS has to have a place for political discussions, but also has to have a place to be social, and talk about music. We need to be an organization that can train people to do grassroots organizing, and that can sustain itself while it grows and changes.

RH: I am really excited about the Hundred Days campaign, although we have a lot of work ahead of us. Whether national SDS endorses it, the chapters that partake in the campaign are going to become huge and develop the ability to work with other groups. Those chapters are going to be really powerful, and this campaign will potentially allow them to participate in social change in their areas. I know that's where I am going to be putting all of my energy.

After conducting this interview, I now realize that there are terms we on the Left commonly use and, more often than not, take their meaning for granted. For example, I have no doubt that Rachel Haut and I have different ideas of what terms like "ideology," "democracy," "radical," "anarchist" or "socialist" mean. The term "democratic" most clearly expresses this problem in SDS. The result is that both sides of a disagreement can claim to have democratic principles on their side. This represents a larger problem for the Left. We have inherited terminology like "alienation," "oppression," "Marxism," and "liberalism" without a sufficient understanding or agreement about what these terms may mean today. Worse, we have even lost the desire to clarify those terms for ourselves and for each other, often opting for neologisms and neglecting clarification. This clarification is necessary if we wish to advance the possibility of social transformation. The largest and most troubling term we face is "capitalism," because how we develop our anti-capitalist movement depends on our understanding of what we aim to overcome. If we don't clarify the full and complex meaning of these opaque terms for ourselves, it will mean that although we are working together we may not be working for the same goals. Then, all the Left is building is its own Tower of Babel. I ask my fellow SDSers, and those on the Left more broadly, to use the Platypus Review as a place to develop a clarification of these terms and, more importantly, our goals

As an able-bodied, working class white male with

LR: Would you like to add a closing remark?

academic training, who does not work in the academy, if I want to think intersectionally, it requires a willingness to undergo personal transformation. I must be willing to listen to others, learn from others, and then let that knowledge change the way I see the world, which changes me. This goes for all people who occupy advantageous positions in the nexus of intersecting oppressions. Able bodied people must be transformed through experience of disabled people, white people must be willing to be transformed by the experiences of nonwhite people, men must be willing to be transformed by the experiences of women, straight people must willing to be transformed by the experience of queer folk, and gay folks must be willing to be transformed by trans folk. This is hard for many reasons. Two reasons are that it requires a high level of personal development and

tion and therefore cannot possibly extend ourselves for the purposes of theirs, or our growth. According to Erich Fromm, "The faculty to objectivity is reason; the emotional attitude behind reason is that of humility. To be objective, to use one's reason, is possible only if one has achieved an attitude of humility, if one has emerged from the dreams of omniscience and omnipotence which one has as a child." Fromm goes on to say that because love requires

my interests, needs and fears." (1) Fromm's suggestion that I see the difference between Matthew Birkhold is a Brooklyn based writer and educator.

the absence of narcissism, in order to practice love, we must practice "the development of humility, objectivity and reason. One's whole life must be devoted to this aim. Humility and objectivity are indivisible, just as love is. I cannot truly be objective about the stranger, and vice versa. If I want to learn the art of loving, I must strive for objectivity in every situation, and become sensitive to the situations where I am not objective. I must try to see the difference between my picture of his behavior, as it is narcissistically distorted, and the person's reality as it exists regardless of

that we be objective. Empathy, one of the hallmarks of

practicing love, requires that we be objective. If we are

not objective, we can never understand the other's posi-

my picture of the other's behavior and their behavior as it exists objectively, detached from my interests, needs and fears, is a prerequisite to thinking intersectionally because intersectional thinking requires that we embrace difference by listening from others experience, learning from that experience, then letting it transform us and the way

He can be reached at birkhold(at)gmail(dot)com

1. The Art of Loving, p. 101, emphasis added

May '68, continued from page 2



basing their politics on the affirmation of this "rupture, the so-called radicals of '68 missed an opportunity to consciously shape their historical moment. Instead, their historical moment shaped them. They ended up accepting the ideological confusions and social degradation wrought by the breakdown of the welfare-state form of capitalism,

and adjusted their politics accordingly

This accounts for why the essayists cannot help but to portray the narrative of the actual practices of 1968 as reckless posturing and festive abandonment, despite their claim to have historically advanced political theory. In his reflections on the student revolt at Columbia, Danto recalls an incident when he tried to negotiate the release of Harry S. Coleman, a dean of the school held captive in his office by students occupying the building. When Danto attempted to argue that it was wrong to hold Coleman hostage, he was howled out of the scene. Before leaving a group of students told him that he "didn't understand what was happening, that this was the revolution!"—an assertion repudiated within days, when the police cleared the building. Lotringer, also tells a story of the Parisian events countervailant to the achievements in theory. He writes that "They [the French students] stole France, took it for a joyride, and then just as suddenly, dropped it in a back alley with no more than a few scratches." In other words, the actual events of 1968, whether in New York or Paris, were characterized by a complete lack of goals and a delusional sense of strength. Nevertheless, Lontringer assures us that "May '68 left a lasting trace: From its ashes arose the most vital political theories to emerge in the West over the past half century, as if the political creativity of the French May, thwarted in every other way, found in philosophy its most potent outlet."

But this begs the question of the relation between theory

and practice. The underlying premise informing all of Artforum's essayists is that 1968 represents an unprecedented and unique political event which, as Negri argues, ruptures historical continuity. Thus, they affirm the same false sense of "progression" that lead students in '68 headlong into the streets to confront the human masks of unknown and unalterable forces; and who, upon being beaten back, nonetheless claimed victory for having elucidating the limits of the ability to change the world. To avoid this painful problem the enragés of May '68, and their disciples today, reinvent politics along the edges of the shattered pieces of their smashed practice. Upholding this fractured arrangement to be a theoretical breakthrough they lose contact with a fundamental aspect of Marxian critical theory—the ability to recognize continuity in change and change in continuity. It is this blindness that accounts for their inability to see in the "sui generis" political event of '68 the imprint of the ongoing destruction of theory (Stalinism and Cold-War Social Democracy), and it accounts for their blindness to the fact that in 1968's inept revolutionary practices laid the seeds for the future (today's) degradation of politics. Consequently the relation between consciousness and practice is obscured by contemporary theory, which has the effect of dissolving theory into aporia and accommodating practice to a degraded reality. Theory becomes affirmative of a reality it cannot consciously affect, and therefore cannot understand. Instead of considering this complicated and still growing problem, the authors opt for the introduction of abstruse categories to re-imagine the antecedent class-conscious theory; for example, "multitude" (Negri), "youth as a class" (Lontringer), "cognitive labor" (Raunig), "difference" (Gillick), "heterotopia" (McDonough). These categories are not difficult to concretely grasp because the political philosophy situating them is so advanced; instead, their conceptual fuzziness and lack of political specific-

ity result from the failure to discern the actual depth and contours of the problem. Thus to Griffin's suggestion that we have lessons to learn from 1968's continued significance, we say: the only lesson worth learning is how not to repeat the past. Artforum's example shows us that remaining beholden to 1968 offers no way out of the mire it created through its political impetuousness and confused beliefs. Griffin may be correct in pointing out that a "pro" versus "con" framework for understanding 1968 is inadequate because it assumes an anachronistic condition of possibility—that one could somehow choose or reject what has already transpired. Yet we can still reject '68 as our model of "progress," whether in theory or practice. For the critic of today's barbarism, this is an essential lesson in brushing history "against the grain." IP

Obama, continued from page 1

Obama has not claimed to be anything but a typical Democrat. Despite burnishing credentials as a "community activist" in Chicago when running for Illinois State Senate, Obama has not presented himself as a "movement" candidate, despite what many may wish from him — to pin their mistaken hopes on this or else find him wanting. It seems that the idea of an entirely "mainstream" (i.e., conservative) black political candidate is beyond the imagination of most on the "Left.

So we are treated to some "shocking exposés" of Obama as a supposed product of the "Chicago School" of neo-liberal economic policy (of the former University of Chicago Professor of Economics Milton Friedman) — see for example Naomi Klein on "Obama's Chicago Boys," June 12, 2008, in The Nation, and various articles in Counterpunch — as if any president of the U.S. today would do anything but pursue post-Fordist/neo-liberal policies!

The candidacy and election of Obama will continue to send the "Left" into a tailspin, and in this sense will be "bad" for the Left — but this is Obama's greatest value.

Hitherto, the "Left" has expected that black politicians should either "represent" — or even "lead" — a fictive black "community." Conversely, black Republicans have been demonized for being sell-outs or otherwise "race traitors." It has been a fundamentally racist imagination that denies that black Americans can run the entire spectrum of policy positions and therefore social politics.

As witnessed with Obama, the racist illusion that seems to die the hardest is the notion that black people are especially insightful let alone "progressive" in their outlook on American society. It is an old canard on the "Left" — somewhere between wishful thinking and demagogic propaganda — that the most oppressed are somehow the most critically conscious of social realities. Behind this spectacular illusion the "Left" has spun, however, has been the more prosaic realities of the Democratic Party and the role of "black" politics in it.

Because American politics has been about the struggle for inclusion in the power structure by successive waves of various immigrant and other marginalized groups, it has been perhaps the most destructive illusion that the Democratic Party, which has played the inclusion game of its constituency politics better (especially in urban machine politics) than their Republican rivals, is somehow to the Left socially or politically. — As Gore Vidal once put it, American politics is really a one-party affair, the "party of property," with "two Right wings." The Democratic Party is simply the party that tends to include the interests of parvenu bourgeois elements from non-WASP groups, along with perhaps some of the more enlightened WASPs. "Black politics" has been part of this game, especially since the reorientation of American party politics as a result of the Civil Rights movement and the defection of the Southern "Dixiecrats" to the Republicans in the 1960s. Whereas previously the Democratic Party represented the unholy populist lash-up of Southern rednecks with Northern ethnic constituencies and organized labor, and the even earlier phenomenon of blacks voting for the Republican Party of Lincoln and Grant as a matter of course, today it is taken for granted that black Americans naturally find their political interests expressed in the Democratic Party. But this has worked to ill effect, especially as the "Left" has contributed to the charade.

The election of Barack Obama represents something very difficult for those on the ostensible "Left" to understand, that since the 1960s the Right (in both its Democratic and Republican Party forms) has been very successful in depoliticizing — effectively defusing — the issues of poverty and other forms of social degradation faced by most black Americans. The Left has played into this very well, doing their own work of replacing style for substance and, as Adolph Reed has put it, "posing" for politics. Thus, the "Left" since the 1960s has actually become a part of the new Right, a key factor in the depoliticization and hence conservatizing of American politics and society, for more than a generation now.

Of course Obama is just as much a product of this conservatization and depoliticization. This should shock no one. — Yet it does, and so this symptom is extremely important to note and understand

The election of Barack Obama will be an event. It should be a moment for reevaluating American society and politics. It should be an opportunity for throwing overboard illusions the "Left" has sown for at least 40 years about the realities and possibilities for American society and politics. The incredulity with which the Obama election is met, either in hopeful expectation or denial based in fear, is less about his election itself than it is about the confused, mistaken and utterly reactionary consciousness on the American "Left:" it is a measure of the racism of the "Left," how this "Left" is a key bulwark of racism in American life.

Note how the Obama candidacy has been met with hostility from all the usual suspects, the sexagenarian post-Civil Rights leadership of Jesse Jackson, Sr. (who said he wanted to cut Obama's balls off!), to the unblushing racist politics of Democratic Party stalwarts like the Clintons (who were "just saying what the Republicans will, anyway"), and those like Rev. Jeremiah Wright who cannot countenance any challenge to the wounded narcissism they've made their profession. — Obama was entirely correct about Wright et al. being stuck in the 1950s. The vested interests of black politics are rightfully wary of Obama. Their game is up. The time for reckoning has

So what can be made of this campaign by Obama that completely eschews the business-as-usual of the business of racism in the U.S., and one that does not run politically on the basis of "opposing" the racist demagogy of the Democrats (like the black Republicans do, making of their "criticism" of black Democratic hucksterism a business of their own, in their own way: see for instance

Shelby Steele on Obama), but rather seeks to bypass such

One catch phrase that has flown in the wake of the success of the Obama candidacy is "post-racial," raising the question of the degree to which America has overcome racism. But perhaps the matter is not one of our historical moment being post-"racial" but rather post-racist. Perhaps racism has changed. For the historical racism that plagued the U.S., from the failure of the post-Civil War Reconstruction era through Jim Crow until the overcoming of legal racial segregation with the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-60s, is over. But this has not meant the meaningful improvement of conditions of life for the vast majority of black people in America, but rather has accompanied worsening conditions, as part of the broader greater stratification and brutalization of American society

in the general downturn since the late 1960s - early '70s. In the meantime, the political issues of racism, as they stood in 1950s-60s, have been rendered obsolete. On the one hand, American society and culture is less "racist" than it has ever been; on the other hand, real suffering is rendered, if not invisible then politically insoluble. There has been "progress" on the issue of "racism" while there has been regress in terms of addressing any problems of greater substance for black people. The hollowed-out politics of "anti-racism" meanwhile has come to serve, at best, the racket politics of black and other Democrats, and at worst a paranoiac narcissistic trap for anyone who might be willing to think radically about political and social change in the U.S.. — The more sensible people have done what the rest of America has, come to avoid the madness — or the simple cretinism — of such politics as much as

The degree to which it has at all, American politics and culture has tried to address the social concerns of black people according to a peculiar and confounding mixture of the older Civil Rights and subsequent Black Power political models — think of the successful conflation of the diametrically opposed politics of MLK, Jr. and Malcolm X by Spike Lee, for instance — for an entire generation, without at all improving the lot of the greater portion of black Americans.

This presents a paradox, and the Obama election is a very good emblem for it. For it is truly the case that Obama does not stand at the head of a groundswell of a social movement but rather only a successful marketing tweak of Democratic Party electioneering. The inability to critique Obama without recourse to de-authenticating his "blackness," which everyone feels to be a hollow move, exposes the utter contemptuousness of what stands for "politics" today. — In the end, the election really will hinge on whether Obama as an image makes people feel better than John McCain does. This is an outrage, but not especially outrageous given the state of American politics today. But at least now political symbolism has developed so that the image of a "black man" can be one of jejune

'hope" (and not only for black Americans), and no longer just a jigaboo bugaboo, as the Republicans (and many Democrats) have made it their cynical trade to ply disingenuously and opportunistically for the past generation, finding it an increasingly less successful ploy to pull off

RH: I would like to see SDS become a recognized national

Perhaps young (black) people have embraced Obama precisely because they have become so "sick and tired of being sick and tired" with the politics of their parents and grandparents. Perhaps it is enough that Obama means turning the page, even if the basic story remains the same. Change is its own value — if only because it represents an opportunity. — In this case it is the opportunity presented by the failure of "black politics.

The election of Barack Obama will not solve the problems faced by the greater lot of black Americans, but it might at least deliver the coup de grâce for a politics that was not working for social improvement anyway. And this should be welcomed — at least by anyone who is honestly concerned with the politics of substantial reform and emancipatory transformation of life in the U.S.

Those on the "Left" who thought it would take a revolution — of whatever kind — to have a black leader have had a profoundly mistaken social imagination. It turns out that racism was not the kind of problem they thought it was. The problems facing black Americans were both less and more intractable than they thought. They have mistaken the political significance of anti-black racism — and black Americans have paid the price for this depoliticization of their social grievances.

The election of Obama will be an event. It is a signal that we need not be held back any longer by the invidious illusions the prior "Left" bequeathed us — amidst the botched world they have made. We have been stifled too long under the weight of their obfuscations and rationalizations, while society has gone to hell — or has gone, if you prefer, to "Nixonland" (the title of a recent book by Rick Perlstein): The "Left" has been complicit in the degradation of politics by mirroring the "culture wars" unleashed by the Right, becoming caught up in symbolic imagery, as in the late-'60s Black Power turn, at the expense of real political progress.

As Adolph Reed has pointed out, Obama might indeed represent the "severing" of the "last threads" potentially linking anti-racist and anti-capitalist politics. But the specific ways these have been "linked" in the social imagination and politics — the ideology — of the "Left," for more than a generation, have not helped but actually worked to the detriment of either addressing the social problems faced by most black Americans or addressing the problems of capitalism in the U.S.

Perhaps the very attempt to address these two sets of issues in identical terms, as if struggling against racism and capitalism were not only indissolubly linked but were somehow the same thing, fudging the issue of how to articulate them, was the mistake, especially as the struggle against racism and for "black empowerment" came, since the late '60s, to take the place of the struggle for working class empowerment and against capitalism

Capitalist politics since the 1960s has succeeded in effectively separating, neutralizing and eliminating both agendas, empowering working class people and ameliorating social conditions for black people, and both in the name of "black politics," which today does not require reform but abolition. "Black politics" has done nothing to empower black working-class people, but only to chain them, in a more or less roundabout way, to the Democratic Party and its capitalist politics. So we do not need "better" black politics, but rather to overcome such politics entirely. We have stood sorely in need of a specifically working class politics that can effectively speak to (black) workers comprehensively, to all aspects of their social reality and

political empowerment. This need can be found reflected in the fact that Obama leads in the current electoral polls of all lower-income people, including more than 10 points among "white" workers. — So much for the specter of the supposedly so intractable racism of the "white working class" that the post-'60s "Left" has peddled so hard and for so long!

Instead of this, pursuing the chimera of some kind of purportedly "progressive" black nationalism or other distinctly "black" politics has sent the "Left" so far around the bend that it has become unable the recognize the true nature and character — and range of varieties — of black conservatism (including among working class people), of the inherently conservative nature of "black politics" itself. Hence, Obama.

With Obama we might be able to wake from the night marish "dream" of "black politics:" in the "mainstream," in both the miserable Democratic Party ethnic racket variety and the cynical and phony "sobriety" of black Republicanism; and, among "radicals," the "revolutionary suicide" of which the Black Panther Huey P. Newton spoke, as well as what Frantz Fanon and the late Malcolm X called the "sickness and madness" of black nationalism — only to perhaps be able to face our grim social realities more squarely. If Obama represents the "end" of "black politics," this should be welcomed, not least as a salutary - if painful - shock to the bad "Left."

The surprising "black face" of conservatism Obama reveals ought to send reeling — and finally into the "dustbin of history" — the complex of assumptions involved in "black politics," so that we can interrogate what it was that it was supposed to accomplish, for it clearly has not,

and perhaps never could. The Obama election will be an event — in that it will not be one. Nothing will change. But this might help the "Left" to change — certainly some for the worse, clinging to ever more demented and ineffectual "black politics," but perhaps also some others for the better, who might finally extricate themselves from the trap such politics has presented for more than a generation. IP

Trotskyism, continued from page 3

continues today, social reality presented an increasingly obdurate face to the bearers of these kinds of politics. Capitalist society remade itself after the crisis of the first world war and the opportunity of 1917-21. As the new order of the "administered society" replaced classical, liberal capitalism in the form of Fascism, Stalinism and the bourgeois welfare state, the political tradition inaugurated by Lenin and Luxemburg and maintained first by Trotsky and, after his death, by Trotsky's followers saw itself less and less able to change the world.

As we've learned from Marx's Theses on Feuerbach, the world can only be known to the extent that it can be changed. The less leverage the declining Trotskyist movement had, the more that it fell into a sclerotic tendency to raise the tactical, historically specific, formulations of these historical figures into matters of permanent theoretical principle. This is because when history stagnates so does thought; as its sphere becomes removed from the movement of real events it falls away, powerless, into a purely contemplative position.

Because of this impotence, concepts as dear to today's Trotskyism as Lenin's vanguard party, Luxemburg's mass strike, and Trotsky's defense of the deformed workers' state, started to hold an increasingly tenuous and obtuse relationship to the events of the day. These ideas were in fact the material out of which Marxist orthodoxy was built and as they spun away from any kind of applicability to the real world, to maintain Marxist orthodoxy began to mean the opposite of what it meant at the beginning of the 20th century. Instead of being the set of ideas with which to shake the world out of its blind course, orthodoxy begins to represent a nostalgic turning away from the world. The melancholic orthodoxy of today's Trotskyism reminds us of the thwarted lover who instead of successfully mourning and overcoming his loss will endlessly talk to his friends about all the ways that "she did him wrong" until he finds that his friends don't want to talk to him anymore.

Trotskyism was the best of the Left, but even the best people stink when their corpses begin to decompose. Platypus exists for the purpose of burying the corpses so as to be able to continue the work of the deceased without the stink

Thus we are faced with the problem of discontinuity. We in Platypus see ourselves as suffering from a necessary discontinuity from the tradition of Revolutionary Marxism. It is indeed unfortunate that the Left is dead. It is indeed unfortunate that we are in no place to build a mass worker's movement and to overthrow capitalism. We are victims of this discontinuity, but we have to recognize it as a fact and as a starting point. We are not, as others claim to be, "the true party of the Russian Revolution" because to claim that today is to do a disservice to the original vision of the Russian Revolution. To be prepared to fight the good fight forever is to be resigned to never winning it. To not be willing to recognize that the Left is dead is to have died with it. As researchers, critics, and historians of the dead Left, which we now put to rest with a deep feeling of gratitude, we hope to be ready to educate a future politics of emancipation. IP