Democracy and the Left

Dick Howard, Alan Akrivos, Joseph Schwartz, and Alan Milchman

On February 5, 2014, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a conversation titled 'Democracy and the Left' at the School of Visual Arts in New York. The participants were Alan Akrivos (Socialist Alternative), Dick Howard (Stony Brook University), Alan Milchman (Internationalist Perspective), and Joseph Schwartz (Democratic Socialists of America). The panel was moderated by Pam Nogales. The description of the event reads as follows: "From the financial crisis and the bank bail-outs to the question of "sovereign debt"; from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street; from the struggle for a unified European-wide policy to the elections in Greece and Egypt that seem to have threatened so much and promised so little—the need to go beyond mere "protest" has asserted itself: political revolution is in the air, again. The elections in the U.S. and Germany seem, by comparison, to be non-events, despite having potentially far-reaching consequences. Today, the people—the demos—seem resigned to their political powerlessness, even as they rage against the corruption of politics. Demands for democracy "from below" end up being expressed "from above": The 99%, in its obscure and unorganized character, didn't express itself as such in the various recent elections but was instead split in various tendencies, many of them very reactionary. Democracy retains an enigmatic character, since it always slips any fixed form and content, since people under the dynamic of capital keep demanding at times "more" democracy and "real" democracy. But democracy can be like Janus: it often expresses both emancipatory social demands as well as their defeat, their hijacking by an elected "Bonaparte." What history informs demands for greater democracy today, and how does the Left adequately promote—or not—the cause of popular empowerment? What are the potential futures for "democratic" revolution as understood by the Left?" What follows is an edited transcript of the event. A full recording of the discussion can be found online at http://platypus1917.org/2014/02/25/democracy-left-new-york-2-25-14/

Opening Remarks

Dick Howard: There is a fundamental difference between the French Revolution and the American Revolution, which leads to a vision of democracy that is radically different in the two contexts.

The American Revolution was an anti-colonial revolution against the state that wanted to get the British off of the backs of Americans and leave society to go on in its own way. There's an anti-statist tradition in the United States. The American Revolution went through three distinct phases: declaring independence, winning the war, and then the problem that Ukraine is going to have to face, namely, how do you give society a political framework such that it can hold together? That's the period of the failure of that kind of direct democracy found in the Articles of Confederation. Finally, a nation-state was created.

America became a nation-state and a *democratic* state insofar as you had the "Revolution of 1803." That was not only when the Jeffersonians (the opposition) won the presidency, but also when the decision in *Marbury v. Madison* recognized that the society was *one*, held together by its constitution despite the diversity of the society that was framed by the constitution. That gave America a *republican democracy*: the constitution which frames the republic holds priority and gives the unity within which a diversity can flourish.

During the French Revolution, insofar as the society was based on *status* rather than equality of opportunity, the power of the state was used in order to transform society. That process of using the state power to transform society went through phases, and you can list the canonical dates: the high point of the Jacobin period in 1793, the reaction against it, the empire, the return of the monarchy, then 1830, 1848, 1870, and finally—even Platypus puts it into its name—1917, which, *apparently*, is the realization of that dream that begins with the French Revolution. That dream is that the gap between society and the state be overcome, but it is overcome by the action of the state. Instead of a republican democracy in the American sense, you had a *democratic republic*—the idea is that democracy and the state come together, and this is the elimination of the state.

I came to realize the importance of this distinction in 1990 or 1991 when I was giving a lecture in Greifswald, in the former German Democratic Republic, about the American Revolution and how the Americans created a "democratic republic." The audience was not particularly happy because they had just gotten out of a democratic republic! What is that democratic republic? What is that republican democracy? Awareness of this distinction was there well before when there developed a left-wing critique of totalitarianism.

What was totalitarianism, after all? It was the attempt to eliminate the difference between society and the state, to overcome that gap. I don't want to get into a polemic about whether those countries were fully totalitarian; let's just say that they were tangentially totalitarian, that they would have liked to have been more totalitarian but they couldn't quite make it. What you saw in those tangentially totalitarian societies was the attempt not only to eliminate the difference between society and the state but to eliminate all conflict, all difference, all pluralism—to eliminate, in the last resort, what? If you went to those countries immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, perhaps the most striking thing from an urbanistic perspective was that there were no cafes. The only places where you could meet were the communal cafeterias, where you could get a cheap meal, but you could also be watched over if you met with friends on a regular basis and talked about things that were not permitted. This leads to a recognition that the problem of totalitarianism has roots in the historical project that goes back to 1793, that attempt to create a democratic republic.

The fundamental document in the period leading up to the adoption of the U.S. Constitution is the *Federalist Papers.* People in political science departments love to quote *Federalist No. 10* on factions, that factions will offset one another. For me, the most fundamental paper is *Federalist No. 63*, where Madison is trying to justify a senate. He asks himself, why do we have a senate? We just made this revolution; senates are traditionally where the aristocracy goes. Madison says that there have been democracies in the past, ancient democracies, but they failed; he's thinking of Rousseau's critique that small-scale democracies become factionalized. Madison says that Americans have a different kind of democracy, in which all of the institutions represent the people and *none* of those institutions incarnates the people. Therefore, you can read American history as a series of conflicts among these various institutions, each of them trying to claim that they incarnate "the people." Think of presidential powers, congressional government, the role of the Supreme Court—think of the Texans, who think the real incarnation of the people is the state of Texas.

I was in France during the shutdown of the U.S. government. Europeans can't imagine the idea of closing a government. Historically, the American state only begins to be constituted after the Civil War; militarization leads to the creation of the railroads and industry and the beginnings of a national project. The income tax and the Federal Reserve are created in 1913, the year America begins to concretize this state phenomenon. The next phase in American development is the New Deal, but it leaves out black people because Roosevelt needs to get the support of the southern senators. (Social Security originally covered all workers except two kinds: agricultural workers and home workers or maids, who happened to be black people.) The next phase of American political development is the Civil Rights Movement, which *apparently* culminated with the election of Obama, whose presidency has been a bit of a disappointment, to say the least. Where did the shutdown come from? The one thing that hadn't been developed and that was needed to make the American state into a State was the health care measure. When Hillary Clinton first proposed health care reform, the opposition to that reform was articulated by the far right on the grounds that this health care system would round out the social state—it would make America into a true state. Curiously, over the past 20-30 years in the U.S., we've had a movement towards the creation of an ever more complete state; whereas in France, what explains some of the political problems of the French socialists in power and of the French left more generally is the un-knitting of the Jacobin vision of France. French politics has increasingly decentralized; there is a crisis of the political.

When we function as *critical* democrats, we always need to bear in mind the two modalities of a single danger, namely, that quest to create a democratic republic, that quest to overcome conflict, to avoid division. This can be present in two ways: in opposing society to the state and in opposing the state to society. These tendencies are not going to disappear. There's a constant back-and-forth between anti-politics—the attempt to overcome politics—and politics, which renews political impetus and makes for the advance of society.

Alan Akrivos: Socialist Alternative recently made national headlines by electing an open revolutionary socialist, Kshama Sawant, in the Seattle city council with almost 100,000 votes—which is unprecedented in recent history. We came quite close to winning a second race in Minneapolis. In our view, there is a real link between the ballot and the social struggle. It is not simply a question of getting elected, but of using the ballot and the positions that we win to mobilize and organize social movements. We're using these positions to launch the national movement for "15 Now," which intends to end the disgrace of poverty wages in the U.S., where people with full-time jobs are still forced to be on welfare, unable to survive. It has become a massive issue. Socialist Alternative is involved in linking this issue to the need to build a movement so working people can effectively fight back. This inevitably raises the issue of the state, of democracy, of how we fight, of what we aim to accomplish.

We have to remind ourselves of the limits of what Professor Howard explained before. In many ways, a lot of the bourgeois revolutions—the capitalist revolutions—stalled very quickly, and after that there were revolts from below: the Paris Commune and, by the 1880s, the rise of the mass socialist parties across Europe that changed the political terrain. Central to that struggle was the demand for political rights from the

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Statement of purpose

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

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

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

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

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

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point of view of the working class. The workers were disenfranchised across Europe. It was only on the basis of massive social struggles, along with the building of their own organizations [the unions and the powerful socialist and communist parties], that the working class was able to gain tremendous strength—to gain from capitalism and to increase living standards.

For the ruling classes, after the trauma of the French Revolution came the trauma of the Russian Revolution: the working class actually took power and eliminated the capitalist class, just as the aristocracy was eliminated. The issue of revolution is not sanitary; it was not simply a question of what kind of state forms people wanted. It was an actual struggle between the classes, which ended up (in the case of the Jacobins) with the need, in many instances, to physically eliminate the French aristocracy, which was a massive parasitic stratum in society.

Platypus framed our discussion on democracy and the Left by stating that "democracy retains an enigmatic character." Democracy is enigmatic if you keep it in the abstract; in an abstract sense, democracy can be filled with all kinds of content: metaphysical content, idealistic content, and so forth. But for Marxists and socialists, the issue of democracy has to be analyzed in a very concrete way. Because I work in construction, I like to say, "The truth is concrete." What classes exist? What class conflicts exist in particular societies? How do those conflicts manifest themselves? Classical Greek democracy was slave-based democracy, and that concrete context is often forgotten. Every Athenian citizen relied on the labor of something like 20 or 30 slaves. This reveals the class character of that democracy at that time. How should socialists approach democracy? In my view, there's no issue of "real democracy" and abstractions along these lines; you have to reveal its class basis.

Chris Hedges is one of my favorite authors because he shreds the illusions about democracy that continue to persist in the American political superstructure. He calls it "the last gasp of democracy." The government shutdown reveals the deadlock: they cannot resolve the fundamental contradictions that American capitalism is facing at the present time. Their political system is in an autonomous, superstructural crisis; it's not simply economic. The other issue which reveals the complete farce of democracy—"mirage democracy," Hedges calls it—is the revelations about the national security state and its all-embracing extension, a kind of Panopticon that's evolving at present. That certainly does not reveal the dominance of democratic norms; it reveals that the ruling class is preparing for vicious reaction and repression, the kind of repression we saw being used against the Occupy movement and virtually every major struggle in the past period in the U.S.

We need to be concrete about the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement. The Egyptian masses fought for democracy. It is not simply a question of them wanting a congress and a senate and a presidential system like the U.S., as it is sometimes presented in the American press; this, of course, is nonsense. There is a real class content to what they want: They want to use democracy as a way to fundamentally overcome the enormous inequality and poverty that continues to plague those societies. The same is true of the Occupy movement, which tried to overcome this issue on the basis of horizontalism.

In Socialist Alternative, we believe that you need to use whatever norms exist. At the height of the Occupy movement, we advocated that it should run 200 candidates against Republicans and Democrats on the basis of fighting for the 99%, fighting against Wall Street, and so on. At the very least, that would have put the fear of god, if you like, into the establishment. They didn't do that because they said, "Well, no, no, politics doesn't work." As a result, the movement was defeated; it waned at first and then it was repressed with police methods across the country.

The democratic struggles over the last few years have taken place on the basis of the ongoing economic catastrophe. Even in the U.S., where they claim a recovery, extreme structural unemployment and pressure on wages continue, and *these* are the issues from the point of view of the masses. In the U.S., working class people need to do what the workers did in Germany in the 1800s: the building of a mass party of the working class is absolutely necessary, a party that will enshrine in its program the need for a living wage and the ideas of democratic socialism.

There is an increasing Americanization of European politics. If you take the Socialist Party of Hollande in France, or the traditional parties representing the historic demands of working people, of the 99%, they have actually crossed over to the side of the 1% in many instances. The best example is the Labour Party in Britain, which has become thoroughly bourgeoisified; it no longer represents working people. The same is true of the German SPD. This has necessitated the rise of left-wing tendencies, such as around Mélenchon in Le Parti de Gauche in France, and the rise of new formations, like SYRIZA in Greece, which has many tendencies within it but reflects a revolt against the establishment and against the bankruptcy of the old socialist PASOK. The same process has been repeated in Portugal and in Spain. It's partly a reflection of the fact that these traditional parties have, to a very large degree, crossed over. Therefore, the narrative of European politics in the post-war period—the workers would get elected and a powerful socialist party would extract some concessions from the bosses—has been completely reversed.

It is on the periphery at the moment, but increasingly, the issue will be the need for socialist revolution. Every major revolutionary upheaval throws up not only new forms of struggle, but also new forms of government, as was the case in the Paris Commune. Workers' councils arise in the course of revolutions. In the Russian Revolution, the soviets rose as the workers' councils before their destruction by the Stalinist counterrevolution. Recently, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, workers' councils— called plenum in Tuzla—arose where people of the cities attempted to run their own affairs. That has profound implications in terms of overcoming the redundant parliamentary norms that exist. New forms of workers' councils and more direct forms of democracy will arise again and again in the course of struggle, whether in the form of workers' committees in the course of strikes, or workers taking matters into their own hands in the course of revolutions.

Joseph Schwartz: Sometimes the Left poses false dichotomies: post-political versus politics, democracy as a means versus democracy as an end. I think we have to be committed to both. What about representative versus direct democracy or participatory democracy? It is very hard to imagine a society that is strictly horizontalist and participatory. As Rosa Luxemburg predicted, the workers' councils in the Soviet Union couldn't solve the question of the land or of industrialization. What's the right industrial policy? What's the right peasant policy? After the revolution, there's no single correct, socialist answer to the questions of how we organize space, how we organize mass transit, whether we have concentrated cities or whether we have exurbs. How do we deal with a global environmental crisis if we don't have representative forms of government across the world? We can't just do it horizontally. The state won't wither away, or at least, authority won't wither away. Then the question is: How is it democratic?

The Left has mistakenly posed direct democracy or working-class power versus the rule of law. Luxemburg was right: If you don't have a right to free association, 'to freedom of speech, then there will be no democratic socialism. We also have to confront the legacy of how Marx somewhat, and Lenin *really*, were children of the Enlightenment who believed that science would ultimately give you the right answer. As Dick implied, it's a very post-political and anti-democratic vision. There is no one right answer to most political questions; that's why we're democrats.

If we're socialists, it's because we believe that decisions that are now made in hierarchical, undemocratic, anti-political ways aren't subject to democratic politics. Our argument for democratizing economic, social, and cultural life is that right now people are dominated and bossed as well as exploited. Our argument for democratizing the workplace is that decisions are made by bosses who have coercive power: they can fire workers. We believe that any binding decision, any decision that can coerce you or harm you—this is from Rousseau—has to be made democratically if it is to be legitimate: one person, one voice, one vote. This is also why we criticize bourgeois democracy: for being too bourgeois to be fully democratic.

On the other hand, if it were purely bourgeois, it would be a bourgeois dictatorship, which exists at times. Or we can call it a dictatorship to which the bourgeoisie gives power, like in Bonapartist France or fascist Italy or Germany, where the bourgeoisie isn't confident enough or strong enough to rule democratically. In this country, there is a surveillance state and there is tremendous repression. But, *this* meeting is occurring, and this wouldn't happen in a *really* authoritarian state.

Dick [Howard] is right: we couldn't have had this meeting, and in fact you can't have Trotskyists—openly—in Cuba, for example. So democracy ought to be important to everyone in this room because a lot of us would be in prison if we had the courage of our convictions in allegedly communist states. What if there's dissent in the Party? The democratic centralists say: in that case, form your own faction. But what if the faction is banned by higher-ups who say the congress has already decided the issue? If you can't form free associations, free parties, and multiple parties, you can't have a free society. The Chinese argument is, "Big leaders make big mistakes!" That was Mao. Well, there was no rule of law, no checks and balances, and no alternative forms of power to check the big mistakes of the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution.

We want as much participatory democracy, decentralization, and horizontalism as possible—but we also need representative democracy. And here's where Marxists don't know history: the Commune was not direct democracy. It was a district-based municipal government with one-year terms, recall, workers' wages for the representatives, etc. There were seven parties in the Commune government, which Engels said was the dictatorship of the proletariat—and the Blanquists were in the majority, not the Marxists. If that's the dictatorship of the proletariat, it was very democratic, but it was pluralistic. The Left hasn't really embraced pluralism and there are a lot of reasons why working people around the world are still somewhat suspicious about the democratic *bona fides* of socialists and communists.

I agree with most of what Alan Akrivos said about the retreat of the Left, and this is mostly a result of a class offensive against the gains of the Left. Here's where the reform or revolution dichotomy is not useful: if working people don't have unions you can't rebuild the strength of reformist forces; you can't go from a right-to-work state to revolutionary socialism. There's tremendous democratic energy, but many of these movements are what Frances Fox Piven calls "flash movements": they appear in a flash, like the Indignados, the Piqueteros, the Occupy movement, etc. The Left is weak because class power has been decimated; the common sense of ordinary people, in the Gramscian sense, is neoliberal: "there is no alternative." The Left has no governing program; that's why people don't vote for the Left, or why the Left moves to the center.

In the U.S., there's a contradiction we can exploit: We have great suburban social democracy. There are great public schools, parks, and after-school programs, but they're totally segregated by race and class. Our slogan should be, "Integrate the Scarsdales of the world by race and class! One, two, three, many Scarsdales, for all!" If we shared the tax resources of Manhattan in a progressive way with the whole metropolitan area we could have much more equitable public goods. We have to get people to understand—and this means struggle from below—that you can't have meaningful political and civil rights without social rights, without good, universal, publicly-and equitably-financed healthcare, childcare, paternity and maternity leave, etc. Yes, things have been eroded in northern Europe and there are problems there with racism and immigration, but there isn't the mass poverty that we have in this country. We also have to convince people that money solves problems. The elderly are less poor in this country because Social Security was doubled in real value under Johnson and Nixon (the last domestic Keynesian) because there was pressure from below. Our program has to be more radical, but without public investment and real democratic control of the pension funds we can't reindustrialize the country and create more good jobs or solve the global environmental crisis. In other words, we've got to build social movements, but they have to put programs on the agenda. Occupy basically staved off a far-right government and gave us a center-right government because Obama was forced by Occupy to talk about inequality; he didn't do anything about it but it got him re-elected.

The 1930s and 1960s—particularly the 60s and early 70s—were the greatest periods for radical transformation in the advanced industrial world. Unions had power. In France in 1968 there were tremendous gains in collective bargaining; Italy had Hot Autumn and American workers at Lordstown sat down wanting un-alienated jobs. The Left had a transformative politics in periods either of severe global depression, when there's no way out and half or two-thirds of the population of the country can't normalize the situation, or during periods of rapid growth (like the very unusual 1947-1973 period) when people don't have to worry about being unemployed, so working-class people and college students can make demands and protest. In a period of global recession and uneven growth, people think they can survive by taking an individualist approach. Neoliberal hegemony is reflected in the fact that, even among the Left, we don't have strong social organizations, strong social ties, or even the time for the emotional bonding that sustains long periods of movement.

The Left has to have a plausible alternative. Ordinary people had a sense of the New Deal, of the Great Society, of what May '68 meant in France (a critique of everything from social democracy to revolutionary Leninism). Maybe in Latin America they have some sense of an alternative; but even the Latin American project is constrained by the neoliberal economy: the Latin American left has redistributed, mostly to the poor, the gains from exports and primary goods. They haven't reformulated a socialist economy.

We can take hope from one thing: there is increasing resistance on the part of low-wage workers, immigrants, indebted students. We ought to be talking about how to cohere that into a conscious socialist and left project. To be successful, that project can't make dichotomies between representative and direct democracy, bourgeois right versus direct democracy. It has to concretize the goals of the revolutionary project, which are democracy, liberty, and solidarity.

Alan Milchman: I want to focus on how democracy as a state form—what I want to designate as "really existing democracy" that we all live with and under—functions. Really existing democracy, with its historical roots that go back a couple of hundred years, is the perfect machine for the consolidation and perpetuation of capitalism, of money, of the value-form, of all of the exploitative social forms that sustain capitalism—the abstract labor of the collective worker. Really existing democracy is a machine that provides capital with the most favorable conditions for withstanding its crises and for preventing social revolution or social upheavals. Really existing democracy is a state form that has proven itself time and time again, particularly in moments of social tension and social upheaval. It is what closes, destroys, circumvents, any tendencies towards real social struggle.

At the present time, it takes the form in the resurgence of *progressives*. Whether on CNN and MSNBC or in the Democratic Party, the election of Bill Deblasio, or the Obama administration, they all are perfect examples of "really existing democracy"; they all perform that vital function of channeling social discontent and social upheavals onto the terrain of capitalism, preventing a real movement that can challenge capitalism. They prevent it theoretically, with claims to be democratic, and they prevent it politically.

The democratic state form was still in its infancy in the course of the revolutions of 1848 (when Marx first confronted Bonapartism) or when Marx penned his critique of the Erfurt Programme of the German Social Democracy in the aftermath of the Paris Commune. Since that time, despite Lenin's *State and Revolution*, I don't think we have ever seen, in Marxism, a coherent theory of what I am calling really existing democracy, of the way democracy functions in the real world. If we want to understand really existing democracy, we have to look to someone who was certainly no Marxist: Max Weber and his political sociology.

Weber was committed to what he termed "plebiscitary leader democracy," a democratic state form the function of which was to choose a leader who could control the masses. The masses, in Weber's understanding, were incapable of self-governance; but really existing democracy, or what Weber called plebiscitary leader democracy or mass democracy, is based on the formal equality of all citizens. It is based on a system of elections through which a leader is chosen. It is, basically, what we have in the U.S. or in Western Europe and increasingly in other parts of the world: the election of plebiscitary leaders who take control of the state apparatus and who can be removed when their charisma wears thin, when the masses lose confidence in them.

Weber understood that the ballot box is free and fair; the votes are counted and there really is a political campaign for leadership, for election. It is in that sense *democratic*, formally democratic. The right to vote is based on universal suffrage; it extends to all citizens, and even the concept of citizenship can be broadened. But when the leader is chosen, to the extent that the leader has the trust of the masses, the operation of the state proceeds as if the masses no longer existed. It is on this electoral battlefield that the voters provide the leadership with their trust.

One condition of the success of really existing democracy is that there are frequent and fair elections. There are efforts to restrict the suffrage, but I don't think anyone doubts that Obama was *really* elected, twice. What we got was a substantial increase in the role of the national security state, in the use of drones, in spying on the citizens of this "free democracy," all of the things that Edward Snowden has revealed. The Obama administration hasn't given us anything that could be construed as democratic except in the sense of really existing democracy: a charismatic figure, elected, who can basically run the federal government over the course of his term. The only limit on the plebiscitarian leader in the U.S., imposed after Roosevelt was elected four times, is the constitutional restriction that limits the president to two terms; and so the next plebiscitarian leader may have to be Hillary Clinton. But Obama's charisma is wearing thin, so from the point of view of capitalism, it's probably a good thing that there is a rotation of plebiscitary leaders; it reinvigorates the system.

Think about Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal. Think about all of the programs which, if one looks at them in global terms, were programs intended to crush social resistance, to prevent social upheavals, and perhaps most importantly, to prepare for world war and global American domination. *That's* the New Deal. JFK's role as a plebiscitarian leader was cut short by bullets, but not before he had taken the U.S. to the brink of thermonuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The decision to blockade the Western Hemisphere and shoot at the Russians if they crossed the blockade line was taken by the president and a handful of people around him. To call that democracy makes sense only in the terms that Weber used: plebiscitarian leader democracy, with the emphasis on the *leader*. I have little doubt that if Kennedy had survived Dallas then his policy would have been exactly the same as Lyndon Johnson's in sending half a million Americans to fight and die in battlefields in Vietnam.

The history of real American democracy over the past century is one of the progressive growth of the power of the executive branch to the point where the executive branch can do pretty much what it wants, particularly under the guise of national security.

It's not that elections don't count—they do count! They are the battlefield on which our leaders are chosen, and because they are chosen, they are stronger than an unelected leader, a dictator. A Mubarak who gets 99% of the votes in the series of presidential elections does not have the authority or the power of an American president in this constitutional system.

JS: So why can't we raise the minimum wage in Rhode Island? Have you ever heard of the Tea Party, or of Congress, or of the Koch brothers? It's *all* the President? That's a real Marxist analysis!

AM: No, it is not *all* the president: it's a system. It is Obama who raised a hundred million dollars, so we know who supports him.

JS: So why did they all support Medicaid for the poor? Why did the Koch brothers endorse Medicaid in the south? Are there no differences within the ruling class? Why isn't there immigration reform? The whole corporate community wants it, but white, nativist populists don't! Votes do matter! How do you explain right to work laws without Republican governors? It's like you're coming from another planet, a planet that is made up!

AM: The planet that I am from is the planet of the capitalists. The electoralism that you espouse, the reforms that you believe are possible, are not possible in a capitalist society and are not possible under really existing democracy. The obstacle to them is not the Koch Brothers; it is Wall Street, it is the progressives, it is Obama, it is the Democrats *and* the Republicans. Really existing democracy is a state form through which the stability and power of capitalism can be assured, a state-form through which capitalist relations have the best chance of surviving social upheavals.

In Ukraine, social upheavals have put an end to the rule of Yanukovych. Ukraine will have a new government. It will need to borrow 100 billion dollars, the price tag of which will be draconian austerity. That is not a blow against capitalists. What may emerge is a Ukraine that is more firmly ensconced within the global capitalist bloc led by the United States and Germany; that's a distinct possibility and even a probability (unless the Russians invade and break apart the Ukraine, which cannot be ruled out). In neither case does this hold out the promise of equality, a higher living standard, more rights—except the right to elect your leader.

If the Left wants the opportunity to replace a Republican-dominated House of Representatives with a Democratic House of Representatives then really existing democracy is for the Left. But if you want the overthrow of capitalist social relations, if you want communism, if you honestly believe that reforms cannot be made in this system because of its very laws of motion, then you *don't* want really existing democracy, *including* its free elections, *including* plebiscitarian leaders. They exist to prevent any fundamental social change.

Q&A

Dick Howard discussed how, historically, democracy comes about as an opportunity to deal with social conflict through society, through the demos. Howard expressed an optimism about the historical opening of democracy and what it can achieve. Both Alan Akrivos and Joseph Schwartz talked about democracy as a means through which to achieve certain reforms and conditions for revolutionary possibilities, as something that should be fundamental to the Left because it allows public exchange, debate, and association. Alan Milchman talked about how democracy in its present form is a constraint, a hardened tool of capitalism.

What is your understanding of how democracy has changed historically? How is it that democracy was first perceived as a revolutionary opening to deal with social conflicts through society, whereas in the present, the hardened character of American democracy suggests that the capitalist state simply administers capitalist social relations? Finally, how does democracy relate to the birth of the Left?

DH: Historically, left-wing politics emerged on the basis of what Marx called an "immanent critique": what is going on *within* the society that can be brought to an awareness and crystallized in the form of a movement? Marx's vision of capitalism is that it's *immanently* self-contradictory, and that *critique*, in his phrase, functions to "make petrified relations dance by singing before them their own melody." We have to hold up a mirror in which people see what exists as a potential. The opposite of an immanent critique is what I'm hearing from all three of you to some degree, namely, a

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criticism, an external criticism: "Here's what's wrong." It's cheap! It's easy to say what's wrong with this society. What I want to know is, what are the sources of potential that can be mobilized?

I disagree with Alan Akrivos when he says that he wants to bring together these diverse movements into a single movement. As a citizen, I try precisely to avoid that kind of unity. The metaphor that comes to mind is a juggler who wants to have lots of balls in movement. It's terrible when the balls are caught and the movement stops; there's no longer any interest in what's going on. So keep the movement, keep this immanent critique, but don't have this vision of somehow fusing. The French have no parties. They all call themselves something different: a *front* for this, a *movement* for that; the right wing calls itself the *Union*, and even the Socialist Party, until very recently, called itself the SFIO, or the French Section of the Workers' International. To them, the idea of a party implies partisanship and division, whereas I would say yes, let's have parties, and let's argue with one another.

AA: Marx articulated the idea of class struggle as the centerpiece of historical social development. Starting with different movements and bringing those movements together has happened over and over again. A movement can start from a particular issue that arises in society, like civil rights, and then at a certain point it can acquire a more general character; this character can be anti-capitalist or more openly socialist in the course of its development.

In the Trotskyist view, Stalinism was a caricature of socialist ideas; that's partly why the Trotskyists were among the first to be put in concentration camps when the Stalinist counterrevolution took place. Trotskyists do not espouse the idea of a one-party state or the idea of a single party without factions. We believe that in a modern social context it would be necessary to have many parties, an open press, and so on, though of course we would repress those who advocate open and armed counterrevolution. The notion of dictatorship is also misunderstood. Marx speaks of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a class dictatorship, not something like Pinochet or the Stalinist gulag. The class dictatorship that Marx and Lenin spoke about was the idea of the rule of one class over another.

In the workers' council, the objects of history, people who are perceived merely as numbers (you put them in line and produce things or they punch keys to get your coffee) become the subjects of history. Workers' councils rise over and over again. The most classic examples are the Spanish Revolution and the Portuguese Revolution in 1973-74. Workers' councils arose in the early 20th century among machinists; ironically, these workers' councils arose out of the needs of capitalists to organize war production. Nevertheless, those workers took over the means of production and the running of the factories and organized their own council. Those workers became the epicenter of the revolutionary movements in the period before and after the First World War, the epicenter of organizing the political forces that sought, in the course of the revolutionary upheavals that took place in Germany, Russia, Scotland, and other countries, to actually run society. That remains a real inspiration for us today.

In my own experience, the bosses today hardly "rule" in the sense of organizing production. To put up a high-rise today, which is a major construction endeavor, relies almost entirely on skilled labor. You see the employers and the bankers at an occasional meeting because they have to sign papers, but in reality, they do not play a role in the productive process. There is no reason why production cannot be organized in a rational way, with working people running the means of production.

JS: If we're quoting the good book, I don't think Alan Milchman's presentation would tell us why Marx supported the ten-hours bill or why the ten demands of the *Manifesto* were clearly reformist: they call for universal healthcare, public education, nationalization of the banks, etc. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*,[1] Marx says that electoral democracy is dangerous for the bourgeoisie because once you let people fiddle on the ground they're going to want to run the show. That's why the bourgeoisie abandon electoral democracy when they're threatened.

Let's talk about the New Deal. My mother was a communist militant. I was in the IS when I was a kid. The Trotskyists were totally right about questions of democracy—but only after they were thrown out of the Soviet Union. But on questions of domestic strategy: Tell working people—tell my Jewish grandmother, a needle-trade militant—that Social Security and that unemployment insurance was a sop. She'd spit on you! *Correctly*. The communists went from 20,000 to 100,000 during the New Deal because they set themselves up as the left wing of the New Deal. They said Social Security, unemployment insurance, and the CIO *mattered*. After the Socialist Party was integrated with Trotskyists in 1937, Norman Thomas said the New Deal was buying off working people and the SP went from 20,000 to 3,000. They thought those reforms were meaningless, whereas they were implemented because there was mass unrest in the CIO and mass mobilization.

You're saying that the Civil Rights Movement had nothing to do with Lyndon Johnson signing the Civil Rights Bill. Ask any African American over age 60 whether their world changed because of what they did in the context, yes, of bourgeois democracy. Bourgeois democracy is too democratic to be purely bourgeois but much too bourgeois to be fully democratic. I don't think the ruling class had an exact, firm position on LGBTQ liberation and marriage and the fight against AIDS. There's more than just "plebiscitarian democracy" at work here; this is now a very different country for LGBTQ people too.

AM: Many of the proposals Marx made in 1848 can be criticized today because we don't live in 1848. Capitalism today is not the capitalism of 1848—that youthful, dynamic capitalism which was overthrowing patriarchialism and the remnants of feudalism. The capitalism we live with today is creating a planet of slums for every human being! That wasn't the case in 1848. Capitalism's dynamism was creating an industrial working class. The idea that we can now create an industrial working class with high wages and job security is a myth! And it's a myth, unfortunately, that redistributionists are peddling as an answer to the crisis of capitalism.

Does capitalism have the capacity to provide an amelioration of the present inequality? The Obama administration has presided over 8 years of growing inequality in this country. It hasn't stopped it, whether by executive fiat or any other means. It has *presided* over it, because the bulk of the advantages of the Obama presidency in domestic terms have gone to Wall Street, the banks, financialization, the big corporations—*capital*, the capital that shapes and dominates the world and that by and large supported the election of Obama, though it could easily have adjusted to Mitt Romney. Capitalism is neither Republican nor Democrat. It can work with either; it can shape and dominate either.

How did the working class in Wisconsin respond to Scott Walker? A recall effort: the ballot box. And it failed! What step was not taken? The step to breach capitalist legality. What could have been stopped by a fighting working class could not be stopped at the ballot box.

Those halcyon days of the New Deal always come up. The New Deal means World War II. It means massive destruction of physical planet and of human beings on an unprecedented scale: 50 million dead. And it meant, for the CIO, the no-strike pledge: "For the duration of the war, we will not strike, we will support the war effort." The war effort ended with the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and had the Germans not surrendered, atomic bombs would have been dropped on German cities.

JS: So it wouldn't have made a difference if Hitler had won?

AM: Hitler was not going to win World War II.

That no-strike pledge belongs to the whole history of the international left. At the outbreak of World War I in 1914, all of those mass political parties that Alan and Joseph have talked about resuscitating—what did they do in August 1914? They voted for war credits, on *all* sides, in *every* country. The only exceptions were the Serbian Social Democrats (who voted against war credits) and, by a fairly narrow margin, the Bolsheviks in Russia. (A large part of the Bolshevik Party was for defense, and in 1917, at the time of the February Revolution, it was only by the authority of Lenin that the Bolsheviks did not support the continuation of the war on the side of the U.S., Britain, and France.) Mass political parties, legalism—these are not tools that can be used to overthrow capitalism. The planet of slums that Mike Davis describes is not something that can be reversed by changing a president or a political party. It can only be changed by revolution. Francois Hollande is a socialist? The SPD in Germany, they're socialists? Give me a break! They are those who run capitalism in their respective countries. They haven't been socialists since long before 1914.

To live in a world of illusions and *delusions* that capitalism can be reformed is a recipe for the continuation of capitalism's move to a global planet of slums. If we want to reverse it, we need to start thinking about why capitalism can't provide jobs, why capitalism can only condemn an increasingly large surplus population to life in the planet of slums. If we understand the immanent laws of capitalism, if we understand the logic of capitalism, then we'll see why these bromides that come from the 1930s, or 1880s, or even 1848, are useless in 2014.

The concept of freedom was once a fundamental feature of the self-consciousness of the Left; the Left identified with freedom in society as it exists and with its potential furthering. This consciousness seemed nowhere in your comments; that was very shocking and disconcerting to me. It bears very much upon the question of the relationship between identitarian politics and the Left. The fact that people of color in this country are represented largely by the Democrats is a feature of a hardening concept of race around an inescapability of one's racialized character, prescribed externally. We're used to people saying "I'm a person of color, therefore this is my party," but they used to say, "This is my politics, therefore this is my party, my color be damned!"

DH: The place of freedom is the political sphere. The danger to freedom is precisely anti-politics. This relates to a critique of identity politics and this idea, for example, of the "People's Party" in India—"we are the people," we somehow incarnate that which the people want.

There were lots of polities in the ancient world that had slaves. There was only *one* that had freedom, that had democracy, and that was Athens. The question is, why? How did they create a politics aimed at preserving freedom?

If it's the case, as Alan Milchman suggests, that capitalism is a closed system that constantly reproduces itself, then in effect there is no place for freedom. My question would then be, weren't we asked here to talk about democracy and the Left? There's nothing in the title of this panel about socialism, about the working class; it's "Democracy and the Left." Could it be that the Left is defined precisely by its understanding of, and attempt to preserve that which we have of, that democracy?

JS: I agree with Dick. I'm a socialist because I'm a radical democrat, and if radical democracy doesn't exist under socialism then I'm not a socialist. Democracy is about more than just freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of expression, etc. But the Left sometimes abandons these positions; communist parties abandoned them in Europe and lost a lot of support until they changed their position. There is a reason why all parties in liberal democracies that are viable embrace individual freedom and liberties and are fairly critical of repressive societies (Left or right). Anybody can nationalize the means of production—fascists, communists, and liberal capitalist regimes.

Identities can be homogenized and repressive. The working class, in its majority formation, chose a nationalist identity over class identity. It wasn't led to the slaughter by a few right-wing social democrats; the right-wing social democrats just followed mass opinion, they didn't lead it. You have to grapple with nationalism on the part of white working people. White, non-college-educated people, to the extent that they vote, vote 62% Republican. I wish they voted Trotskyist...

AA: They do in Seattle!

JS: Seattle was a nonpartisan race.

AA: Sawant ran as an open socialist!

JS: Seattle is a very unique community: there's no threat of electing a Republican. It is an important victory but it is a nonpartisan race and we should talk about partisan races. There were no primaries.

AA: It defies your paradigm.

JS: It doesn't defy my paradigm at all. There are plenty of Greens that have been elected, nonpartisan, to city councils, and there's not a single Green in the state legislature who has been elected in a partisan race. Regional politics does allow the Left to be viable in state governments; that happened in Minnesota and Wisconsin in the 30s. If you have to elect an executive directly and the executive can veto legislation then it forces broad two-party coalitions. In the second round of elections in France, Trotskyists support right-wing social democrats because they are worried about right-wing governments. The American separation of powers forces you to worry about the median voter, to build the center-right versus the center-left. Third parties are hard to build in the U.S. at the state and national level, but maybe not at the municipal one.

Left discourse about democracy in the U.S. says that, on the one hand, it's necessary to defend whatever democratic rights and liberties that we still have from the NSA or the far right. On the other hand, come the revolution, there will be workers' councils and dual power; then the workers' councils will become the new state, the new radical democratic polity. But there's not much in between; the Left doesn't generally talk about what concrete political—not economic, but political—reforms we should be making part of our program. Once upon a time the Socialist Party of the United States demanded the abolition of the Senate.

Alan Milchman, if you oppose building mass parties—even mass parties built on Marxist principles—then I don't know what you're left with, strategically. It seems you're left with a revolutionary spontaniasm that owes, regardless of your political-economic analysis, more to Bakunin than to Marx.

AM: If revolutionary spontaneism means that revolution just arises out of thin air—no work involved, no preparation, no texts, no writing, no intervention in ongoing struggles—then I'm opposed to revolutionary spontaneity. But if it means that revolution arises *not* from the leadership of a political party that has *the* program, then, I'm for revolutionary spontaneity. The question is, can social struggles, which erupt all the time, move in an anti-capitalist direction?

Everyone here is talking about how reforms are possible and about how to get them. Internationalist Perspective provides a counter-position to that vision; we have a pamphlet on the value-form. But this is not a forum on the crisis or logic of capitalism or why capitalism can't provide reforms; the focus is on whether or not you can operate within the framework of really existing democracy and work to overthrow capitalism. Our answer is no: one has to go outside that framework to overthrow capitalism. We don't need to recall the governor in Wisconsin but to occupy the state house, the physical plants where production occurs, and the schools and universities. The focus has to be shifted from a massive operation for the recall of the governor of Wisconsin into a very different kind of mass operation.

AA: Socialist Alternative is a small organization, but we run candidates who call things by their name. We attack capitalism. We have to defend even the most basic democratic rights; it's ludicrous to suggest otherwise. These are real gains that people have shed blood over the course of the American and French revolutions in order to achieve: the right to vote, the right to free assembly, the right to free speech. These are elementary demands that socialists would defend. But we would take it a step further: you need to build social movements like the movement we are building for 15 dollars an hour minimum wages. We recognize that it's not enough, but it is a step in the direction of building a political party that reflects the interests of the 99%, that seeks to take political-economic control of the banks and of the commanding heights of the economy and place them under democratic workers' control and management. That links the day-to-day struggle of working people to the need to create an alternative to capitalism. Otherwise, it remains an abstraction. |**P**

Transcribed by Josh Price, Danny Jacobs, Louis Haling, and Douglas La Rocca.

1. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" [1852], available online at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/

Larry Shiner, continued from page 3

CM: Your reference to the French Revolution makes me think of the failed revolutions in 1848. For Marx, this was a world-historical moment because the bourgeoisie shifted to the side of political reaction. Marx argued that, from then on, the proletariat needed to organize itself autonomously and to maintain its independence from the politics of the bourgeoisie.

This moment is also significant for art. The transformation in politics for the working-class was simultaneous with a transformation in the production of art with the rise of movements such as Realism, etc., which ultimately led to the origins of modernism. In my view—and I am wary to stamp my own narrative onto yours—this crisis, of the failure of art to fully integrate into social life, deepened around 1848. The origins of modernism brought the crisis to consciousness, where it became an overt problem for the artist to work through. This crisis in some sense made art a practice of negation, where artists sought to fully realize the limits of art through abolishing its own history, as in Dada.

This kind of crisis that you speak of in 1789 might not have come to full fruition until 1848 with the crisis of the proletarianization of society. Do you see the perpetual crisis you speak of stemming from the fact that the universal freedom and egalitarianism promised by the French Revolution were never realized?

LS: Another crisis point we can add to this narrative is the Russian Revolution and the moment when the Constructivists, and the whole panoply of the different positions of artists at this time, had to grapple with the same kind of problems faced in the French Revolution: What is the social role of art and artists? It seems to me that these artists, many of whom proclaimed an anti-art position, were anti-art in a way very different from Duchamp and the Dadaists, who were their contemporaries. The Russian Constructivists thought that, in order to overcome the segregation of art in its own spiritual realm, they had to go into the factories and make objects for everyday use. Making art, to them, was being involved in the revolution in a very direct and productive way. It seems to me those were very fresh debates. Unfortunately, they got cut off by Lenin and eventually by Stalin, so there really was only one answer permitted, namely traditional art forms with a Socialist Realist content. But I think the struggles of the artists involved in the Russian Revolution were efforts to bring art back into everyday life, something the Dadaists and Surrealists also wanted, but in a different and less serious way. The efforts of the Dadaists and Surrealists were swamped by the wider capitalist society and its democratic transformations. The Russian Constructivists, like the French Revolutionary artists and musicians before them, were caught up in a transformational vortex and, though they were crushed by the totalitarian turn of Stalin in a manner similar to the discrediting of the experiments of the French Revolution during the Napoleonic Empire and the Bourbon Restoration, their efforts remain thought-provoking for us.

CM: Are you saying that artists during the Russian Revolution were echoing a lot of the problems experienced in the French Revolution?

LS: Yes. These problems assumed a new significance and took place in a new context. But, to me, this continuity points to the underlying issue of art as an autonomous realm and the obstacle it runs up against in determining the role it should play within society during periods when people want to transform social, economic, and political institutions.

CM: Do you think that the overcoming of these social and cultural problems can be accomplished in the sphere of art itself? Or do you think it will take a socio-political revolution in order for art to work through its crisis?

LS: It will take a socio-political revolution because the problem with artistic revolutions is that most of them have been very quickly re-absorbed into the existing autonomous structures of the art world. If you take almost anyone who said that what they were going to make was anti-art, it is displayed and accepted in the museum the following week. In such a situation, where anything can be art for any reason offered by anybody, it is very difficult for art to be transformative. Yet, I am not completely pessimistic. I mentioned Theaster Gates's determination not to get sucked into the enclave of the art world; some Chinese artists today, even one as celebrated as Ai Weiwei, have shown a way to make art that maintains a cutting edge. These are artists who not only make us think but also attempt to operate in a way that escapes the suffocating embrace of the high art world. |**P**

Art, a modern phenomenon

An interview with Larry Shiner

Chris Mansour

On March 18, 2014, Chris Mansour, a member of the Platypus Affiliated Society in New York, interviewed Larry Shiner, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, History, and Visual Arts at The University of Illinois, Springfield and author of The Invention of Art: A Cultural History *(2001), in which he argues that the category of art is a modern invention. What follows is an edited transcript of their conversation.*

Chris Mansour: You first wrote *The Invention of Art* in 2001, nearly 15 years ago. Why did you feel the need to write a book about the historical development of the category of "art" at this time?

Larry Shiner: In the field of philosophical aesthetics, or the philosophy of art, the focus of attention in the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s was on the issue of how to define art. A famous essay by Morris Weitz argued that art cannot be defined, and that the most we can do to understand art is to resort to what Wittgenstein called "family resemblances." This position was challenged in another influential essay by Maurice Mandelbaum, who said that we might not be able to define art in terms of any visual or perceptual properties, but we might be able to define it in terms of its relational properties, in terms of art's social context. This set up a new pursuit for the definition of art, and it was considered a very important question during this time.

Among these attempts to generate a definition of the essence of art, one of the most influential writers was Arthur Danto, who said that the historical development of the concept of art needs to be taken into consideration if we are to define it at all. He believed that art's essence has been revealed progressively, culminating in the twentieth century. I was skeptical of finding the essence of (fine) art as such. From my perspective, art does not have an ahistorical essence but is a multi-valiant term referring to a set of ideas and practices that function differently in society throughout time. Thus, *The Invention of Art* was an attempt to construct a sort of genealogy of art and to flesh out what it means when we consider art as an historically developing concept.

The historical transformations during the long eighteenth century, from roughly 1680 to 1830, culminated in the emergence of the cultural complex that we now call "art" today, that is, a semi-autonomous sphere of practices within society. This was a shared but unevenly developed trajectory of several art forms. Yet, despite the differences in the pace of the transformations of the various disciplines and mediums, these transformations were part of a total social process. Philosophy students as well as art history students need to know this history of the concept of art and recognize that (fine) art, as we now understand it, is the product of modern society, and is barely 200 years old. Many art history books never bother to define what they mean by art, although there is a definition implied in what they exclude and what they cover. I consider my book to be somewhat of a companion volume for students and artists, helping them to situate art historically and to understand this historical process *philosophically*.

CM: You say art is barely 200 years old and is specifically a modern phenomenon. The early 1800s was a rapidly maturing period for global bourgeois society, and culminated in the Industrial Revolution. What makes the practice of art in bourgeois society different from prior, art-like practices? Also, why is this historical distinction so significant in understanding art *qua* art?

LS: There is great importance, for me, in the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity in history. Confusion arises from the fact that, since the late nineteenth century, the historically specific phrase "fine art"—as distinct from art practices before this time—has dropped the "fine" out of the phrase and we now simply term it "art." However, the meaning of the term "art" is incredibly ambiguous.

One meaning descends from what I call the "older, broader" meaning of art, from *ars* in Latin and *techne* in Greek. This use suggests any human craft or performance that is done with some skill or grace; in one sense, everything humans do is an art. Here, there is a complete continuity from the caves of Lascaux to the present. It is not only the bison depicted on the cave walls that are art, but also the stone tools used to create them. Art as *techne* or *ars* lacks the precision of what we define as art today, which is roughly a semi-autonomous set of social practices, often geared toward aesthetic contemplation.

The big change in art's definition came when all those human arts got split up into various kinds: the first split was the opposition between the liberal arts and what the ancients called the "servile arts" (which was later replaced by the "mechanical arts"). That polarity was very different from the modern one contrasting the "fine arts" to the "applied arts," "commercial arts," or "craft arts." The old schema of the liberal arts included what we call sciences and mathematics as well as the humanities. Part of what distinguishes the "fine arts" as a category of classification is that things like painting, poetry, architecture, music, and theater were pulled out of the old liberal arts and made into a separate category. In fact, things like painting and sculpture, because they involved physical labor, were not even considered part of the liberal arts until Renaissance painters, sculptors, and critics argued that these disciplines should be included among them. Up until the eighteenth century, for example, the producers of paintings and sculptures and the composers of symphonies were what I call "artisan-artists," since these two terms, "artisan" and "artist," were used interchangeably in English and many other languages. The old notion of the artisan combined genius and rule, inspiration and skill, creation and imitation, freedom and service. What began to happen in the eighteenth century is that these two notions were pulled apart and, by the end of the century, each term was defined as the opposite of the other term. It took decades for the new ideas of "Fine Art" and for the new ideals of the "Artist," in contrast to the mere "artisan," to become generally accepted.

By the time they did become generally accepted, the famous seventeenth-century "rise of science" had already split apart the liberal arts. At this time, the humanities, sciences, and fine arts began to emerge as distinct fields. A key point of my book is to show how the emergence of the category of fine arts, and its accompanying ideals of the artist and the aesthetic, occurred in conjunction with a new set of practices, institutions, and behaviors.

Paul Oskar Kristeller's essays on the development of the classification systems of art were very influential for my book; I share his vision that the category of (fine) arts fully emerged only in the eighteenth century. Kristeller ended his essays with Kant and Schiller's writings on the nature of the aesthetic. It seemed to me that the way we use the term art in the singular, as a kind of semi-autonomous subdivision of culture in the modern world, is still deeply influenced by the Romantics and the German Idealist philosophers. When I reread the literature, it struck me that the real culmination of the long process of constructing the social system of the fine arts occurred around 1830. This is why I speak of the long eighteenth century: You can see the beginnings of the fine art category and its institutions as early as the 1680s. My long eighteenth century encompasses the epoch spanning from the 1680s to the 1830s. By the 1830s, the fine arts system as we know it today was almost fully developed.

CM: How did the broader socio-political, institutional, and practical changes that happened in bourgeois society in the eighteenth century transform the liberal arts and fine arts system? What is the specialized fine arts system's relationship to large societal transformations, and how was this relationship expressed?

LS: In very broad strokes, the historical transformation entailed the shift from an aristocratically-organized society toward a society dominated by the bourgeoisie. The development of the market economy played an important role in the emergence of the categories of fine art and the artist. On the production side, the old order was dominated by the patronage-commission system. As an artist, you were typically either employed full-time by a lord or bishop, as were many of the great figures of the Renaissance and the seventeenth century, or you received commissions as an owner or member of an independent workshop with apprentices.

For the most part, artisan-artists prior to the eighteenth century did not experience the scenario where the artist walks into the studio and faces the "anxiety of the blank canvas." Prior to the eighteenth century, the subjects of paintings were commissioned, and very often the artist had a contract. One of my favorite examples is Leonardo, whom today we think of as a great independent artist and genius. However, he had a contract for *Virgin of the Rocks* that not only specified the subject matter of his work, but also the color of the virgin's robe, the date of delivery, a guarantee of repairs, and so on. This is unthinkable for an artist with an independent practice working in the twentieth or twenty-first century. Turning out pieces that are intended for a particular purpose—and very often for a particular place—does not match our notion of the freewheeling modern artist.

The emergence of the market also created the possibility for more people with disposable income to emulate their aristocratic "betters" by collecting art. Most of the wealthy bourgeoisie did not have enough money for an "in-house artist," but they could acquire paintings through dealers. There were all kinds of smaller institutions—not just large ones like the Louvre—that were created in the eighteenth century to facilitate this kind of transaction. Additionally, there was the rise of art galleries, art dealers, and specialists, which were rare before then. Until the eighteenth century, most paintings and sculptures were handled by furniture dealers. With the flourishing market economy, there was greater specialization and artists began anticipating what buyers might want.

Initially, many artists greeted the freedom of the market with great enthusiasm. They exclaimed: "Now we will not have some lord telling us what the subject matter will be! We can create things on our own, we can do what we want!" But, of course, it very soon became apparent that if artists wanted to make a living, they could only create what they wanted within the limits of what people were willing to buy, what dealers were willing to handle, and so on. It did not take very long for many artists to become disillusioned with their apparent new freedoms.

CM: How did the rise of the market system in the fine art world allow artists freedom in their practice and forms of expression? How did those same market forces simultaneously undercut the independence many artists thought they had achieved?

LS: In my book, I cite Annie Becq's reference to the emergence of the modern category of literature with the shift from "concrete labor" to "abstract labor." I think those two terms are useful ways to express the shift away from the patronage system for making a particular thing for a particular purpose. The patronage system made the value of art depend on such things as the place it was intended for, the difficulty of its execution, the cost of materials, and so on. Certainly, under the old system, the prestige of the workshop, and the artist whose name was identified with it, was part of the work's value. But in the new system, what makes the production of art "abstract labor" is the emphasis on primarily valuing the creativity of the artist. This value is expressed in the ideas and facility embodied in the work. What you are paying for, as it were, is the reputation and the value that is created by the market itself.

Obviously, there is a continuum here between these two poles of labor. The shibboleth that art and money should have nothing to do with each other, that "pure" art is not affected by the dynamics of monetary value, has become a new hurdle for artists. But the fact is that art and money cannot be fully separated except in the case of artists with an independent source of income. Julian Stallabrass intelligently discusses a lot of these issues, especially how the high-end international art market operates, a market where all the players have to be very wealthy. It is an enclave, a world of its own, in which the auction houses, galleries, dealers, curators, and critics each have their role in establishing reputations and value.

The cave of hands in Patagonia, Argentina, circa 7300 BCE.

CM: Artists need to be able to sell their work like any other commodity in the market, so one often finds that they conform their work to the predominant taste or demands of their time. They end up following a formula or make predigested marketable products. In this scenario, art is hollowed out to become a means for entertainment, status symbols, or fashion, and is not an autonomous practice that pushes the limits of human expression and creativity, which seemed to be the promise and potential of art in emerging bourgeois society. There are a host of other unfreedoms related to this, but the external demand of the market is the most general problem that has affected all of the arts, and that has undermined the freedom that the market offered the artist in the first place.

One thing I find very interesting about the rise of art as a distinct category, and embodying what you call "abstract labor," is how it is coterminous with the rise and generalization of the commodity form of labor in society. Concrete labor is no longer measured in the same way it was in the pre-modern world. Abstract labor, under the capitalist mode of production, entails the valorization of the commodity form through the total sum of socially necessary labor time. Commodities thus become equivalent exchanges in the market measured by the time and labor-power it takes to produce them. But what seems peculiar about art is that it is not the same kind of commodity as labor or other objects in the market because it gains its value through idiosyncratic, particular, and concrete properties. Why do you think art gains a certain kind of value for being a concrete object when its production can be considered as a process of "abstract labor," similar to other commodities produced in capitalist society?

LS: This relates to another theme that I deal with in the book, which, which has to do with the spiritual function of fine arts. By the early nineteenth century, with the development of Romanticism and Idealism, the phrase "fine art" was often replaced simply by "art" in the singular (*e.g.*, in the work of Schiller, Hegel, Schelling, etc.), an elevated notion in which art became reified. It seems to me we are still stuck with the fallout from the Romantic elevation of the artist to a kind of deity, or, at least, a priest with a sacred calling or vocation.

Obviously, all kinds of twentieth-century artworks are stuck in this logic. Andy Warhol or Jeff Koons can make fun of it, and yet, in a way, they *live* by it. But the spiritualization of art, regarding it as a sacred calling and as an embodiment of human experience, is also a way to keep prices up. It is part of what drives the market. This relates to Benjamin's observations regarding the work of art in the age of technical reproducibility: Art's "exhibition" value, even though it is historically distinct from its prior "cultish" value, still maintains a fetish character, albeit under social conditions very different from the pre-capitalist past. Art's aura, it seems to me, has hung on despite the Dadaist and Duchampian attempts to undermine it. These attempts persist, most famously perhaps with Warhol calling his studio a "factory." These artists make fun of the aura, but they are nonetheless parasitic upon it. In this sense, art's spiritual aura is needed to keep the market going. This is not to deny that there is a spiritual dimension to *all* art, design, and craft-making in the sense that such works can embody human meanings of many kinds—high, low, everyday, ordinary and occasionally extraordinary—but the notion that only the most celebrated artists selected by the high art curators, critics, and gallerists embody such spirituality is a market fiction.

CM: It may be the case that this spiritual element of art is what paves the way for the next new thing in art as a marketable trend. New forms of experience and expressions are created, and the market is able to use this creativity to reconstitute itself on a different basis while still operating under the same laws of motion. However, do you think there is the potential for something transcendental in art insofar as it embodies the experience of the new? Could the new in artworks be an expression of a form of consciousness that is not reducible to the logic of capital? The historic avant-garde, for example, used this understanding of art to justify their practices.

LS: I am very interested in contemporary artists like Thomas Hirschhorn and Tania Bruguera, both of whom are dedicated to political activism in their artworks. They can be considered part of what we have for an avant-garde today. I am sympathetic to their aims, but one of the problems—and I think this is the intrinsic problem of the modern autonomous social system of art—is that, as artists, they jump into the arena and make political interventions, but then they just as easily jump out. For example, Bruguera is celebrated by critics of the *October* type for creating a cultural center for immigrants in New York and for letting immigrants live in her apartment. She is seen as an artist who is grappling with capitalist life, with its reality. But once she is finished with that, she will move on to another project. Meanwhile, the ordinary social worker or community organizer does not receive the scantest attention. In fact, many people have contempt for social workers and often look down on them as petty bureaucrats. But social workers go back year after year and work in those situations. Thus, I am ambivalent about this kind of art. I admire it, but we also have to recognize that it is not superior to what the ordinary foot soldier is doing. It does not take place on a higher spiritual plane as is implied by continuing notions of Art with a capital "A."

CM: Is it plausible to say that such politically-engaged artists who seek to integrate their practice more into the "real world" end up unconsciously rehearsing the older system of art before it became a specialized practice focused on formal and material concerns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?

LS: There may be an aspect of that, but I think that we cannot go back in time. We can learn from the past and something about our situation through investigating history, but my ambivalence about Bruguera and Hirschhorn does not prevent me from spending time thinking about their work, which is more fruitful than thinking about the work of Jeff Koons. However, I also recognize that, since society has turned art into a specialized culture and has created the concept of an artist as one who can dip into gritty reality but with the protection of being residents of a spiritualized sphere, these practices are not the same as they were in the past. One possible exception to my concern about artists being trapped by their membership in the protected enclave of art is the practice of Theaster Gates in Chicago. Thanks to many invitations, he too is a world traveler, like Hirschhorn and Bruguera, but so far he has used his income and celebrity to continually develop his cultural interventions in his own Chicago African-American neighborhood.

CM: Then might it be the case that artists like Bruguerua and Hirschhorn are expressions of a crisis in our current configuration of art as an autonomous sphere of production?

LS: I think the problem with the idea of crisis is that it suggests a turning point, or a moment of decision, whereas, what I describe in my book attempts to capture a much longer historical process. The eighteenth-century turn where all of these developments converged—that is, the market economy, the rise of the bourgeoisie, the emergence of new, separate art institutions, and so on—set the stage for a continuing crisis of art. Art is always in crisis in that its aspirations far exceed its reach.

The "crisis" notion relates to another movement that I trace in the book: what I call "the dialectic of assimilation and resistance." "Resistance" refers to such things as the effort within the context of the French Revolution to hang onto or revive certain disappearing, older ways of doing things, for example, the "National Music." This was also seen in the work of figures such as Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, and Hogarth. On the one hand, revolutionaries were happy to eliminate the power of the aristocracy, which one can see as part of the rise of the bourgeoisie. But on the other hand, the revolutionaries embraced such ideas as Rousseau's notion of the festival and the program for a "national music," with which they tried to make the arts directly serve the revolution. You can say that was a moment of crisis: the failure of the French Revolution on so many fronts, including the failure to maintain or restore the integration of arts and politics in daily life.

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