Can Neo-liberalism continue after the crisis?

Observations on the ideological recovery in France and the United States

Ashleigh Campi

IT HAS BEEN NOTED that the current economic crisis is of a scale unprecedented in the history of advanced capitalism. Today, three decades since the first stages of a transition of world markets through the expansion of finance capital, we face the first disruption of the system on a global scale. As is by now well known, the effects of the crisis have reached across economic sectors and across the world, displaying the interconnectedness of disparate societies, whose structure and social trajectory are bound up in the development of capitalism. The extension of global markets, and their force as the major medium conditioning interaction and material exchange between societies has long been described by liberal economic and political thinkers as a historical development that was at once progressive and uncontestable: the invisible hand that insured the stability and equitability of markets was also seen as a politically neutral source of economic reason. Warning against the ideological and tendentious character of socialist politics, proponents of liberal economics lauded the disinterested scientific clarity of pure economic decision-making. In deferring disagreement over the diverse paths towards social goals, the science of economic growth became a decisive tool in circumscribing political debate.

During the most recent period of long-term economic stability in the United States, free market ideology was passed off as common sense. With predictions of 'unlimited growth' by market observers, inflated real-estate values propping up value across markets, and easy access to credit caused by an explosion of high risk lending, the need to articulate an alternative to free market politics was obscured.

Rupturing the collective naïveté that facilitated the triumph of neo-liberalism, the current economic unraveling was immediately recognized as one in a series that spans the history of advanced capitalism. As is requisite in times of crisis, critiques of the outgoing political and economic status quo have come from a range of social spheres, professions, and political camps. Certain general and undeniable facts form the base of discourses in the United States, the Western world, and in poorer and less stable regions around the globe: the crisis is causing vast suffering and deprivation, which is felt most acutely by the social sectors most removed from the spheres in which the crisis was produced; the crisis reveals the political err in yielding debate to the limits imposed by liberal-capitalist ideology. It is this second fact that asserts itself when considering the French and American responses to the present crisis.

An account of recent political history appears to have been consolidated in recent months among critics of liberalism. This story diagnoses some economic fundamentals which have become visible in the wake of the crisis: financial markets act based on wagers on potential profit; there is no intrinsic moderation in financial markets that holds profits in relative equivalence to the growth and contractions of other economic sectors; over-production of value through capital speculation will result in crises of capitalization and affect all areas of economic activity. In analyses offered by both the Barack Obama and Nicolas Sarkozy administrations this account of economic events—irrefutable, if incomplete—boils down to two supposed causes of the crisis that in turn predetermine the corresponding policy responses. These two causes are lack of regulation and the distinct, but related, issue of inflated wages and earnings in the financial sector. In televised speeches and statements, both presidents spoke with conviction asserting their intentions to arm the state with increased oversight and regulatory capabilities in order to amend these problems.

This response falls far short of holding the founding ideals of neoliberal governance up for public scrutiny. In his inaugural address, Obama expressed his hope for the future with the encouraging assertion that "American workers are still productive." The fact that this phrase appears unremarkable or even apt speaks to the continued purchase of a vision of society that triumphed in the age of capitalist democracy. Even if Obama was merely describing his vision of economic recovery, his statement affirms economic activity as the primary form of mediation between individuals in modern society, including on the level of politics. The optimism of this vision hinges on the recovered growth and profitability of American enterprises, which is sustained in part by the continued suppression of wages in the United States. Both through employment policy hostile to organized labor and collective bargaining, and through strict immigration policy that helps maintain the illegal status of many employees in the manufacturing, hospitality and service industries, employees in the United States are subjected to wages depressed often below the legal minimum.

In France, many union members, leftist party members and activists, as well as intellectuals, artists, professionals and public officials have mobilized to critique the path to economic recovery centered on the vitality of private enterprise. An estimated 1.08 million protestors throughout France turned out on January 29th in support of a one-day general strike. The strike was called through an agreement by all of France's major unions, and was followed by the traditionally well-organized public sector as well as private sector employees of banks, the media, the stock exchange, and the cultural sector. The central aim of the mobilization was to criticize President Sarkozy's focus on aid to private businesses and his insufficient attention to the rising rate of unemployment in France.

Notable for its large turnout, and for the participation by many individuals and groups who do not commonly engage in politics, the protest succeeded in bringing the widespread disapproval of the present government's political agenda to popular consciousness. The demands articulated by protesters centered on preservation of socialist state policies such as programs that aid the unemployed, support and funding for public education, as well as job security in the public sector.

Beyond the immediate economic demands expressed in the march, many in attendance came to condemn the politics of the current administration for their antagonism towards the principles of social solidarity. This claim, while more difficult to support empirically, approaches a more profound critique of the neoliberal model of economic development. The ability of the French left to mobilize a resistance to the economic liberalization taking place under the current administration attests to the maintenance of leftist politics in France, both through more diffuse inheritances in academia and culture, as well as through structures such as unions and political parties which sustain leftist ideologies in increasingly hostile political environments.

Despite the ambition and vision that has been maintained in France on a level unmatched by the left in the United States, and despite the force of the economic crisis-which laid bare the insufficiency of a politics that is subordinated to the growth dynamic of capitalism-the left is not adequately equipped to seize this moment of ideological opening. The urgency of the economic situation leaves those who envision a socialist politics obliged to rearticulate the same state-centric politics that historically formed the grounds for the welfare state and brought about the enfeebled opposition to liberal-capitalism that views the state as a social benefactor. It is this version of politics, circumscribed by economic necessity, which keeps the left from offering an adequate critique of liberal-capitalism, even at a moment of globalized economic crisis.

In the absence of an alternative political vision and strategy advanced by the left, neo-liberal economic prescriptions and political ideologies are driving the recovery from the crisis. At present, the continued strength of the crisis is resulting in severe economic slowdown in the global economic centers of the West, as well as in countries around the world that integrated into global markets only in recent decades. The British Prime Minister Brown recently opined, "rebuilding global financial stability is a global challenge that needs global solutions." It is with this understanding that Brown and Obama have endeavored to launch a "global new deal," which aims to ensure "that every country that wishes to participate in the international financial system agrees common principles for financial regulation, coordinated internationally, and changes to their own banking system that will bring us shared prosperity once again." (1) Following an emergency summit of the European Union on March 1st, President Sarkozy echoed this oxymoron of political relations conditioned by the rules of international finance in stating, "If someone needs solidarity, they can count on their partners....Their partners also need to count on them to follow certain basic rules." (2)

Both the 'global new deal,' and the emergency measures sketched out by the European Union outline a path to economic recovery in which 'international coordination' will continue to allow the wealthiest countries to lay out the terms for the global economy. With many poorer countries forced to borrow on international capital markets to refinance old debt or take out new loans, the prescription for economic recovery portends the future of neo-liberalism. For those wish to forge political solidarity across states, the response must be to build the structures and institutions in which political and economic thought of sophistication and influence can be developed, so that the next time an economic crisis creates an opening for politics, the Left will be equipped to offer an alternative. **|P**

1 Brown, Gordon. *Times Online*. "The Special Relationship is Going Global." March 1, 2009.

2 Dougherty, Donald. *New York Times.* "E.U. Leaders Turn to IMF Amid Financial Crisis." February 22, 2009.

The Platypus Review
STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

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 underlies 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 accumulation 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 disenchantment 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 commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

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Remarks on Chris Cutrone's *Iraq and the election: the fog of "anti-war" politics*

Tuomas Nevanlinna

I WAS INTRIGUED TO FIND in *The Platypus Review #7* a commentary by Chris Cutrone on the U.S. role in world politics. I found it more sophisticated and original than anything I had previously come across in the mainstream media either here or in Europe.

Before launching my machine, I would like to situate myself. I'm a foreigner, philosopher of sorts, and not a student any more (That means I'm old.). I have lived in the US for only two months. I come from Finland, a country which is in many senses the exact opposite of the U.S.: tiny, internationally insignificant, linguistically isolated, and culturally homogeneous. Our religious right-wing – indeed any extreme right wing – is trifling. In fact it would not be too great an exaggeration to claim that Finland has politically incarnated, for the last fifty years or so, the wet dream of U.S. left-of-center -Democrats.[1]

American patriots, both Republican and Democrat, tend to cherish the idea of the U.S. being the shining beacon of morals and democracy on Earth. I have yet to encounter a single soul outside the U.S. who would agree. Rather, the U.S. is considered an unequal, structurally racist and imperialist banana democracy with its too-short-a-step from slavery to the partial successes of the civil rights movement, the lack of equal general education, the lobbyist-controlled corrupt governing, the semi-open ballot sabotage, the state of exception-power of the executive branch, the reprehensible CIA-coups and the unilateral military interventions.

The idea of the U.S. being the ultimate power fighting for democracy on the global scene is doomed to sound obscene. If there were elections in Belarus an international delegation of electoral monitors would be sent. Why would the same not be done with regard to the U.S.? Just think about Florida in 2000 – and it is not the only possible example.[2]

Last but not least, there has always been, from the European point of view[3] , a lot more conservative whining about the excesses of the welfare state than genuine and stable welfare state structures in the U.S.[4]

It must be underscored that this attitude does not stem from any irrational "anti-Americanism". Firstly, the harshness of the European criticism is the obverse of the fact that the U.S. is regarded as one of "us"; as a country from which we are supposed to expect more. Secondly, the rest of the world does appreciate America, only on different grounds than the U.S. patriots do, namely for "aesthetical" reasons.[5]

What I have stated thus far compresses exactly the received Europeanish pseudo-progressive wisdom that Cutrone wants, in his article, to reject, or at least call into question. His point of view, certainly, is not that of an American patriot. Instead, Cutrone points out that the Left in general has been confused and self-contradictory in its opposition to U.S. imperialism. Furthermore, Cutrone emphasizes that Europeans in particular have been self-righteous, double-faced and irresponsible regarding the role of the U.S. in present-day global capitalism. As for the U.S., the anti-war rhetoric of the Democrats, claims Cutrone, has been unprincipled and opportunistic.

Cutrone asks, what and on what grounds does the anti-war movement actually oppose? Is it opposing any "imperialist" intervention whatsoever? Or any unilateral intervention by the U.S. ? Or any intervention that fails or is not efficient enough? And is the argument that the US should not "spread democracy" supposed to be a progressive or a conservative argument?

The real reason for the occupation in 2003, according to Cutrone, was that Iraq had become a failed state. Sooner or later, someone had to intervene. This is where the Bush administration comes in: in doing what someone would have had to do anyway, it ultimately acted "responsibly". U.S. companies surely have profited from the intervention but some capitalists would have profited anyway, so why bother? All the other options concerning Iraq would not have been less "imperialistic" or "capitalistic". And what if the Bush policy succeeds? Then what will the basis for opposition to U.S. "imperialism"? These are good questions, and all too easily ignored by the inverse self-aggrandizement [6]of the Europeans.

Francis Fukuyama has formulated a critique of the Iraq war which is based on the notion of its "necessary" failure – necessary, because there was no plan for the day after. Fukuyama labels the brand of neo-conservatism he does not want to subscribe to (any more) as "Wilsonianism minus international institutions." Invented by Reagan, this doctrine has undergone a revival in the Bush administration. Against this doctrine Fukuyama advocates "realistic Wilsonianism"; the notion that the spreading of democracy cannot rely on naked military force but has to take into account the local cultural factors, the specific history and the developmental phase of societal institutions of the country in question. Fukuyama 's argument is *not opportunistic*, although it is based on the Iraq war being a failure. He makes a systematic Straussian point.

I venture to outline a basic intuition behind a typical European counter-reaction to the Iraq war. It boils down to three points: firstly, the Reaganist-Bushian doctrine is not just unilateral but exceptionalistic; secondly it has a nationalistic agenda, which if necessary, is covered up by downright lies and finally it is counter-productive. These points are well-rehearsed, of course.

The doctrine is unilateral, because it disregards international law.[7] As Fukuyama puts it: the Bush administration had made it clear that the U.S. would not be bound by what the Security Council did. Also, the notion of pre-emptive war is not only a fundamental revision of the Westphalian tradition of international law but also a tacit endorsement of U.S. exceptionalism. Many countries face terrorist threats – Russia, China and India, for example – but if any of these nations announced a general strategy of preventive war as a means to deal with terrorism the U.S. would undoubtedly be the first to object.

Still, the most glaring example of the U.S exceptionalism is not the case of Iraq. After demanding that the Serbian war criminals should be submitted to the International Criminal Court, the Bush administration demanded that the governments of the EU agree to a blanket exemption of all U.S. citizens from the jurisdiction of the very same court. How irritating can you get?

Against Cutrone's claim that the cause of the occupation was not oil, but the fact that Iraq was a failed state, I'm inclined to repeat the standard anti-war criticisms. What about the control of Iraq oil fields, taking Iraq out of OPEC, breaking the anti-Israeli Arab front, weakening the Saudi oil monarchy and attempting to provoke a regime change in Iran? How do these sound for reasons? And although it could be said that Iraq was a failed state from the beginning, it managed to create a series of relatively successful, though certainly authoritarian, regimes between 1958-1991. It was the Gulf War that ruined the state of Iraq. Again, the U.S. is cleaning up the mess it has itself created.

The original justifications (weapons of mass destruction, links to al-Qaeda) the Bush administration gave for the occupation evaporated. Bush himself gave them up and fell back to the general human rights-argument. Well, why not? The key question is, however: how are the potential object countries discursively hegemonized as the most urgent countries to be intervened in? When the world is being asked whether it endorses a particular intervention or not, the decisive justifying step for unilateral action has already been accomplished. When the question "would you endorse an intervention in Iraq?" is on the agenda everywhere, the intervention is already justified. "Saddam is a terrible dictator, so..." "Yes, but on the other hand..." Why just Iraq, out of all the undemocratic states in the world? Why not Columbia?

Now, do these points form a coherent whole? Well, yes. It is not contradictory or opportunistic to oppose exceptionalism and to claim that the interventions are by and large counterproductive as far as the first argument is regarded as the primary one.

But what have I been doing here? Arguing like the ultimate liberal democrat, presenting well-wishing arguments for international co-operation? Have I forgotten that the maintenance of order in global capitalism is and remains "a bloody business", as Cutrone puts it? Well, maybe. But is this to say that nothing matters until the revolution comes?

I fully agree that the mainstream European critique is double-faced: the USA is doing the dirty job for the European states while they can retain the position of a Hegelian beautiful soul. And Cutrone may well remind me that he is not actively endorsing the role of the U.S. in the scene of international capitalism, he is just realistic. The Left should acknowledge the facts of the situation, make correct analysis and then conquer the situation, if possible.

But this is exactly where my (or Zizek's) central question regarding Cutrone's reasoning comes in. His basic presupposition is that the hegemonic position of the U.S. in global capitalism is a fact – a fact to be understood, analyzed and for the time being accepted, but definitely not whimpered about. But are the "undiminished capacities" of the U.S. really so indisputable?

I think Cutrone's argument testifies to his perverse Wilsonianism. What if the military tours de force of the U.S. are the obverse of its impotence? Has the U.S. not been, until the recent financial crisis, the ultimate consumer of the world economics? As its economics and financial institutions have been dependent upon being trusted by the rest of the world, maybe the overspending and growing indebtedness of the U.S. have made feats of strength a necessary prop for maintaining that trust? Perhaps we have been witnessing a series of ultimately fake military interventions by the U.S. against adversaries known to be weak in order to maintain its continuing financial credibility? Now that the bubble has burst, shouldn't we just face the fact that the era of the U.S. is just over?

As is well known, the U.S. is constantly fighting against the dangers it has itself created. The examples have been cited ad nauseam by the anti-war movement: the Taliban, Bin Laden, Saddam etc. were all originally backed and financed by the U.S. Not to mention that the Iraq intervention has accelerated the nuclear programs of North Korea and Iran and has made Iraq, instead of Afghanistan, the training ground and operational base for jihadist terrorists. What if all this has not just been unwise or contra-final but bears testimony to a certain Hegelian cunning of reason instead? Maybe the apparent counter-productivity of the US-interventions – the fact that they tend to strengthen and even constitute in the first place the very enemies supposed to be eliminated – tacitly serves as a guarantee that the military power of the U.S. will be needed forever?

I may be carrying my point about the non-intentional conspiracy too far here, but perhaps the conservatives did not even want (on the level of Rumsfeldian "unknown knowns") to win the recent presidential elections. I mean, what has the Republican strategy been after Reagan? To let the debt rise to the utmost and then send for the Democrats to deal with it. Enter Obama... **|P**

1 There is still truth in this, although Finland has undergone its share of neo-liberal setbacks from the 90's on as well.
2 See e.g. http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/11717105/robert_f_kennedy_jr__will_the_next_election_be_hacked
3 It must be remembered that the Europeans have an "European point of view" only in America. (This does not make it any less real.) In Europe there are only German, French, Polish, Finnish etc. perspectives. The European Union does not help here – actually it is the ultimate Other in Europe. Even the supporters-in-principle of the EU tend to resent it a bit. Including me.
4 There have been two occasions, again from the European perspective, when the American Dream has actually won when its bluff was called: USA joining the WWII and the Obama winning the elections. The Americans also have a strong point, of course, in emphasizing that Nazism and Stalinism were quintessentially European phenomena.
5 The USA is the unchallengeable "capital" of urban aesthetic movements, scenes of authentic popular culture, from blues&jazz to Jewish Hollywood, Dylan, hip hop etc. What would the modern world be without these figures? A desert. The majority of Africans, Asians and Europeans under sixty-five would agree on this, while hardly any one of them would praise the USA for its record in international politics.
6 "We are better than Americans because we don't think we are better."
7 The "Europeans" are not so naive as to think that reliance on the UN would solve all the problems of international politics. The UN rather serves as a metonymy for the appeal for more multilateral processes of decision. It is all about checks and balances, you know... And although the claim that UN is weak and inefficient is indeed true, the attitudes and actions of the USA have of course performatively contributed to this state of affairs.

Why the U.S. stimulus package is bound to fail

David Harvey

Much is to be gained by viewing the contemporary crisis as a surface eruption generated out of deep tectonic shifts in the spatio-temporal disposition of capitalist development. The tectonic plates are now accelerating their motion and the likelihood of more frequent and more violent crises of the sort that have been occurring since 1980 or so will almost certainly increase. The manner, form, spatiality and time of these surface disruptions are almost impossible to predict, but that they will occur with greater frequency and depth is almost certain. The events of 2008 have therefore to be situated in the context of a deeper pattern. Since these stresses are internal to the capitalist dynamic (which does not preclude some seemingly external disruptive event like a catastrophic pandemic also occurring), then what better argument could there be, as Marx once put it, "for capitalism to be gone and to make way for some alternative and more rational mode of production."

I begin with this conclusion since I still find it vital to emphasize if not dramatize, as I have sought to do over and over again in my writings over the years, that failure to understand the geographical dynamics of capitalism or to treat the geographical dimension as in some sense merely contingent or epiphenomenal, is to both lose the plot on how to understand capitalist uneven geographical development and to miss out on possibilities for constructing radical alternatives. But this poses an acute difficulty for analysis since we are constantly faced with trying to distill universal principles regarding the role of the production of spaces, places and environments in capitalism's dynamics, out of a sea of often volatile geographical particularities. So how, then, can we integrate geographical understandings into our theories of evolutionary change? Let us look more carefully at the tectonic shifts.

In November 2008, shortly after the election of a new President, the National Intelligence Council of the United States issued its Delphic estimates on what the world would be like in 2025. Perhaps for the first time, a quasi-official body in the United States predicted that by 2025 the United States, while still a powerful if not the most powerful single player in world affairs, would no longer be dominant. The world would be multi-polar and less centered and the power of non-state actors would increase. The report conceded that U.S. hegemony had been fading on and off for some time but that its economic, political and even military dominance was now systematically waning. Above all (and it is important to note that the report was prepared before the implosion of the U.S. and British financial systems), "the unprecedented shift in relative wealth and economic power roughly from West to East now under way will continue."

This "unprecedented shift" has reversed the long-standing drain of wealth from East, Southeast and South Asia to Europe and North America that had been occurring since the eighteenth century (a drain that even Adam Smith had noted with regret in The Wealth of Nations but which accelerated relentlessly throughout the nineteenth century). The rise of Japan in the 1960s followed by South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong in the 1970s and then the rapid growth of China after 1980 later accompanied by industrialization spurts in Indonesia, India, Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia during the 1990s, has altered the center of gravity of capitalist development, although it has not done so smoothly (the East and South-East Asian financial crisis of 1997-8 saw wealth flow briefly but strongly back toward Wall Street and the European and Japanese banks). Economic hegemony seems to be moving toward some constellation of powers in East Asia and if crises, as we earlier argued, are moments of radical reconfigurations in capitalist development, then the fact that the United States is having to deficit finance its way out of its financial difficulties on such a huge scale and that the deficits are largely being covered by those countries with saved surpluses – Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan and the Gulf states – suggests this may be the moment for such a shift to be consolidated.

Shifts of this sort have occurred before in the long history of capitalism. In Giovanni Arrighi's thorough account in The Long Twentieth Century, we see hegemony shifting from the city states of Genoa and Venice in the sixteenth century to Amsterdam and the Low Countries in the seventeenth before concentrating in Britain from the late eighteenth century until the United States eventually took control after 1945. There are a number of features to these transitions that Arrighi emphasizes and which are relevant to our analysis. Each shift, Arrighi notes, occurred in the wake of a strong phase of financialization (he cites with approval Braudel's maxim that financialization announces the autumn of some hegemonic configuration). But each shift also entailed a radical change of scale, from the small city states at the origin to the continent-wide economy of the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century. This change of scale makes sense given the capitalist rule of endless accumulation and compound growth of at least three per cent for ever. But hegemonic shifts, Arrighi argues, are not determined in advance. They depend upon the emergence of some power economically able and politically and militarily willing to take on the role of global hegemon (with its costs as well as its advantages). The reluctance of the United States to assume that role before World War II meant an interregnum of multi-polar tensions that could not halt the drift into war (Britain was no longer in a position to assert its prior hegemonic role). Much also depends on how the past hegemon behaves as it faces up to the diminution of its former role. It can pass peaceably or belligerently into history. From this perspective the fact that the United States still holds overwhelming military power (particularly from 30,000 feet up) in a context of its declining economic and financial power and increasingly shaky cultural and moral authority, creates worrying scenarios for any future transition. Furthermore, it is not obvious that the main candidate to displace the United States, China, has the capacity or the will to assert some hegemonic role, for while its population is certainly huge enough to meet the requirements of changing scale, neither its economy nor its political authority (or even its political will) point to any easy accession to the role of global hegemon. Given the nationalist divisions that exist, the idea that some association of East Asian Powers might do the job also appears unlikely as does the possibility for a fragmented and fractious European Union or the so-called BRIC powers (Brazil, Russia, India and China) to stay on a common path for long. For this reason, the prediction that we are headed into another interregnum of multi-polar and conflictual interests and potential global instability appears plausible.

Tectonic Shifts

But the tectonic shift away from United States dominance and hegemony that has been under way for some time is becoming much clearer. The thesis of both excessive financialization and "debt as a principal predictor of leading world powers' debilitation" has found popular voice in the writings of Kevin Phillips. Attempts now under way to rebuild U.S. dominance through reforms in the architecture of both the national and the global state-finance nexus appear not to be working while the exclusions imposed on much of the rest of the world in seeking to re-shape that architecture are almost certain to provoke strong oppositions if not overt economic conflicts.

But tectonic shifts of this sort do not come about as if by magic. While the historical geography of a shifting hegemony as Arrighi describes it has a clear pattern and while it is also clear from the historical record that periods of financialization precede such shifts, Arrighi does not provide any deep analysis of the processes that produce such shifts in the first place. To be sure, he cites "endless accumulation" and therefore the growth syndrome (the three per cent compound growth rule) as critical to explaining the shifts. This implies that hegemony moves from smaller (i.e. Venice) to larger (e.g. the United States) political entities over time. And it also stands to reason that hegemony has to lie with that political entity within which much of the surplus is produced (or to which much of the surplus flows in the form of tribute or imperialist extractions). With total global output standing at $45-trillion as of 2005, the U.S. share of $15-trillion made it, as it were, the dominant and controlling share-holder in global capitalism able to dictate (as it typically does in its role as the chief shareholder in the international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF) global policies. The NCIS report in part based its prediction on loss of dominance but maintenance of a strong position on the falling share of global output in the U.S. relative to the rest of the world in general and China in particular.

But as Arrighi points out, the politics of such a shift are by no means certain. The United States bid for global hegemony under Woodrow Wilson during and immediately after World War I was thwarted by a domestic political preference in the United State for isolationism (hence the collapse of the League of Nations) and it was only after World War II (which the U.S. population was against entering until Pearl Harbor occurred) that the U.S. embraced its role as global hegemon through a bi-partisan foreign policy anchored by the Bretton Woods Agreements on how the post-War international order would be organized (in the face of the Cold War and the spreading threat to capitalism of international communism). That the United States had long been developing into a state that in principle could play the role of global hegemon is evident from relatively early days. It possessed relevant doctrines, such as "Manifest Destiny" (continental wide geographical expansion which eventually spilled over into the Pacific and Caribbean before going global without territorial acquisitions) or the Monroe Doctrine which warned European Powers to leave the Americas alone (the doctrine was actually formulated by the British Foreign Secretary Canning in the 1820s but adopted by the U.S. as its own almost immediately). The United States pos-

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Going it alone

Christopher Hitchens and the death of the left

Book Review: Cottee, Simon and Thomas Cushman (eds.). *Christopher Hitchens and His Critics: Terror, Iraq, and the Left*. New York: New York University Press, 2008.

Spencer A. Leonard

IF HISTORY DID NOT, as the conservative critic Francis Fukuyama pronounced, come to end in 1989, this is because its politically relevant sense--as the self-realization of freedom--it had already stopped. Even before the emergence in recent decades of new geopolitical configurations and institutional forms within global capitalism, a new and unprecedented political situation was taking shape, one which has severed the last threads of continuity connecting the present with the long epoch of political emancipation that stretches back through modern socialism and the labor movement to the Enlightenment and the great bourgeois revolutions that came before. Yet, unlike Stalinism's well-publicized collapse, the death of the long-ailing Left in our time has gone largely unmarked. One exception to this is the work of Christopher Hitchens, whose political writings combine a partial recognition of this unprecedented new circumstance with an acutely symptomatic, unconscious expression of the same.

When Hitchens publicly broke with the *The Nation* in the aftermath of 9/11, the break was based on chiefly moral grounds. The Left's anti-war arguments were, Hitchens argued, "contemptible" and in "bad faith"; its authors were corrupt "masochists" [104-8]. While Hitchens's defection was widely condemned by the Left, few attended closely to the moral form that it took, which is in many ways as revealing as the substance of the debates it occasioned. In *Christopher Hitchens and His Critics: Terror, Iraq, and the Left* [hereafter *CHHC*], editors Simon Cottee and Thomas Cushman provide a handy single-volume introduction to this tussle on the Left, supplying both an ample selection of Hitchens's writings and published interviews, as well as many criticisms by his erstwhile comrades. Through them we relive something of the disorientation and struggle for clarification on the Left that accompanied 9/11 and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Though in some respects a replay of debates around western intervention in Bosnia in the 1990s, far more engaging is the near total discrediting of the existing Left that Hitchens has accomplished writing as a moralist since.

Enlightenment on the Left

A scourge of the establishment, Hitchens was one of the few journalists steeped in Marxism publishing in the mass circulation English press throughout the 1980s and 90s. Coming out of the International Socialist tendency of British Trotskyism, he did not simply admire Marx or sympathize with certain historical achievements of the socialist Left; rather, he brought to the pages of *The New Statesman*, *Harper's* and *The Atlantic* the unique resources of a sectarian Marxist political education. With the familiarity he possessed of prevailing intellectual habits and dispositions and also of the actual composition of the various popular front organizations that sprung up to oppose the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hitchens possessed unique resources to undertake a thoroughgoing critique of the contemporary Left. It is the limitations of these same resources, however, that ultimately diminished the force of that critique. For while Hitchens was correct in his assessment of the conservative and one-sided character of the "leftist" critique of American hegemony, it was chimerical to imagine that one could both side with the Bush regime's war and retain critical independence from it.

Taking the last ten years of his output together, Hitchens has been remarkably prolific, producing a steady output of books and articles. (1) This impressive written output has gained Hitchens a mass audience, further expanded by the steady schedule he maintains of television and radio appearances, as well as high-profile public debates. Neither specialized scholar nor think-tank wonk, Hitchens is a rare breed: one who lives not simply by his writing, but by a sustained attempt to analyze the present. *Hitchens and His Critics* thus serves as a valuable selection of writings from the years 2001-2005 when Hitchens began to do this freeform, wholly independent of party or clique.

To describe Hitchens's writings in *CHHC* as acts of "apostasy" from the Left is misleading. It is better to read them as authentic, if inadequate, responses to the intractability of contemporary circumstances. For this reason, editors Cottee and Cushman locate Hitchens not among the God-that-failed liberals, but rather "in the tradition of Marx and the Frankfurt School." As they explain: "It is our belief that in Hitchens's recent political writings it is possible to discern one of the most powerful self-critiques of the Western Left today. Hitchens is. . . an essential reference point for the Left, and his criticisms demand to be engaged with" [3-4]. While one might balk at the phrase "Western Left" as foreign to Hitchens's internationalist disposition, Cottee and Cushman are nevertheless right to point out that Hitchens did not so much abandon the Left, as he was abandoned by it.

Still, the editors' introduction generates as much confusion as clarity respecting Hitchens's leftism. For while Hitchens cannot but mourn the collapse of the revolutionary Left, insofar as it stood for the project to abolish capitalist social domination and realize human freedom, Cottee and Cushman do not share this understanding of the Left's fundamental commitments. So, it is hard to see how they as non-Marxists comprehend Hitchens when he says, "there is no longer a general socialist critique of capitalism – certainly not the sort of critique that proposes an alternative or a replacement. . . . [Still] I don't think that the contradictions, as we used to say, of the system are by any means all resolved" [169]. Be that as it may, Hitchens's sense of the collapse of the Left is true now in a way that was not the case even for those who survived into the 1940s. Though certainly the first-generation Frankfurt School theorists recognized that the rise and consolidation of Stalinism and fascism in Europe prepared the ground for it, the total extinction of the Left had to wait till the second half of the 20th century. Hitchens is unmistakably melancholy if not nostalgic when he says, "I am in a strong position to promise you. . . [that] all talk [of a Trotskyist revival] is idle. It's over" [181]. Yet, just as Cottee and Cushman think Jürgen Habermas's liberalism represents a continuation of the Frankfurt School's mid-century project, they treat "the Left" as if it were a stable political category. Hitchens, on the other hand, makes no claim to represent an alternative form of Leftism. Instead, as he says, "call me a neo-conservative if you must: anything is preferable to the rotten unprincipled alliance between *the former fans of the one-party state and the hysterical zealots of the one-god one*" ["At Last Our Lefties See the Light" *The Times of London* online edition, 4/30/06]..

Breaking Left

Retrospectively Hitchens's break with the Left may be seen to have been foreshadowed in his 1990s tirades against Bill Clinton and his "lesser evilist" liberal supporters. In those polemics, Hitchens argued that social democracy had collapsed utterly, as had the salience of the distinction between the Democrats and Republicans. The Clinton presidency represented the triumph of a fully managed, poll-driven, and lobbyist-directed politics. This failure of mainstream politics was accompanied by a general vulgarization and moral degradation. But these developments were not wholly explicable in terms of mainstream politics, but were rather the consequence of the Left's collapse. This last point was never made explicit at the time, so those writings failed to register unmistakably Hitchens's sense of the epochal change that had occurred, which was marked chiefly by Hitchens's own turn from political analysis proper to something more akin to 19th century moralism. As he commented just prior to 9/11, "I don't have allegiances. . . anymore" [173]. But, since the Left is rarely targeted directly in the Clinton-era writings, this period must be seen as prelude to what would come after 9/11.

In the weeks and months following 9/11, Hitchens's criticism of "the Left" resounded loudly on both sides of the Atlantic in both the usual organs such as *The Nation* and *the Guardian* as well as in more mainstream outlets like the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Independent*. Hitchens drove home the point that the issue of "imperialism," as understood for decades on the Left, had become irrelevant. The enemies of American imperialism in no sense represented a more democratic future, nor would their victory be likely to have desirable effects elsewhere. Making the stakes plain, Hitchens averred, "capitalism, for all its contradictions, is superior to. . . what bin Laden and the Taliban stand for" [55]. As for U.S. military involvement in Iraq, Hitchens supplements the arguments about al-Qaeda's Islamist fascism with arguments drawn from Iraqi Trotskyist Kanan Makiya to the effect that Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime was not only tyrannical but represented a variety of modern-day "totalitarianism." In response to Makiya's argument, Hitchens adds that the U.S. was saddled with a "responsibility" to the people of Iraq in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, when the U.S. left Saddam's opponents in the lurch. He condemned as both untenable and ill-conceived the continued enforcement of no-fly zones and a crippling sanctions regime that punished the population while allowing Hussein to maintain his hold on power. Of course, nothing could be more predictable than the U.S. Army "failing" to fight Hitchens's war in Iraq (nor could greater "pressure" from the Left have prompted them to do so). Still, the American military, as Hitchens pointed out in a debate with Tariq Ali, was "not militarily defeatable" in Iraq and "all moral and political conclusions to be drawn from that should be drawn" [http://www.democracynow.org/2004/10/12/] At any rate, the critical thing about Hitchens's support for the war, as *CHHC* demonstrates, is the distance it gave him from the rest of the Left.

Taking up cudgels against the likes of Tariq Ali, Noam Chomsky, Norman Finkelstein, bell hooks, Naomi Klein, Michael Moore, Oliver Stone, Studs Terkel, and Howard Zinn - the chief representatives of that political strain that passes for "the Left" today -, Hitchens recognized that Ba'athist Iraq's steady disintegration and the emergence into plain view of Islamist fascism posed for them a dilemma they could not resolve with the conceptual and political resources at their disposal. The War on Terror is not Vietnam II, if only because the character of the enemy of American imperialism is so utterly changed. But Hitchens does not possess critical resources the others lack. Contrary to what he likes to suggest, his support of America's invasion of Iraq is no straightforward act of solidarity with secular-socialist political parties inside Iraq, such as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan led by Jalal Talabani. Still, his stand did effectively dramatize the disappearance of Left internationalism. "When I first became a socialist," he writes,

> [...] the imperative of international solidarity was the essential if not defining thing, whether the cause was popular or not. I haven't seen an anti-war meeting all this year [2002] at which you could even guess at the existence of the Iraqi and Kurdish opposition to Saddam,

"Going at it alone" continues bellow

1 *These are No One Left to Lie To* [1999), *Unacknowledged Legislation* [2000), *The Trials of Henry Kissinger* [2001], *Letters to a Young Contrarian* [2001 hereafter LYC], *Why Orwell Matters* [2002 hereafter WOM], *A Long Short War: The Postponed Liberation of Iraq* [2003], *Love, Poverty, and War* [2004 hereafter LPW], *Thomas Jefferson: Author of America* [2005], *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man: A Biography [2006], God is not Great* [2007], *and Is Christianity Good for the World: A Debate* [2008], as well as regular articles appearing in *Slate*, *The Nation*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*.

U.S. stimulus, continued from page 1

sessed the necessary dynamism to account for a growing share of global output and was quintessentially committed to some version of what can best be called "cornered market" or "monopoly" capitalism backed by an ideology of rugged individualism. So there is a sense in which the U.S. was, throughout much of its history, preparing itself to take on the role of global hegemon. The only surprise was that it took so long to do so and that it was the Second rather than the First World War that led it finally to take up the role leaving the inter-war years as years of multipolarity and chaotic competing imperial ambitions of the sort that the NCIS report fears will be the situation in 2025.

The tectonic shifts now under way are deeply influenced, however, by the radical geographical unevenness in the economic and political possibilities of responding to the current crisis. Let me illustrate how this unevenness is now working by way of a tangible example. As the depression that began in 2007 deepened, the argument was made by many that a full-fledged Keynesian solution was required to extract global capitalism from the mess it was in. To this end various stimulus packages and bank stabilization measures were proposed and to some degree taken up in different countries in different ways in the hope that these would resolve the difficulties. The variety of solutions on offer varied immensely depending upon the economic circumstances and the prevailing forms of political opinion (pitting, for example, Germany against Britain and France in the European Union). Consider, however, the different economic political possibilities in the United States and China and the potential consequences for both shifting hegemony and for the manner in which the crisis might be resolved.

In the United States, any attempt to find an adequate Keynesian solution has been doomed at the start by a number of economic and political barriers that are almost impossible to overcome. A Keynesian solution would require massive and prolonged deficit financing if it were to succeed. It has been correctly argued that Roosevelt's attempt to return to a balanced budget in 1937-8 plunged the United States back into depression and that it was, therefore, World War II that saved the situation and not Roosevelt's too timid approach to deficit financing in the New Deal. So even if the institutional reforms as well as the push toward a more egalitarian policy did lay the foundations for the Post World War II recovery, the New Deal in itself actually failed to resolve the crisis in the United States.

The problem for the United States in 2008-9 is that it starts from a position of chronic indebtedness to the rest of the world (it has been borrowing at the rate of more than $2-billion a day over the last ten years or more) and this poses an economic limitation upon the size of the extra deficit that can now be incurred. (This was not a serious problem for Roosevelt who began with a roughly balanced budget). There is also a geo-political limitation since the funding of any extra deficit is contingent upon the willingness of other powers (principally from East Asia and the Gulf States) to lend. On both counts, the economic stimulus available to the United States will almost certainly be neither large enough nor sustained enough to be up to the task of reflating the economy. This problem is exacerbated by ideological reluctance on the part of both political parties to embrace the huge amounts of deficit spending that will be required, ironically in part because the previous Republican administration worked on Dick Cheney's principle that "Reagan taught us that deficits don't matter." As Paul Krugman, the leading public advocate for a Keynesian solution, for one has argued, the $800-billion reluctantly voted on by Congress in 2009, while better than nothing, is nowhere near enough. It may take something of the order to $2-trillion to do the job and that is indeed excessive debt relative to where the U.S. deficit now stands. The only possible economic option, would be to replace the weak Keynesianism of excessive military expenditures by the much stronger Keynesianism of social programs. Cutting the U.S. defense budget in half (bringing it more in line with that of Europe in relation to proportion of GDP) might technically help but it would be, of course, political suicide, given the posture of the Republican Party as well as many Democrats, for anyone who proposed it.

The second barrier is more purely political. In order to work, the stimulus has to be administered in such a way as to guarantee that it will be spent on goods and services and so get the economy humming again. This means that any relief must be directed to those who will spend it, which means the lower classes, since even the middle classes, if they spend it at all, are more likely to spend it on bidding up asset values (buying up foreclosed houses, for example), rather than increasing their purchases of goods and services. In any case, when times are bad many people will tend to use any extra income they receive to retire debt or to save (as largely happened with the $600 rebate designed by the Bush Administration in the early summer of 2008).

What appears prudent and rational from the standpoint of the household bodes ill for the economy at large (in much the same way that the banks have rationally taken public money and either hoarded it or used it to buy assets rather than to lend). The prevailing hostility in the United States to "spreading the wealth around" and to administering any sort of relief other than tax cuts to individuals, arises out of hard core neoliberal ideological doctrine (centered in but by no means confined to the Republican Party) that "households know best." These doctrines have broadly been accepted as gospel by the American public at large after more than thirty years of neoliberal political indoctrination. We are, as I have argued elsewhere, "all neoliberals now" for the most part without even knowing it. There is a tacit acceptance, for example, that "wage repression" – a key component to the present problem – is a "normal" state of affairs in the United States. One of the three legs of a Keynesian solution, greater empowerment of labour, rising wages and redistribution toward the lower classes is politically impossible in the United States at this point in time. The very charge that some such program amounts to "socialism" sends shivers of terror through the political establishment. Labour is not strong enough (after thirty years of being battered by political forces) and no broad social movement is in sight that will force redistributions toward the working classes.

One other way to achieve Keynesian goals, is to provide collective goods. This has traditionally entailed investments in both physical and social infrastructures (the WPA programs of the 1930s is a forerunner). Hence the attempt to insert into the stimulus package programs to rebuild and extend physical infrastructures for transport and communications, power and other public works along with increasing expenditures on health care, education, municipal services, and the like. These collective goods do have the potential to generate multipliers for employment as well as for the effective demand for further goods and services. But the presumption is that these collective goods are, at some point, going to belong to the category of "productive state expenditures" (i.e. stimulate further growth) rather than become a series of public "white elephants" which, as Keynes long ago remarked, amounted to nothing more than putting people to work digging ditches and filling them in again. In other words, an infrastructural investment strategy has to be targeted toward systematic revival of three percent growth through, for example, systematic redesign of our urban infrastructures and ways of life. This will not work without sophisticated state planning plus an existing productive base that can take advantage of the new infrastructural configurations. Here, too, the long prior history of deindustrialization in the United States and the intense ideological opposition to state planning (elements of which were incorporated into Roosevelt's New Deal and which continued into the 1960s only to be abandoned in the face of the neoliberal assault upon that particular exercise of state power in the 1980s) and the obvious preference for tax cuts rather than infrastructural transformations makes the pursuit of a full-fledged Keynesian solution all but impossible in the United States.

In China, on the other hand, both the economic and political conditions exist where a full-fledged Keynesian solution would indeed be possible and where there are abundant signs that this path will likely be followed. To begin with, China has a vast reservoir of foreign cash surplus and it is easier to debt finance on that basis than it is with a vast already existing debt overhang as is the case in the United States. It is also worth noting that ever since the mid 1990s the "toxic assets" (the non performing loans) of the Chinese Banks (some estimates put them as high as 40 per cent of all loans in 2000) have been wiped off the banks' books by occasional infusions of surplus cash from the foreign exchange reserves. The Chinese have had a long-running equivalent of the TARP program in the United States and evidently know how to do it (even if many of the transactions are tainted by corruption). The Chinese have the economic wherewithal to engage in a massive deficit-finance program and have a centralized state-financial architecture to administer that program effectively if they care to use it. The banks, which were long state owned, may have been nominally privatized to satisfy WTO requirements and to lure in foreign capital and expertise, but they can still easily be bent to central state will whereas in the United States even the vaguest hint of state direction let alone nationalization creates a political furor.

There is likewise absolutely no ideological barrier to redistributing economic largesse to the neediest sectors of society though there may be some vested interests of wealthier party members and an emergent capitalist class to be overcome. The charge that this would amount to "socialism" or even worse to "communism" would simply be greeted with amusement in China. But in China the emergence of mass unemployment (at last report there were thought to be some 20-million unemployed as a result of the slow-down) and signs of widespread and rapidly escalating social unrest will almost certainly push the Communist Party to massive redistributions whether they are ideologically concerned to do so or not. As of early 2009, this seemed to be directed in the first instance to revitalizing the lagging rural areas to which many unemployed migrant workers have returned in frustration at the loss of jobs in manufacturing areas. In these regions where both social and physical infrastructures are lagging, a strong infusion of central government support will raise incomes, expand effective demand and begin upon the long process of consolidation of China's internal market.

There is, secondly, a strong predilection to undertake the massive infrastructural investments that are still lagging in China (whereas tax reductions have almost no political appeal). While some of these may turn into "white elephants" the likelihood is far less since there is still an immense amount of work to be done to integrate the Chinese national space and so to confront the problem of uneven geographical development between the coastal regions of high development and the impoverished interior provinces. The existence of an extensive though troubled industrial and manufacturing base in need of spatial rationalization, makes it more likely that the Chinese effort will fall into the category of productive state expenditures. For the Chinese, much of the surplus can be mopped up in the further production of space, even allowing for the fact that speculation in urban property markets in cities like Shanghai, as in the United States, is part of the problem and cannot therefore be part of the solution. Infrastructural expenditures, provided they are on a sufficiently large scale, will go a long way to both mopping up surplus labour and so reducing the possibility of social unrest, and again boosting the internal market.

Going at it alone, continued from above

an opposition that was fighting for "regime change" when both Republicans and Democrats were fawning over Baghdad as a profitable client and geopolitical ally. [105]

Those on the Left who tacitly defended Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein did so because of an inherited moral and intellectual rot the consequence of which was that "instead of internationalism, we find among the Left now a sort of affectless, neutralist, smirking isolationism" [108]. One manifestation of this was the anti-war movement's willingness to bracket out of their calculations the fate of Iraqi Leftist or oppositionist parties and trade unions -- or to condemn them as U.S. "stooges." Groups like the ISO and Spartacist League ignore the historical gulf that separates the current anti-war movement from the movement opposing the Vietnam War by simply recycling the slogans of that earlier struggle. Their claim that "every blow struck against the imperialist occupiers is a blow in the interests of workers and the oppressed worldwide" has become a mantra by the muttering repetition of which they withdraw into senility. Of course, others on the Left are more vulgar, hoping that an Iraqi quagmire would allow for the emergence of Europe as a substantial counter-hegemonic force (as, for instance, in Habermas and Derrida's joint letter of May 31, 2003). Regarding such Leftism, Hitchens remarks, "I am very much put in mind of something from the opening of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. It's not the sentence about the historical relation between tragedy and farce. It's the observation that when people are learning a new language, they habitually translate it back into the one they already know" [55]. Unable to so much as describe the present, the Left has lost its currency for an entire generation. "Members of the Left, along with the far larger number of squishy 'progressives,' have grossly failed to live up to their responsibility to think; rather, they are merely reacting, substituting tired slogans for thought" [57]. "Left conservatism," with a long pedigree stretching back into the 1960s, became dominant by couching itself in anti-imperialist language. But, as Hitchens comments, "My Marxist training tells me things don't remain the same. [These new, openly] reactionary-left positions won't hold for long. They will metamorphose into reactionary-right ones" ["'Don't Cross Over if You Have any Intention of Going Back'" Interview with Danny Postel *The Common Review* 4:1, 7]. The merits of this critique stand, regardless of Hitchens's opportunistic support for the Iraq War.

Rejecting the consensus view that the 1960s New Left represents a high-water mark of radical politics, Hitchens argues that, in fact, the conservativism of today's pseudo-Left derives from precisely that period:

> If you look back to the founding document of the 60's left, which was the Port Huron statement . . . you will easily see that it was in essence a conservative manifesto. It spoke in vaguely Marxist terms of alienation, true, but it was reacting to bigness and anonymity and urbanization, and it betrayed a yearning for a lost agrarian simplicity. It forgot what Marx had said, about the dynamism of capitalism and "the idiocy of rural life."
>
> All that endures today on "the Left" is precisely this anti-modern strain of the 1960s. Describing the route from Port Huron to Seattle, Hitchens notes, "the anti-globalization movement has started to reject modernity altogether, to set its sights on laboratories and on the idea of the division of labor, and to adopt symbols from Fallujah as the emblems of its resistance" ["Where Aquarius Went," *New York Times* (online edition) 12/19/04]. If the New Left grew old, it never betrayed the dubious ideals of its youth. Hitchens captures the massive political and intellectual shift this has occasioned anecdotally: "Marx and Engels thought that America was the great country of freedom and revolution. . . [We] live in a culture where people's first instinct when you say [that] is to laugh or to look bewildered" [176-77]. After years of Pop-Front coziness with his "comrades" in "the movement," Hitchens finally broke rank. And yet, Hitchens's defeat of his "Left" opponents, of which *CHHC* leaves its reader no doubt, never translated into what we might call a genuine political victory.

Hitchens's Marxism

The force of Hitchens's critique of the degenerate Left in the wake of 9/11 derives in large measure, as argued above, from his sectarian background which at least imparted a deep aversion to uncritical solidarity. It is this that lends his account its force. In other words, it is not simply a matter of familiarity breeding contempt, but of the precision that comes from long study of the enemy. And yet, the instincts that allow him to register his insights soon come up against their own limits. For the current crisis requires an active (and openly skeptical) re-engagement with the history of the Left and the theoretical categories of Marxism.

Hitchens's greatest shortcoming is not the position he has taken on Iraq, as this amounts chiefly to a confession of political futility. Nor is it his bullying and hectoring tone, which, though it occasionally rings false, is typically reserved for those who deserve it. Rather, his greatest shortcoming is in his sclerotic Marxism, often conceptually under-specified and indistinguishable from ahistorical liberalism. For what Hitchens terms the "tenets of the Left" require us only to recognize that "the materialist conception of history has not been surpassed as a means of analyzing matters," "there are opposing class interests" and "monopoly capitalism can and should be distinguished from the free market and that it has certain fatal tendencies" (LYC, 102). There is nothing specifically Marxist about such propositions.

Discussing the anti-Stalinist Marxists of the 1930s, Hitchens says "these heroes. . . were forced to rely as much on their own consciences, if not indeed more, as on any historical materialist canon" [LYC 98]. But the likes of C. L. R. James, Victor Serge, and Trotsky are not merely moral exemplars, and the "crimes" to which they bore witness were not simply criminal. They were *political* betrayals opposed politically by a Marxism rooted in a definite conception of capitalism as a form of social organization. Any full account must go beyond discussing the bravery of these tendencies to address that their emancipatory potential. Hitchens exhorts readers so question the obvious and call into question the status quo, for which, he argues, intellectual honesty and a will to truth are required. And while this is true, Hitchens only goes so far. Morality and "principles" alone, including "the conception of universal human rights" to which he points as guiding "the next phase or epoch" of Leftist politics are an inadequate basis on which to remount the sort of emancipatory politics to which Hitchens is unmistakably committed [LYC 136].

Hitchens's etiolated conception of Enlightenment (under which Hitchens subsumes Marxist "historical materialism") causes him to fall below the level of his own insights. This can most readily be seen by a brief review of Hitchens's 2002 treatment of George Orwell, *Why Orwell Matters* [*WOM*]. This book's publication coincided with and may be seen as explicating much of the basis for his criticism of his former comrades. Hitchens's Orwell, it is safe to say, stands in for the Trotskyism that came so late to Britain, where most of those who would become the beacons of the New Left did not actually break with Stalinism in Trotsky's lifetime but much later, after the 1956 Hungarian uprising was crushed by the Soviet Union. Orwell was "in contact with the small and scattered forces of the independent international Left" and this fact, that he questioned Stalinism at a time in the history of the British Left when it was extremely unpopular to do so, is central to why Orwell matters to Christopher Hitchens [*WOM*, 62]. As a fellow traveler of "the International of persecuted oppositionists who withstood 'the midnight of the century' – the clasping of hands of Hitler and Stalin" [*WOM*, 63], Orwell was a confirmed leftist critic of the Left from at least the time of his fighting on behalf of the Spanish Republic, which he chronicled in his early work, *Homage to Catalonia*. Orwell never discarded the commitments and insights that crystallized for him while fighting in Spain, since in his late work *Animal Farm* "the aims and principles of the Russian revolution are given face-value credit throughout: this is a revolution betrayed, not a revolution that is monstrous from its inception" [*WOM* 187]. Thus, while "the edifice of [Orwell's] work. . . [is typically] identified with sturdy English virtues" [*WOM*, 63], it constitutes for Hitchens a more valuable internationalist legacy than does that of some figures more widely lionized on the British Left, where the New Left intellectuals' struggle to work through the fraught legacy of the past was hobbled by the relatively superficial de-Stalinization effect after 1956. He therefore skewers Raymond William's hatchet job on Orwell as symptomatic of the same undigested Stalinism that then also affected the *New Left Review's* editors, who in their reverence toward Willams in the 1960s, failed to adequately digest earlier the struggles on the Left of the 1930s.

But Hitchens, too, fails to work through the history of the left. On the one hand, Hitchens is adamant that we regard as a victory for the anti-Stalinist New Left the Velvet Revolutions that brought to an end "actually existing socialism" in the former Warsaw Pact countries. Yet, on the other hand, he recognizes that "once the Cold War was over, there was a recrudescence of. . . totalitarianism and. . . authoritarianism" ["'Don't Cross Over if You have any Intention of Going Back,'" 7]. It is altogether unclear just how Hitchens can view the 1990s as both a culminating revolutionary moment and as a period of the revival of totalitarianism.

Retreat to moralism

The insights Hitchens develops respecting the history of the Left with reference to Orwell are valuable and, in many instances, merit further elucidation. The difficulty arises in trying to address such matters in the moral terms on which Hitchens bases his analysis, as for instance when Hitchens attempts to characterize the European fascism of the 1930s and 40s in terms of "arrogance," "bullying," "greed," "wickedness," and "stupidity" [*WOM*, 7]. Such moral and intellectual flaws have, after all, plagued humankind throughout its history, and for this reason alone they provide an inadequate basis for conceptualizing something so distinctly and exclusively modern as fascism. Similarly, leftist politics, while it may be rooted at the individual level in a certain moral impulse, can never be guided by that impulse alone. While Hitchens's expressions of moral disapproval are in themselves unobjectionable and indeed often rhetorically powerful, they hardly suffice as categories of political analysis. Rather, such analysis requires a theoretical grasp of social and historical circumstances, the abstract character of which necessitates theory. As Hitchens himself acknowledges, "I became a socialist . . . [as an] outcome of studying history" [168]. In other words, Marxian theory is necessary to actually grasp the ongoing transformation of society. The power of facing unpleasant facts that Hitchens associates with Orwell is scarcely sufficient if the aim is elaborate a politics rooted in a critical grasp of the present. Hitchens knows full well that "a purely moral onslaught on capitalism and empire would be empty sermonizing" ["The Grub Street Years," *The Guardian* 6/16/07], and yet he seems to think an increasingly moral rhetoric to be adequate for contemporary critical purposes.

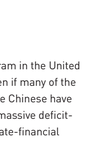
Stefan Collini (in a 2003 essay strangely omitted from the volume under review) is no doubt right to balk (or chuckle) at the machismo of the ostentatiously hard-drinking, chain-smoking, author of the piece "Why Women Aren't Funny." But, what is curious is the evidence Collini adduces of Hitchens's masculinism, his commitment to being "right about which way the world . . . is going, right about which policies will work and which regimes are wicked; right about the accuracy of one's facts and one's stories; and right when so many others, especially well-regarded or well-placed others, are demonstrably wrong" [Stefan Collini, "'No Bullshit' Bullshit" *London Review of Books* 25:2 [1/23/03], online edition]. If Hitchens fails in this enterprise, it is not because of his masculinist folly, nor, indeed, because of the limitations of his talent, intellect or instincts, but because the world itself has become opaque. This, and the impulse toward being right -- at least against the "Left" -- is what has led Hitchens to shill for the American warmongers. The old habit of choosing sides betrays Hitchens when the task requires more than simply making compromises and choosing the lesser evil, but actually critically confronting a situation in which there is nothing to choose. While Collini's chastising as "masculinist" Hitchens's commitment to being right when so many others are politically wrong amounts to little more than the imposition of a thought-taboo, it is nevertheless undeniable that, for the present, the formulation of "a political line" is impossible. This is not because of the inherent folly or masculism of such an attempt, but is rather a consequence the "world's" incoherence when the left is dead. Hitchens's polemics would seem to imply an independent position, but the impossibility of this is precisely where the contemporary circumstance of the death of the left must be registered.

Hitchens's "return" to moralism in the 1990s and 200s is coupled with a nascent sense of historical regression, which he understands as a return to the Enlightenment and a replay of bourgeois revolution. Thus Hitchens's most recent writings on the Enlightenment, American Revolution, and atheism stem from his sense of the need for a renewal of "the war for Enlightenment values" [213]. As early as 2002 Hitchens wrote, "as the third millennium gets under way, and as the Russian and Chinese and Cuban revolutions drop below the horizon, it is possible to argue that the American revolution, with its promise of cosmopolitan democracy, is the only 'model' revolution that humanity has left to it" [*WOM* 105]. But in the 2005-08 publications that grew out of this conviction Hitchens flattens out much of what remained suggestive in the earlier polemical writings, such as those contained in *CHHC*. For instance, in his recent non-fiction best-seller *God is Not Great*, Hitchens improbably portrays the struggle against contemporary religious fascisms as a mere continuation of the Enlightenment tussle with irrationality. As if al-Qaeada's "medievalism" were a relic of the unscientific feudal past! At this point, rationality surrenders to dogma in the name of the Enlightenment and Hitchens's recognition of political regression threatens to transform itself into the *idée fixe* of a crank who has forgotten that the argument with religion is the beginning, not the end, of the ruthless criticism of everything existing. Adopting a more sympathetic approach towards these more recent works requires reading them against the grain to argue not only that the self-described left today is entirely past saving and needs only to be retired, but also that the project of re-constituting the left is best advanced today through an engagement with those drawn to (and encountering the limits of) liberalism. **IP**

Announcements

The *Platypus Affiliated Society* hosts open weekly reading groups, film screenings, and coffee breaks in Chicago, New York City, and Boston. For further information (time, location, reading material) please visit:

www.platypus1917.org



Platypus @ left forum 2009:

April 17-19, 2009 (NYC)

www.leftforum.org/2009

Dialectics of Defeat: Towards a Theory of Historical Regression

The panelists will be asked to evaluate significant moments in the progressive separation of theory and practice in the twentieth and twenty-first century history of Leftist politics: 1917/1918-1923 (James Vaughn); 1933-1939 (Richard Rubin); 1968 (Atiya Khan); and the present, 2001-2009 (Spencer Leonard). Each panelist will be asked to consider the following questions: How was the problem of relating theory to practice, and practice to theory, politically dealt with in each historical moment? How did these political actions extend the widening divergence of theory and practice? And, how do the historical failures of Leftist politics effect the possibilities for Leftist politics today.

A panel discussion with:

Atiya Khan, Ph. D. candidate, University of Chicago, Department of History

Spencer Leonard, Ph. D. candidate, University of Chicago, Department of History

Richard Rubin, Platypus Affiliated Society

James Vaughn, Assistant Professor, University of Texas Austin, Department of History

Chair: Benjamin Blumberg, Platypus Affiliated Society

Politics of the Contemporary Student Left: Hopes and Failures

This panel aims to explore and critically reflect upon the politics of two of the largest and most successful Left student organizations of recent times: the new Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS). The panelists will engage these organizations by examining the various perspectives currently influencing them, and explore how these ideas affect their means and ends. This requires us to delve into the history of Left student activism, as well as the history of the Left as a whole. We hope this panel will not only provide insight into the failures of the student Left, but also begin a serious discussion within these organizations and the Left at-large of what the revolutionary potential of such struggle can be.

A panel discussion with:

Atlee McFellin, Students for a Democratic Society, New School Radical Student Union

Pam Nogales, Platypus (New York)

C. J. Pereira Di Salvo: former organizer for United Students Against Sweatshops

Laurie Rojas, Platypus (Chicago), former member of Students for a Democratic Society

Chair: Alexander L. Hanna: former organizer for United Students Against Sweatshops