

The coming insurrection?

A reflection on resistance at the G20

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One of the results of these recent movements is the understanding that henceforth a real demonstration has to be "wild," not declared in advance to the police. Having the choice of terrain, we can, like the Black Bloc of Genoa in 2001, bypass the red zones and avoid direct confrontation. By choosing our own trajectory, we can lead the cops, including unionist and pacifist ones, rather than being herded by them. In Genoa we saw a thousand determined people push back entire buses full of Carabinieri, then set their vehicles on fire. The important thing is not to be better armed but to take the initiative. Courage is nothing, confidence in your own courage is everything.

—The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*¹

THESE FEW SENTENCES PRESCRIBE the Invisible Committee's advice for today's budding radical. Concurrently serving as agitator and guidance counselor, their pamphlet's understanding of the path towards overcom-ing capitalism is woven through with the demand to abandon the fear and inhibition taming one's revolution-ary, insurrectionary potential. As a theoretical justifica-tion for tactics of subversion, violence, and destruction in the name of anti-capitalism, *The Coming Insurrection* was without a doubt in the minds, hearts, and back-packs of the black-clad protesters who converged on, collided with, and combusted cop cars in protest of the Toronto G20 Summit in June. Perhaps less apparent is the manner in which the emphasis on the propa-ganda of the deed, à la the insurrectionists and those participating in Black Bloc actions, is hardly restricted to the usual, sable-appareled suspects. Rather, this lust for radical change rooted in "real struggle" represents the culture of the contemporary anti-capitalist Left en masse, and is reflective of a politics whose fervent affirmation of action expresses a non-critical, reified understanding of society.

Despite seemingly great differences between "mainstream" protest and "extremist" tactics, Black Bloc methods and the theory of the insurrectionists are in reality only more acute expressions of a politi-cal outlook shared by the contemporary activist Left as a whole: a naïve, ahistorical asseveration of action, despite the Left's continued downward descent into the abyss of meaninglessness. Marx once described the predicament of emancipation being fettered by a gulf

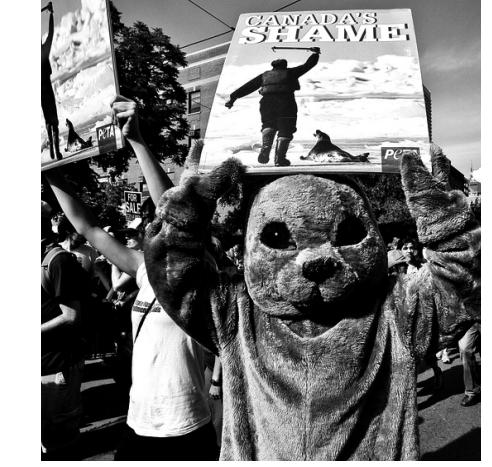


A few faces of the anti-G20 protests in Toronto, June 2010.

between thought and action, famously concluding that "philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." The mantra of the 21st century left seems to have amended this evalua-tion, posing that the point is *to resist it*. This fixation on resistance, contrary to popular imagination, does not reveal the Left's strength, but rather its consensual degradation into pure symbolism. The actions, antics, and aftermath of the G20 protests underscore the cur-rent crisis of the Left: not a rain of rubber bullets aimed at it, but the perverse, perennial celebration of its own comatose state.

Global gatherings of the G20 have been celebrated for bringing together all flavors of left activism: religious social justice types pleading for peace, eco-warriors distraught over the destruction of Mother

Earth, dozens of infinitesimal sectarian groups ironically endorsing the power of the masses, Fosteresque entryist union organizers championing any cause that gives their local more street cred, anarchists equipped with tear-gas-ready bandanas, hoards of protestors decked out in "Fuck the G20" shirts and marching to chants of equal chutzpah, and enough Tibetan flags to make one think he or she is jamming at a Beastie Boys concert circa 1994. The uncom-fortable, odd couple dynamic of this conglomeration is a decades-long tradition, for these unlikely comrades share the streets time and time again, as they did in 1999 while battling in Seattle and in the host of protests against corporate criminals, global hegemony, and world capital that populate the landscape of the Left, post-collapse. Protest, it has been decided, is the least common denominator amongst what constitutes itself as the Left today, the



arena in which divides are bridged in the name of unity against the enemy of all.

While constantly conceptualized as unprecedented, this form of politics is in reality formulaic, and the storyline of the G20 in Toronto has only reproduced the equation. Thousands gather for state-sanctioned, peaceful demonstrations seeking to inform those in power what democracy looks and sounds like—apparently, like hundreds of people mechanically shouting in unison. As the demonstration unfurls, a small militant population destroys property as a gesture of their "autonomy" and fearlessness to resist the intimidating batons and tear gas of police officers outfitted in riot gear. This is followed by intense retaliation from the police officers, chiefly against persons who committed no crime. Indeed, the G20

"Insurrection" continues below

Insurrection, continued from above



resulted in the largest mass arrest in Canadian history. To the embarrassment of police officers and the city of Toronto, nearly all these arrests and detainments, whether the result of the frenzy of the moment or an intentional abuse of power, were without merit.

What is lost in this narrative, a conceit of the Left by now, is why it is so often repeated. While there are undoubtedly authoritarian brutes in the ranks of the riot police, itching to swing those batons into the dreadlocked head of some protester, the urge to point this out, though nearly instinctual on the Left, is an insufficient response. In the name of a solidarity whose political achievements have not materialized, the pre-dominant gesture uniting global protest is summarized in the words and sentiments of one Ice Cube: "Fuck the police." While N.W.A. features prominently on my iPod, this sentiment, when conceived of as a politics unto it-self, demands further consideration. As stated in countless articles appearing in both the mainstream press and various alternative publications, most observers walked away from the G20 with a disdain for the police (and perhaps the remnants of a lachrymatory agent in their lungs), and little more. While the actions of the police in Toronto, including the use of highly developed facial recognition software to identify vandals, were truly disturbing, fixating on police brutality and corruption can and often does come at the expense of insight into the purpose and effectiveness of these protests. Masked behind what appears to be unrestrained, op-pressive police brutality lie buried choices made by the Left, the product of a history of intellectual and political resignations.

The "concrete" expression of antagonism against the police as a mode of politics is far less simple than it might appear. Marching alongside thousands of others with the synchronicity demanded by protest, under the stern gaze of riot police, sends adrenaline rushing

through one's veins, whether from fear, delight, or the kinky mix of the two that is characteristic of riot porn and its soft-core and hard-core stars. As we look to the police and insist at the top of our lungs, in shared euphoria, that "this is what a police state looks like!" we must, but rarely do, ask ourselves what this pleasure we take in our resistance reveals. On the one hand, it affirms our belief in actionism, that the insurrec-tion is in fact on the horizon. On the other, it suggests an unconscious understanding of our contemporary impotence. The cynicism of ultra-Leftism, though it drastically simplifies the forces of capitalism it seeks to overthrow, is not entirely unwarranted. The pos-sibility of effective political organizing around a shared goal of universal human emancipation may indeed be a hopelessly utopian vision from a past that has eclipsed us. While it is indeed terrifying to admit, the high we feel in confronting the police may be all that is left to experience of the dream of freedom. Despite feverish assertions that action alone propels the Left forward, in reality it may only serve as the formaldehyde embalming the corpse of the project of social emancipation.

However, this recognition is repressed in the protest culture of the Left. Instead, in the name of a lukewarm affinity towards Black Bloc antics, rationalized as de-fending a "diversity of tactics," the Left in all its varia-tions adopts a politics of mere resistance that, despite its stridency and apparent radicalism, only affirms its complacency. This form of politics, which measures success by the number of bodies marching or windows smashed, differs only in degree rather than kind from one activist group to another. In all cases it diverts from addressing the overwhelming dilemma at hand, which is not a question of resisting the police, or the fat cats, or the leaders of the world pontificating from conven-tion centers. Rather, it is a question of whether the Left can come to terms with the current crisis of its own

state of being, lest the difficulties it faces in changing the world become incorrigible.

Instead of facing this challenge, the Left makes believe that by shattering shop windows and burning police cars, its most violent members are somehow undermining the very foundations of capitalist society. The Left assumes that the actions of protest are, by default, consequential, radicalizing, and moving us closer to an emancipated society. This delusion acts as anesthesia for the pain of living in a world where all that leftists are able to do is symbolically indicate dissatisfaction with inequality, exploitation, and political regression, a world in which the question of what is to be done has become entirely unclear. Rather than taking up the task of clarification of its goals, the Left neurotically demands more action as a solution to its problems. But this is a cop out, a hallucination brought on by hopelessness. Despite a swan-dive in participation—consider the conservative estimates that the 1999 WTO protests had at least 40,000 participants compared to the 10,000 in Toronto—despite the acceler-ation in global poverty, despite increasing political, social, and economic repression, despite further dismantlement of organized labor accompanied by worldwide unemploy-ment spikes, and despite innumerable other indications that the purported "victories" of protests are illusory, actionism continues on as the default politics of the Left today.

Actionism also characterized the scene when I was first politicized, entering the social milieu of ideologi-cally ambiguous leftism championed by contemporary protest culture. I once shared the sentiments of many of my G20 comrades, that in our protest we were taking the first steps towards a revolutionary situation. However, repetition without results began to make me lose my faith. Critical questions posed from a perspective cognizant of the history and defeats of the Left led me to a place of deep agnosticism about the future of emancipatory politics. This agnosticism, however, is not a surrender. Rather it expresses, as Nietzsche put it, a "pessimism of the strong"—it seeks to distinguish itself from the hyperbolically confident façade of radical politics today, a pretense disguising what is essentially a profound sense of defeat. For, while the Black Bloc's politics of provocation and the unreflective, undirected, and underachieving activism of the mainstream Left appear meaningfully differentiated, both actually exist as potent symptoms of the same putrid political imagination, distinguished by symbolism as a veneer for futility and a cold, conserva-tive, and dystopic imagination of the future to counteract what is perceived of as the failings of the overly ambitious, naively utopian project of human emancipation. Slogans on T-shirts replace the struggle to come to terms with the haunting failures of the Left historically, while giving the finger to the police replaces the attempt to under-stand the complications and contradictions of capitalism. The juvenile antics of the Black Bloc, the basis of the infantile theoretical perspective of insurrectionists, and the cowardly anti-intellectual predilection of the Left as a whole, all share a refusal to reflect on their impotence in overcoming capitalism.

This refusal is obfuscated by the seemingly concrete claims made by the activist Left today, in its urgent cries to resist the system, divest from exploiters, and rally on

behalf of immigrants, the working class, the environ-ment, and gay rights. However, when one begins to move beyond protest placards and starts questioning all the shallow theoretical evaluations the Left has embraced as sacred—all of the presuppositions about how we might build a world capable of less injustice, exploita-tion, and unfreedom—the problem is rendered acute. If one believes that the primary problem in the world is that of authority, that we indeed "live under an occupation, under police occupation," as stated in *The Coming Insur-rection*, one cannot help but to focus solely on resisting one's "occupiers."² The Invisible Committee suggests we "flee visibility" and "turn anonymity into an offensive position,"³ that we "sabotage every representative auth-ority,"⁴ that we "hold them at a distance, redirect attention, exercise psychological pressure or force passage and gain ground by surprise."⁵ No matter how much Deleuze and Guattari one reads to reaffirm these prescriptions, this stance cannot amount to much more than a manic fantasy, a misrecognition of the complexities of the task at hand, symptomatic of a broader politics imprisoned in the concrete and immediate. Costuming and all, modern protests feel increasingly like a less sophisticated version of live action role playing, thriving off a spectacular but imaginary conception of one's political context, walking and talking and Molotov-cocktail throwing like a revolution-ary.

The crisis the Left currently faces is a theoretical one, whether it acknowledges it or not. Do we continue to allow the Left to emaciate itself in its mealy-mouthed insistence that we protestors are righteous victims, or do we abandon this caricature, and strive to under-stand what would be necessary to come to terms with the failures of the past while persisting with a desire to understand and change the world? Do we continue to look at a vandalized Tim Horton's and call it revolutionary, or do we concede this is only an indulgence to a juvenile glee in destruction? Do we continue to see subversion in shattered glass, do we take in good faith the opening claim of the Invisible Committee that "everyone agrees, it's about to explode,"⁶ or do we begin to ask ourselves if the consciousness of the working class is even remotely altered by our actions? *The Coming Insurrection* suggests, "the impasse of the present, everywhere in evidence, is everywhere denied."⁷ For the Left's protesting to become more than mere posturing, perhaps it should not project that critique onto the gullible masses, but pose it to itself, given the Left's own tendency to ignore the mounting evidence that its strength is a figment of its own imagina-tion. While a world beyond capitalism may indeed be pos-sible, protest, of the calm or the combustible sort, does not lead us there on its own. | P

1. The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.

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in creating the Chicago chapter of the new SDS, I shared many of its worst characteristics in other coalition work: I fancied myself part of the resurrected 1960s, thinking that 1968 was the high point of politics—that is, until me. This profound hubris, I believe, is a symptom of the sort of uncritical political impulse that deters building the Left in mass. What resounds today is the overall failure, rather than the small gains, of the 1960s student left.

Because of my involvement with Platypus, I have become convinced over time that an emphasis on “synthesis” and “the intersectionality of political struggles” have become fixations that escape and betray the task at hand—human emancipation. For this we need a total theory—not a total understanding of everything in the world, but a theory that grasps fundamentally the unfreedom of capitalist society, rather than merely collects particular descriptions of the effects of unfreedom, or collates a series of bullet points aimed at this amorphous thing called “the Man,” American hegemony, the System, or Empire. This is not some naive utopian desire for absolute truth, but rather a sober recognition of the necessity for a critical Left, a recognition that human emancipation cannot exist unless society at large is understood on the basis of how to push it there.

Marxism has a miserable history of authoritarianism and blind and infertile sectarianism. At the present moment, it has little to no apparent practical significance. But then, why am I interested in the Left? Essentially, it is this drive towards the utopian, understood not as a fixed idea of a perfect future, but as a “better unknown” that one strives for. Marxism was the only tradition of thought that made clear to me why I am a leftist, and raised serious questions about what this means in practice.

A critical perspective rooted in historical study and self-awareness does not mean one renounces all activism or organizing, but it does entail a deeply felt responsibility to be critical not only of the dangerously apolitical state of academia, but also of the depoliticizing potential of protest culture and other forms of participation that seem entirely political and serious. Ultimately, we must remember that the question at the heart of the student left is not about students’ real or imagined emancipation, but about what capacity students have in contributing to a politics of social emancipation, and what the difficulties of such a project would be.

Q & A

Internationally, the Left’s political power is at a historical low. How do you make sense of the decline of the Left? How should the student left, on the whole, or one’s own political practice begin to address this?

WK: I disagree that we’re in a moment of defeat. There are problems with the strikes and protests in Greece, but there are also a lot of interesting things going on. If communities of anarchists, communists, and socialists come together and agree on what needs to happen,

we can profoundly transform not just our country, but the world. Simply because those sorts of wide-ranging transformations are not happening right here, at this moment, does not mean that we are in a moment of defeat. We are at a point in human history where any kind of revolutionary outbreak, once it gets off the ground somewhere, will spread through the global community.

LB: I do not know if the Left is at an absolute low, historically, but I certainly think we are at a relative low, compared to moments like May 1968 or 1917. The first step is building movements and building organizations. We need to create an atmosphere and culture that can instill a belief that things are changing and new possibilities are at hand. There are only 15,000 people here at the U.S. Social Forum; you do not have a revolutionary situation with only 15,000 people. We need people to grab hold of this new vision of society and to build it in their everyday lives. We get there by bringing those people into movements and politicizing them. Organizing on campuses is taking that step from building rallies that grow from five to fifty to five hundred. If we have 500 people at a rally at our campus, that means 500 people have taken, at least in some small way, a stand against the way the world is. However, developing student power alone does not politicize people. But we must build these movements, these communities of people taking a stand, for there even to be a context for politicization in the first place. Certainly, we have not yet reached our destination, and everyone may not be going in a perfect direction, but we are still moving in exciting ways. Therefore I do not think the student left is hopeless right now.

AP: I agree that the Left is at a historic low in the United States, but internationally this is much less the case. There is a lot of potential in Latin America, in particular Venezuela, El Salvador, Bolivia, and Brazil, along with the Maoist revolution in Nepal and the Naxalites in India. Possibilities are emerging in Greece and other European countries, as well. This is a huge moment of opportunity, but precisely for this reason the questions we ask within the Left, about how we build the Left, take on even greater importance. The Left is broader and more inclusive now than it ever has been. It is no longer simply about liberating the working class—it is about GLBTQ liberation, and about liberating people of color, women, and the disabled. Our ideal role as students lies very much in what Luis was saying—it’s just a matter of getting out there and organizing, doing political work, and building rallies from five to fifty to five hundred people, and more. Many have a sense of anxiety about our moment. There is a popular sentiment that “something is going to happen.” But it is not going to happen unless we make it happen. At the same time, many people have a sense that things are only getting worse, that things are only moving to the right. We, as the revolutionary left, need to be a motor; we need to start pushing people’s ideas until they are able to develop on their own as organizers and revolutionaries.

The way we do that is not by asking, “Did we win yet?

reform movements function as the school of revolution for the proletariat, the means by which the working class can be become, as Marx once put it, “a class for itself,” by developing a better understanding of the limitations of working within capitalism. Revolution cannot be achieved simply through reforms, but reforms are part of the revolutionary struggle. Something else we have talked about is the aversion to ideology, which is common on the Left today. A lot of people do not want to box themselves in—they want to “take the best and leave the rest.” I think this amounts, in effect, to feeling shame in being political, shame in talking to people about being a Marxist or talking to people about believing that capitalism is a systematic disaster that can never be reformed into working for people. It is a shame that, because my union leads were against my talking to people from a fervently Marxist and anti-capitalist perspective, I had to leave the union struggle on my campus to really engage people politically. These are all elements that play into why people do not simply become “politicized” by campaigns, even when these campaigns get people out marching on the streets.

One popular strain in radical politics has advocated “engaged withdrawal” from institutions and the creation of alternatives like worker-owned cooperatives, community gardens, tenants associations, and so forth. As a strategy, this approach has recently been programmatically adopted by the Organization for a Free Society, though they are hardly the only ones to do so. What are the results and prospects of this approach to politics?

AP: Being an organizer in Detroit, where there is so much emphasis on building alternative institutions, namely urban gardens and agriculture, has made me think about how important it is to have prefigurative struggle, which means building physical institutions that, to the highest degree possible, represent or resemble the world it is we are fighting for. Building workers’ cooperatives is one kind of prefigurative struggle, and as such it is useful and necessary, both as a laboratory for politics and as a mechanism by which we can win people over to revolutionary consciousness by expressing right now, in the real world, the values that we are trying to build. Of course, there are reasonable reservations about this approach to politics. Detached from larger political struggles against the powers-that-be, any forays into prefigurative politics will only yield isolated institutions and political experiences, which are then unlikely to amount to wider social change.

LB: I support the idea that building alternatives is central to our work, but building alternatives is not enough, because these alternatives are never wholly autonomous from capitalism. Community gardens are not spaces of non-capitalist social organization. The best example is New York City in the 1970s. Everyone was clamoring about the end of capitalism, because there were lots of community gardens and urban farming. Then finance capital came into New York and, all of a sudden, the property became far more valuable and the gardens

Did we achieve this demand?” Rather, we will be winning only when we have built a base that puts the people in power into a dilemma. Obviously, we should be judging ourselves based on whether we are recruiting people into our movements, and whether our rallies are getting bigger. But also we need to judge our political efforts with respect to revolutionary consciousness. Are we developing revolutionary organizers? Even if we don’t win our demands, which can be very difficult, the activity of organizing around those demands may still be a victory of a sort, to the extent these organizational efforts translate into developing revolutionary leadership and bases of revolutionary consciousness in our communities.

AW: At least implicitly, many leftists have this idea that everyone is anti-capitalist, but some of them do not know it yet. In practice, this leads to a conviction that if you just get a bunch of people to sign on to this or that coalition, it will immediately become an anti-capitalist movement, naturally and of its own accord. Frankly, this idea is misguided.

When organizing at DePaul, I basically took the “five to fifty to five hundred” approach that the other panelists mentioned, yet I am skeptical that this organizational work actually politicized anyone. We were able to sit down with the president and demand that our campus workers be paid a living wage. I built a committee that, I think, can win a living wage for DePaul workers in the next year. But I do not think I have politicized a single person through that. There are a lot of liberals that want to do the right thing because they see people on their campus suffering. I am not going to interfere with anyone trying to do right by his or her conscience, but I would not call that politics. The schism between the revolutionary left and the social movement left is very real, and deep. Whenever I have tried to bring even the most vaguely radical perspective to bear on my union work, usually in the form of comradeship critique, it has been mocked by my union leads. This is a real problem that has been internalized in the labor movement, which thinks that it is going to emancipate society through contract negotiation alone. Critique does not mean dismissal; I am critical of the labor movement while respecting it and working for it for free. In fact, I work for the labor movement and strive to be critical of it for the same reason: I take the labor movement seriously.

In the new SDS, the fixation on being a broad-based, umbrella organization displaced attempts to clarify its own ideological thought, and thus to develop its members politically. Internal political differences were often addressed apolitically—through whisper campaigns, for instance—in ways that simply did not get at the heart of the issue. Has this become a tendency of the Left in general, meaning that young leftists are doing work for political organizations, without development and clarification of their political perspective? To what degree is this a problem, and how can organizations address it?

WK: I do not think ideology is nearly as important as some of the other panelists. At this point, it does not

matter which program we are going to implement once the revolution happens. It is fine to talk about whether you are a Marxist or an anarchist, but such discussions are premature at best. They are ultimately irrelevant until we have real power. When I’m organizing students, the reason I do not talk about, for example, whether or not they have read Marx, is because it is not relevant to our lives. It will be relevant, and we should have those arguments, once we have overthrown capitalism. But we are not there yet.

AP: It is true that much of the discourse over ideological differences is frequently—and I’m putting it mildly here—counterproductive. But there are necessary conversations that can be productive. There’s not so much an aversion to ideology in general, but more of an aversion to dogmatic, counterproductive conversations. People want to have meaningful, rich political discourse, in which we clarify our differences, struggle with them, and move forward from them. Ideology is necessary and, in a sense, unavoidable. We all have an ideology because, if nothing else, we are socialized according to the conditions in which we are raised. Part of the goal of revolution is to combat those ideologies and introduce, as Gramsci put it, counterhegemony—a new set of values, a new set of narratives, and a new way to view the world. Precisely because ideology is unavoidable, it is necessary to discuss it; we should not be coy or unclear about this. We will not be able to create a revolutionary movement without a revolutionary ideology that opposes the ideology of capitalism, which serves to justify the oppression that exists in the current social order, and against which we are fighting. This comes back to the necessity of bridging this gap between the revolutionary left, characterized by organizations based on a high degree of political unity, and the social movement left, which is broader and more diverse in terms of its political approaches. Both are absolutely necessary for a powerful popular struggle.

The new SDS showed that there are degrees of unity necessary for accomplishing different tasks. It started as a call for a broad student left to come out to a convention and build a national organization, where you had a bunch of people from different tendencies on the Left in the same room, talking. The hour of conversation became a three-year-long political struggle. Unfortunately, a growing tendency emerged in the new SDS, whereby discussion of superficial questions of the organizational structure took the place of ideological clarification. Genuine, productive political debate was absent. It was very evident to me in the new SDS that these political differences were framed and treated as “personal disagreements” or clashes of personality, rather than dealt with as ideology. From that experience, I think it is necessary to clarify political differences—not because it is good to have disputes about everything, but because people and organizations need to be clear about their agreements and disagreements in order to understand where there is potential for meaningful collaboration, and where there is not. We do not all need to work together, all of

“Ideology” continues below

Ideology, continued from above

the time. Indeed, we are not going to have a movement at all if we do not start to clarify these differences.

LB: What we are talking about here is definitely a problem for the Left. We need to build infrastructure for processes that will politicize people as they organize, like having a reading group. If you are politically active on the Left, you should take a couple of hours out of your week and read political literature together with your friends or fellow travelers. If you are not doing that you are not really politicizing people, and whatever campaign you are working on is not really winning. I myself am retracting a bit from student organizing on a national level because I think, right now, there is more of a need for coherent mid-level, mid-scale organizing in Chicago. I mean, before we start trumpeting a national campaign or a national organization for this or that cause, I think there needs to be a serious political context in which that national work would happen. Moreover, on the scale of a city or maybe a state, maintaining a conversation about politics is much more feasible practically.

WK: Listening to you all, I have come to agree that it is important to talk about our ideology in the movement. At the SDS convention, you would see the Marxists in one corner planning their next move, and the anarchists planning theirs in the other corner. What I thought was interesting was that the discussion, particularly in the anarchist circles, was, “If we win, these people are going to try to kill us.” Many anarchists are skeptical of building coalitions with Marxist groups because of things like the history of Marxism and anarchism in Spain and other places, where taking power led to bloodshed internally. This could happen again, but I think, in the meantime, it makes sense for us to talk to each other. I do not think, however, it is good to organize through these little subgroups and sects—we are not going to win a revolution by organizing anarchists and socialist clubs on our campuses, and I think this is where we really mess up. You may develop a decent community with an idea like that, but it does not build the bridges the movement needs in order to move forward. In the sphere of mass organizing, we cannot let ideology dominate the entire discussion, because it distracts from the fact that hardly anyone is even tenuously committed to a communist revolution in America in the first place.

AW: I’d like to revisit something Aaron mentioned, regarding the importance of having struggles for reform within a revolutionary framework. A lot of leftist groups tail onto various issues, from the Dream Act to health care. Most often they do this in the form of front groups or as cadres that infiltrate existing organizations. They imagine that they are pushing these groups, but are they actually leading them? No. At the same time, some on the sectarian left have an aversion to any sort of reform, which is simply absurd. Rosa Luxemburg had it right in *Reform or Revolution*. It is not a question of “choosing” one side or the other—the problem lies in separating the two in the first place, which ensures that both will fail, in practice. To Luxemburg, the victories and failures of the

were destroyed as the lots were bought and sold. We need to build around these struggles in order to defend and expand them. We need movements that are powerful enough to say, “No, you are not going to destroy this garden, this is the society we are building.” And we need to scale that up: Gardens are great, but we need to feed millions. We don’t just need a new way to feed the neighborhood. We need a way to feed an entire society.

AW: But if, as you said, these community gardens do not represent alternatives to capitalism, why should building them be “central” to any anti-capitalist politics? These sorts of projects do not create a more free society. Community gardens may have other values—certainly, they give pleasure and enjoyment to some people—but the Left does not primarily value them for this reason. Rather, much of the Left uncritically endorses a variety of projects for urban beautification because they see these as revolutionary tactics for social emancipation. There are no ready-made alternatives to capitalism immediately at hand within capitalism. The Soviet Union at no point represented an already completed alternative to capitalism. At best, in its early days immediately following the Russian Revolution, the Soviet project represented a form of highly realized capitalism, the contradictions of which were being pushed and clarified politically by the Bolsheviks.

Today, most of the supposed alternatives to capitalism that emerge from prefigurative struggles are nostalgic for an imagined, premodern Eden, complete with a fantasy of pseudo-feudal property relations, particularly in terms of land. So I have a hard time seeing these struggles as “laboratories for politics” and left-wing “political experimentation.” If anything, they seem to prefigure a future that has regressed to something even worse than the form of capitalism we know today.

If a lot of left wing political discourse is, for the most part, unintelligible to most people, is that a problem with the discourse or is that a problem with contemporary reality?

AW: I would say, “both.” It is the case that most people on the street are not going to understand what I mean if I say Gramsci or talk about hegemony, prefigurative struggle, and so on. I think that we have to be able to relate to the average man on the street, to develop a way of popularizing and articulating our politics, our vision, our analysis, using common language in a way that people can relate to. Perhaps this means developing organic intellectuals, in the Gramscian sense: people who not only come from communities that understand revolutionary politics, but who can also communicate these ideas and develop leadership amongst the masses.

So, for example, on the question of whether or not the Left should call itself “socialist” or use the word “socialism,” I think there are good arguments on both sides. I don’t think that we need to have a straight line on that all the time. What does socialism really mean? It is a whole set of concepts about an economy that is equitable, democratic, etc. We can call “socialism” whatever we like, really, because it is the component ideas that are truly important. Broadly speaking, popularizing and spreading the component parts of that vision, such as democratic

participation in the economy, is most important. There is a time and place for arguing about whether we call it socialism or something else, but at the moment that is a less pressing concern.

I do understand the argument for fighting against the right-wing demonization of socialism. Nevertheless, I wonder what, exactly, is the goal of fighting right-wing groups on campus. Young Americans for Freedom come to your campus with signs that say, “Sweatshops are Good.” It is twisted and pretty sick. But the way to win is by not letting them frame the debate. The best way to fight the right-wing is to build the Left and, in a sense, force them to catch up to us. Most people are not on that extreme polar setting of left versus right. Most people are in the middle—those are the people we need to focus on winning over.

AW: But is it really just a matter of getting the message to the people? Are we even sure we know what the message is, or should be? I needed to figure out for myself what revolution meant, what capitalism meant, what socialism meant, and I am not at all convinced everything has been figured out, by me or anyone else. Leftists want to be on the side of the people, but we also tend to think that we ourselves are not regular people. Leftists have to live and work under capitalism like everyone else. The Left exists under the objective conditions of capitalism; it does not struggle against an ideology that is separate from it. Indeed, the Left must struggle with capitalist ideology precisely because it is not separate from it. The Left is subject to capitalism and thus capable of reproducing it. Otherwise, fighting capitalism would be a much simpler matter. Leftists need to remember that they are most vulnerable the moment they think they are somehow immune.

I think a lot of what the Left is about, or should be about, has become unclear, obscure, vague. If this is the case, a pedagogical approach to politics is more appropriate to our political landscape today than winning people over by promising something you cannot deliver. This pedagogical approach would have to entail a specific kind of education, political and highly politicizing. I do not think that we should be posing alternatives by throwing everything against the wall and seeing what sticks. After all, nearly anything would stick. People are desperate and confused, and are therefore liable to treat as a solution even the most tentative suggestions. Leftists are not somehow above and beyond this situation—if anything, we are wrapped up more deeply in it. The Left needs to pose an alternative, but if we accept that the ideological clarification we have discussed today has not been adequately realized, it follows that we are not in a position to pose a concrete “alternative” through a program, whether it comes in the form of a sectarian screed or a popularizing pamphlet aimed at a mass audience. Perhaps, at the moment, we can pose a legitimate alternative only through a series of questions. | P

Book review: Adolph Reed Jr. and Kenneth W. Warren, eds., *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of African American Thought*

Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2010

Greg Gabrelas

IN A 2005 COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS, Howard Zinn urged the graduates of Spelman College to look beyond conventional success and follow the tradition set by courageous rebels: "W.E.B. Dubois and Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and Marian Wright Edelman, and James Baldwin and Josephine Baker."¹ At first, Zinn's lineage feels like an omnium-gatherum. Compare Malcolm X's "by any means necessary" militarism to Marian Edelman's milquetoast non-profit advocacy—"by any grant-writing or lobbying necessary"—and the incoherence stands out. But there is logic to Zinn's cherry picking: namely, the flattening out of history to instill pride in one's own identity. Du Bois and King may have belonged to radically divergent political tendencies, but what matters is their usefulness as role models, heroes in a continuous tradition of black resistance.

Zinn's historical reasoning has a history of its own. Beginning in the early moments of decolonization, insurgent black nationalists attempted to rewrite history in the service of race pride. Think of Cheikh Anta Diop's demonstration that the ancient Egyptians were really black Africans. Though such appeals proved too essentialist for the post-structuralist historiography of the 1970s and 1980s, historians who still hoped to preserve the therapeutic value of history continued to assert the cultural legacy of the black diaspora. This legacy was forged over hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years of oppression. And black resistance, it was claimed, dates to about the same period. In the absence of any actual politics, historical research became a substitute satisfaction. By revealing the racism implicit in, say, Orson Welles's 1935 "Voodoo Macbeth," the historian seems to win a political victory against racism.

In their edited collection, *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of African American Thought*, Adolph Reed Jr. and Kenneth W. Warren mount a challenge to the political pretensions of black studies. Now, bemoaning the excesses of identity politics is not new; in fact, it has paid for many a conservative's third swimming pool. But Reed and Warren's critique is meant to come from the Left, to show how the unexamined assumptions of black history mystify the present and block the development of critical politics.

One major assumption is that racism poses a persistent and persisting problem in American history. To make the point, historians, literary critics, and pundits often use W.E.B. Du Bois's adage that the problem of the 20th century would be the problem of the color line. In a recent article,

for example, Linda Darling-Hammond details racial disparities in education, and asks whether America will be ready to "roll up its sleeves to at last solve the problem of the color line."² Reed's capstone essay "The Color Line Then and Now" shows how such contemporary appropriations not only misunderstand the context of Du Bois's remark, but also obscure the recognition of real social problems.

Du Bois's formulation was not exactly a clarion call for the black revolution; in fact, as Reed demonstrates, it came at the most conservative moment in his career. When Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, he was not alone in prophesying the primacy of race in current affairs: In the academy, scientific racism had reached its zenith, and in popular political discourse, the imagination of a racial "Struggle for Existence" shaped foreign and domestic policy. Balking at the notion of innate inferiority, Du Bois had a softer view of racial inheritance than most, but he shared the race-centric view of his moment. An admirer of Bismarck, he advocated for social reforms to squelch racial and class tensions, and divert blacks from more radical politics. Du Bois would reevaluate his perspective, of course, over his long lifetime. A member of the Communist Party in the years before his death in 1963, he later questioned his own formulation of the "color line" as the problem of his century.³

Although commentators like Darling-Hammond may think themselves "progressive" in their recitation of the young Du Bois's remark, they only replicate the implicit conservatism of the idea. Following her reasoning, if racism really were the problem behind the miserable performance of schools in inner cities, then a change in the mindset of lawmakers is all that is needed. Send Congress to diversity trainings, and no child will be left behind. One might then protest that racism is not located at the level of individual prejudice; rather, it is an institutional racism. But this piles mystification atop mystification. The problems facing inner-city schools, Reed might respond, are not caused by the unseen poltergeist of institutional racism. No, irresponsible politicians in both bourgeois political parties, some black, failed to address and resolve the actual social crises of American cities—deindustrialization, poverty, and political disempowerment—preferring instead to build patronage machines to win reelection.

The problem is not bad attitudes, but bad politics, carried out in the name of empowerment. Reed has long

criticized all kinds of opportunism practiced by politicians such as Jesse Jackson who, in the name of racial interest, sell the promise of uplift for voters' hapless endorsement of the Democratic Party line. Reed's latest essay also develops his long-term theoretical project: showing how forms of ascriptive identity (such as race, gender, and caste) mediate and stabilize capitalist society, categorizing people differently according to status, and legitimizing exclusion from the political and social body. Because of their immediacy and apparent usefulness for political elites, these identity markers lend themselves to being picked up by activists and reformers as the object of social change. But by shifting political attention towards individual oppressions—such as racism, sexism, and homophobia—activists and reformers block their own recognition of social domination, which is rooted in capitalist production.

Race has, of course, served as one such form of ascriptive identity, legitimating everything from racial violence, disfranchisement, segregation, petty discrimination, and government neglect. But since the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, Reed suggests that new, insidious markers obscure the reproduction of social domination. Take, for example, the notion of an "underclass," the mythical legions of the inner city, born of single mothers and welfare queens, who reportedly suffer from deficient cultural norms rather than from living in a society that does not afford them the resources to escape poverty in the first place. The notion of an "underclass" allows allegedly liberal politicians, such as Barack Obama, to eviscerate social supports for working people in the name of protecting "middle class values."

Meanwhile, "progressives" continue to rely on the "color line" to understand the present, with the result being political failure. As a recent example, Reed relates how the reconstitution of working-class black neighborhoods after Hurricane Katrina was blocked by the "radical" discourse of a unified black community, which ultimately left the interests of tenants to be displaced by those of more wealthy homeowners. But this is just one event in a long line of radicals' misunderstanding of social inequality, leading to their liquidation at the hands of elites. Far from trying to pit the politics of race against the politics of class, Reed insists instead, "The race line is a class line" (288)—namely, that of the petit-bourgeoisie.

Reed's critique of the misapplication of Du Bois resonates with Judith Stein's contribution, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others: The Political Economy of Racism

in the United States." Although originally published in the mid-1970s, Stein's analysis of the rise and fall of the American Populist movement retains its saliency, demonstrating how common-sense assumptions about race are inadequate to study the history of black politics. After the Civil War and the emancipation of black slaves, blacks fought to determine the character of economic development in the South by participating in Reconstruction politics. Yet even after the ascendance of white supremacy under the aegis of the Democratic Party, radical politics were by no means extinguished: The Populist movement sought to unite poor farmers and dispossessed sharecroppers in an interracial struggle against capitalists and landowners. However, these radicals were opposed by politicians like Booker T. Washington in the name of racial uplift and accommodationism.

Whereas the dominant histories of the period understood the failure of interracial populist politics and the rise of Washington's leadership as primarily a reaction to Southern racism, Stein understands Washington's and other black leaders' political commitments in light of the period of intense class conflict on the cusp of Reconstruction's demise.

In the account given by the dominant historiography, the problem of the American Populist movement was bad race relations, not the changing structure of the Southern economy and the balance of class forces. Such accounts traditionally imputed a racial "unity of interests" as a framework to evaluate black political leaders and their strategies, while ignoring blacks' class politics. Stein argues that historians who follow this method inevitably give the misleading impression that the dominant ideological dispute of the times was between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, who in fact only represented two conservative poles: Both took for granted many of the same assumptions about racial uplift and the dangers of utopian radicalism.

To better understand the historical moment, Stein suggests, we must understand black politicians' roles in the unfolding class struggle in the South. As she shows, such a perspective renews the significance of the ideas and self-understanding of radicals who participated in populist organizations, such as the Southern Alliance and the Colored Farmers Alliance, who did not view the triumph of racial domination in the South as a given, and who argued for politics to the left of Du Bois. Rather than treat racism as the unmoved mover, a perpetual evil across American

"Book Review" continues below

Book Review, continued from above



"Treat 'Em Rough," a political cartoon originally from the George Matthew Adams Newspaper Syndicate Service, August 16, 1919.

history, we should consider it as a factor that might have been overcome by conscious political action.

Nevertheless, with the Left's failure to overcome racial inequality, the reconstitution of Southern society took place with the exclusion of blacks from formal political participation. This transformation had ideological as well as material repercussions. Reconstruction and Populism's premature defeats ensured the continued suppression of black political participation, and this suppression, in turn, generated a new understanding of politics. Black politics now centered on a system of racial brokerage: Elites would articulate the needs and interests of the black masses to philanthropists and politicians. To justify the situation, elites like Washington and Du Bois claimed that they had attained their own position by merit, not unfair patronage. The situation presented new problems for black intellectuals, uncertain both of the feasibility of the "racial uplift" program and the possibility of any mass democracy to replace it.

The essays in *Renewing* understand this ambivalence not as a particular ontological problem with "blackness,"

usually signified by Du Bois's unspecified metaphors such as "the Veil" and "double consciousness," but as a dilemma confronting all Progressive Era intellectuals. Uncertain of the significance of the emerging industrial masses, shocked by the obvious depravities of modern life, intellectuals imagined community, and not communism, as a cure for social ills.

The problem is nicely illustrated in William P. Jones's essay, "How Black 'Folk' Survived in the Modern South." The essay documents the progression of Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographic research and writings on folklore. Hurston was trained by prominent anthropologists such as Franz Boas to search for the folkways of blacks in the South, whom many considered to be a premodern, agricultural people. Concerned that the creep of industrial civilization would permanently destroy "folk" life, anthropologists like Hurston mounted expeditions to search out, define, and preserve the dying traditions. However, over the course of her investigations, Hurston gradually realized that the "traditional" blacks she sought out were predominantly workers in industrial

lumber mills and railroad towns, who shaped the same Southern culture as their white working-class peers.

Many commentators have read Hurston's early writings and collections of folklore, such as *Mules and Men*, as part of this nostalgic project of maintaining black cultural particularity as a means of survival against racist denigration. But in fact, as Jones demonstrates, such critics miss the pivotal development of Hurston's own thought. She went looking for the "people," and found the proletariat: biracial and dynamic.

Black intellectuals in the Jim Crow Era did not merely interpret the world; they attempted, in their own way, to change it. Preston H. Smith II's essay, "The Chicago School of Human Ecology and the Ideology of Black Civic Elites," demonstrates how black intellectuals helped create, for better or (probably) for worse, Chicago's modern public housing infrastructure. Using what were at the time cutting-edge quantitative methods to construct models of "human ecology," black sociologists like E. Franklin Frazier measured, analyzed, and explained the needs of the residents of Chicago's "black metropolis" in order to secure Government commitment to public housing. Although the political initiative may seem in retrospect to be progressive, the effort was laden with conservative assumptions that led, eventually, to the collapse of support for public housing. For the black Chicago School sociologists steeped in "human ecology," only race counted as a political or sociological variable. And, as Smith explains, such an assumption

leaves [either] racism or the lack of bourgeois culture as the only legitimate explanations for the pathology of poor blacks and their neighborhoods. These explanations would go a long way to justify a class-stratified housing market and a public housing policy of which the rationale was to promote better citizenship among poor blacks. The only two avenues for black housing reformers influenced by human ecology theory were antidiscrimination policy or the promotion of middle-class culture for upward mobility and racial progress. (148)

Smith ably demonstrates the inadequacy of these black sociologists to understand and respond to the structural constraints on urban development imposed by capitalist social relations, despite their opposition to racism.

Confronted by capital, the intellectuals could only repeat "prejudice," "uplift," and "racism." But the inadequacy was not specific to black intellectuals. In his comparative history, "The Educational Alliance and the Urban League in New York," Touré F. Reed details how both the German-Jewish Educational Alliance and the black Urban League attempted to reign in the radical impulses of the industrial working class via appeals to notions of a common racial mission.

Intellectual history, these essays suggest, cannot simply detail the construction of identities and cultures. It must come to terms with how intellectuals come to understand—or misunderstand—social reality. In addition to the positive advance the contributors to *Renewing* make to the study of black intellectual history, which is notable in itself, there is a shared concern to critique the often conservative, bourgeois foundations of black political thought. By and large, the theoretical contributions of Reed and others succeed in offering a compelling methodology with which to ground intellectual history

in its subjects' material and ideological milieus, and the authors' critiques of contemporary perspectives in black studies makes the intervention timely and invigorating.

But the attempt risks sliding into a vulgar materialism, understanding ideology as little more than a pure reflex of one's own social position or interests or, in the case of intellectuals, the social position of an elite stratum. For if all intellectuals, black or otherwise, are the bearers of a ruling ideology by virtue of their social position, where does that leave Reed, Warren, and the other contributors to their volume?

The problem should be reformulated. We might consider the reigning ideologies of our moment—racial liberalism, multiculturalism, managed pluralism—not simply as a mask papering over the interests of the elites, but as a resignation in the face of historical helplessness: a coping mechanism, a compromise formation, a sublimation. Universalist politics of freedom have been crushed; now, in an effort to pick up the pieces and restore lost gains, intellectuals have over the past several decades fallen back on a set of common-sense notions about racial communalism on which they believe they can rebuild a mass political movement for change. If we cannot win the world, we can at least win gains for the race.

But the expected victories have not arrived, and the gains have not been won. Some blame exogenous forces: police repression, Wall Street, the Republican Party, neoliberalism. But the problem, as *Renewing* helps us to see, is with us. The operative concepts of the Left mystify the world and authorize sterile politics. It is not simply a problem of bad historical method, let alone incompetent teachers or the news media. The whole actually existing "Left" supports and sustains the bad pedagogy: the "push-the-Democrats-to-the-left" hucksters, the grassroots organizers, the "Marxist" cadres, the nostalgic academics. All peddle the crude analysis of race thoroughly discredited by *Renewing*'s contributors. But discredited ideology can, and usually does, persist, temporarily warding off despair at our shared helplessness.

The task for the critical intellectual: to resist all substitute satisfactions, to escalate the critique of bad pedagogy wherever it persists, to remember a future long silenced by history—by any means necessary. | P

1. Sue Sturgis, "Against Discouragement: Remembering Howard Zinn," Institute for Southern Studies, <<http://www.southern-studies.org/2010/01/against-discouragement-remembering-howard-zinn.html>>.

2. Linda Darling-Hammond, "The Problem of the Color Line in America's Schools," Race in America, <http://race.change.org/blog/view/the_problem_of_the_color_line_in_american_schools>.

3. Reed cites Du Bois's own preface to the fiftieth anniversary of *The Souls of Black Folk* to help demonstrate this transformation:

I still think today as yesterday that the color line is a great problem of this century. But today I see more clearly than yesterday that back of the problem of race and color lies a greater problem which both obscures and implements it; and that is the fact that so many civilized persons are willing to live in comfort even if the price of this is poverty, ignorance and disease of the majority of their fellowmen; that to maintain this privilege, men have waged war until today war tends to become universal and continuous, and the excuse for this war continues largely to be color and race. (qtd. 258)