Platypus

A project for the self-criticism, self-education, and, ultimately, the practical reconstitution of a Marxian Left.

The *Platypus* Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s-30s), "New" (1960s-70s) and post-political (1980s-90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

Weekly reading groups will commence at the following locations on these dates:

BOSTON
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
77 Massachusetts Ave
Room TBA Time TBA

09/13/09

for more infromation visit:
boston.platypus1917.org

CHICAGO
School of the Art Institute of Chicago
McLean Center
112 S. Michigan Ave.
Room 707 1:00pm

09/12/09

Universtiy of Chicago
Reynolds Club
5706 S. University Ave.
Room TBA Time TBA

10/03/09

Loyola University
Information Commons
6525 N. Sheridan Road
Room TBA 6:30pm

09/06/09

for more information visit:
chicago.platypus1917.org

NEW YORK
New School University
Location TBA
Room TBA Time TBA

09/12/09

for more information visit:
newyork.platypus1917.org

FALL 2009 MARXIST READING GROUP

Problems on the Left

(• required / + recommended readings)

WEEK 1
- Moishe Postone, "History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism" (2006)
- Fred Halliday, "Who is Responsible?" (2005)

+ Iraqi Communist Party, Letter about the Situation in Iraq (2006)
+ Spartacist League, "The Senile Dementia of Post-Marxism" (2006)

WEEK 2
- Leszek Kolakowski, "The Concept of the Left" (1968)

WEEK 3
- Max Horkheimer, selections from *Dämmerung* (1926–31)
- Theodor W. Adorno, "Imaginative Excesses" (1944–47)
- Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti, " 'Action Will Be Taken': Left Anti-Intellectualism and its Discontents" (2002)

WEEK 4
- Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts" (1844)
- Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848)

WEEK 5
- Georg Lukács, "The Phenomenon of Reification" (Part I of "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," 1923)

WEEK 6
- Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament" (1927)
- Wilhelm Reich, "Ideology as Material Power" (1933/46)

WEEK 7
- C. Wright Mills, "Letter to the New Left" (1960)

+ Carl Oglesby, "The Idea of the New Left" (1969)

WEEK 8
- Max Shachtman, *Race and Revolution* (AKA Communism and the Negro, 1933)

WEEK 9
- Richard Fraser, "Two Lectures on the Black Question in America and Revolutionary Integrationism" (1953)
- James Robertson and S. Stoute, "For Black Trotskyism" (1963)

+ Spartacist League, "Black and Red: Class Struggle Road to Negro Freedom" (1966)
+ Bayard Rustin, "The Failure of Black Separatism" (1970)

WEEK 10
- Adolph Reed, "The 'Black Revolution' and the Reconstitution of Domination" (AKA "Black Particularity Reconsidered," 1979)

+ Reed, "Paths to Critical Theory" (1984)

WEEK 11
- Martin Nicolaus, "The Unknown Marx" (1968)
- Postone, "Necessity, Labor, and Time" (1978)

WEEK 12
- Karl Korsch, "Marxism and Philosophy" (1924)

+ Marx, "To Make the World Philosophical" (1839–41) and "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing" (1843)
+ Korsch, "The Marxism of the First International" (1924)

WEEK 13
- Marx, selections from *The Grundrisse* (1858/1971)

WEEK 14
- Lukács, "Preface" (1922), "What is Orthodox Marxism?" (1919), "Class Consciousness" (1920), *History and Class Consciousness*

WEEK 15
- Juliet Mitchell, "Women: the Longest Revolution" (1966)
- Clara Zetkin and V. I. Lenin, "An interview on the woman question" (1920)

WEEK 16
- Adorno, "Sexual Taboos and the Law Today" (1963)
- John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity" (1983)

The Platypus Review is funded by:
The University of Chicago Student Government
School of the Art Institute of Chicago Student Government
The Platypus Affiliated Society

Submission guidelines
Articles will typically range in length from 750–2,500 words, but longer pieces will also be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: *review_editorfdplatypus1917.org*. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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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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

Issue #14 / August 2009

The Platypus Review

Issue #14 | August 2009

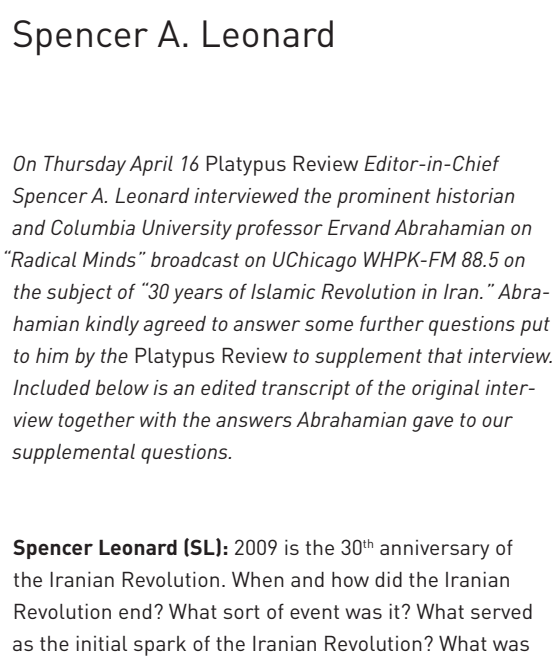
30 years of the Islamic Revolution in Iran

Interview with Ervand Abrahamian

Spencer A. Leonard

On Thursday April 16 Platypus Review *Editor-in-Chief Spencer A. Leonard interviewed the prominent historian and Columbia University professor Ervand Abrahamian on "Radical Minds" broadcast on UChicago WHPK-FM 88.5 on the subject of "30 years of Islamic Revolution in Iran." Abrahamian kindly agreed to answer some further questions put to him by the* Platypus Review *to supplement that interview. Included below is an edited transcript of the original interview together with the answers Abrahamian gave to our supplemental questions.*

Spencer Leonard (SL): 2009 is the 30th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution. When and how did the Iranian Revolution end? What sort of event was it? What served as the initial spark of the Iranian Revolution? What was its duration? What phases did it pass through? How can we best understand its inner dynamics and how is it best periodized? What were the main demands of the revolutionaries in the lead up to the departure of Shah Reza Pahlavi and how were those demands realized (or not)?



Khosrow Roozbeh, the head of the Tudeh party's military wing before his execution.

Ervand Abrahamian (EA): Well as for the demands, you would have to look at all the different sectors of society. Each class had its different grievances, but in 1978 they all came together in denouncing the Shah and the monarchy. I think if you look at the intelligentsia, their demands against the Shah go back all the way to the 1950s for having overthrown the Mossadegh government. There was a great deal of nationalistic resentment for the overthrow of the nationalist government of 1951–1953. But if you look at the traditional middle class, the Bazaaris [merchants], they had a lot of economic grievances against the Shah, because he was trying to stifle much of the bazaar economy and to create a large state economy. The oil boom of 1974 gave the Shah the means to stifle the traditional middle class. In the working class you had the typical grievances of bad working conditions, inflation, wages, high cost of rent. I would list those as economic. Trade union strikes, especially the oil strike of 1978, also targeted the oppressiveness of the Shah's regime. Meanwhile, some clerics wanted to implement their own traditional interpretation of the sharia. In other words, the movement against the Shah was not monolithic. It carried within it inherent contradictions that became apparent immediately after the revolution. This is why the bloodshed immediately after the revolution was far worse than that during the revolution itself.

SL: I want to get back to some of the underlying social dynamics. Could you lay out the brief compass of events of 1979? What was the trajectory, and how can we say that it came to some sort of end, or steady state?

EA: Where the Revolution started was in demonstrations, just as it ended with mass demonstrations that ended in February 1979 with the decision of the armed forces not to continue opposing pro-Khomeini demonstrators in the streets. The [first] demonstrations started in 1977, not 1978 as is conventionally said. These were student protests in the universities. They escalated when seminary students in Qom started imitating the university students. Then followed shootings, the killing of demonstrators, which sparked a cycle of 40-day mourning demonstrations. In Islam, there is an important 40-day commemoration of the dead; here this custom was used as a potent political tactic. Each of those 40-day demonstration cycles snowballed. They became bigger and bigger. The situation was further escalated by certain unforeseen events: There was the burning of a cinema in Abadan, in which many women and children were burned, and it was blamed on the secret police. (Actually, it was not done by the secret police, but at that time it was generally considered, even by American journalists, that the government had something to do with it.) Then there was a large shooting of demonstrators in September of 1978 in Tehran. This too increased the tempo. The size of the killings was vastly exaggerated (some 60 were killed), but it was generally said that something like 400 had been killed in the shootings. So, by the end of 1978, you were getting demonstrations of roughly 2 million people in Tehran alone. It has been said that the popular participation in the Iranian Revolution was greater than any other revolution in terms of the percentage of the total population participating in protests. Eventually the demonstrations got so big that the Shah and Army were not able to control it. That is what forced the Shah to leave the country. As soon as he left, Khomeini [who had previously been exiled in Iraq] returned. About 3 million people came to the streets to greet him in February of 1979. In two weeks, the whole regime just collapsed.

SL: Many journalists speak of Islamist political forces, as though they represented the authentic self-expression of the people in so-called Muslim countries. For instance, in the current crisis in Pakistan, it is often said that the Taliban are popular among segments of society untouched by Western influence, whereas lawyers and professionals represent and defend liberal western values. To what extent does such a view explain or distort the Iranian Revolution? Was the demand for an Islamic state, with Mullahs or religious clergymen in power, a grassroots popular demand opposed by a modernizing Western elite, or is the picture more complicated than that?

EA: It is much more complicated. The conventional view that the Shah was a modernizer and the public was traditional, meaning religiously conservative, and therefore opposed to the regime contains an element of truth. There were people in Iran you could call traditional conservatives. But in the past they had actually been apolitical or they had supported the regime. They had not before caused problems for the Shah's regime. Putting aside the secular and socialist movements, that is, speaking only of those who espoused Islam, there are different branches of Islam involved, none of which can be described as conventionally traditional.

The rise of a radical Islam basically originates in the university students, and they interpret Islam in a much more socialist way. The main philosopher of this is Ali Shariati, who was very much influenced by Franz Fanon. What Shariati did was inject into Shi'ism radical notions of class struggle, equality, anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, and anti-clericalism. There is a strong streak of anti-clericalism in Shariati. His ideas very much appealed to graduates, college students, and high school students, and these were the biggest groups of people who organized the demonstrations and were out in the streets from 1977 onwards.

SL: And these were people who see Shia Islam in particular as radical, egalitarian...

EA: Yes. The religious say the Islamic Revolution was "Islamic," that "Islam is the explanation for the revolution." The trouble with this as an explanation, of course, is that Islam has been in Iran for a long time and yet Iran did not have an Islamic Revolution until 1977–1979, so something else is going on besides Islam per se. One crucial issue was the reinterpretation of Shi'ism from an apolitical, conservative ideology to a highly revolutionary one. This was done by a new young intelligentsia, the sons and daughters of the traditional middle class who were going to university.

SL: I want to get back to some of these questions because I think these are some of the least well-understood aspects of the Iranian Revolution, but first I would like to speak of the immediate historical background. In your recent book, *The History of Modern Iran*, with respect to the White Revolution, you say, "the White Revolution had been designed to pre-empt a red revolution, but instead it paved the way for an Islamic revolution." Specifically, could you speak about the background of later events going back to the early 1960s and the White Revolution? How was Iranian society changing in the decades immediately prior to the outbreak of the revolution? How ought we think about the modernization of Iranian society during those decades? And what tensions did these transformations produce? Which social classes, in other words, gained strength during the Shah's rule and which were rendered vulnerable?

EA: From 1941-53, opposition to the Shah's regime came, basically, from the Left, including both the communist movement and the secular nationalist movement, the national front. The threat the Shah always feared was from the Left. So, to forestall that and with the encouragement of the Kennedy administration, the Shah launched land reforms and with them what he called the "White Revolution." The Western strategy to preempt red revolutions was to carry out land reform. The US did that in Japan and South Korea, Kennedy encouraged it in South America, and the Shah was doing the same in Iran. The trouble was that the White Revolution actually undercut the Shah's power, because traditionally the monarchy in Iran had been supported by a landed class composed of tribal chiefs, big landowners, and clerics with large endowments. Land reform undercut that landed class, so the Shah, instead of strengthening

"Interview" continues below

Interview, continued from above

his position, in a way undercut his own social support. Rationally, you could say the peasants who received the redistributed land (and a certain sector did get land) should have been endeared to the monarchy. After all, the Shah had given them land. The trouble was that the support services with which the Shah was supposed to supplement agricultural reform—agricultural credits, irrigation works, and so on—did not materialize. So the peasantry was left only half satisfied. They got land but they did not get all the things they needed in support of that. The result was that the Shah did not really get the support from the countryside that he had hoped for. That does not mean the peasants were against the Shah. In fact, the peasantry mainly just sat out the revolution, neither supporting nor opposing it. The mass demonstrations were all urban based, not rural.

SL: I want to ask you now more specifically about the role of the Left in the Revolution. What were the most important miscalculations made by those who supported the revolution but ended up losing out in the end? And also to what extent did those among the international Left who supported the Iranian Revolution also suffer disappointment? Has the Left in Iran, and internationally, learned from the experience of the Revolution? Or, in your view, have many of the lessons of the Iranian Revolution been ignored, even today?

EA: It is not so much learning lessons, but trying to fathom what happened. The general expectation on the Left was that once the Shah had been forced out and there was an opening, leftist ideologies and movement to the Left would come to the fore, because, before the dictatorship of the Shah, before 1953, the organizations that had the most mass support in the cities, as I said, were the Communist Party [Tudeh] and the National Front. But from 1953 to 1977 these secular organizations were dismantled by the regime, leaving no leftist or internationalist organization intact. While the regime was dismantling leftist organizations and secular organizations, they left undamaged the religious mosques and seminaries, i.e., the clerical establishment. So once the regime began to unravel, you had really two opposition groups: the amorphous students who were chiefly engaged in organizing demonstrations and university protests, on the one hand, and a network of organizations based in the mosques and seminaries, on the other. The latter were, of course, controlled by the clerics.

When the regime collapsed, there was a vacuum. The people who were much more capable of picking up power were the clerical organizations because they had an organization. To use a metaphor from the Bolshevik Revolution, as someone once said in 1917, power was lying in the gutter and the Bolsheviks were the only organization with the strength to bend down and pick it up. In the Iranian case, the people most capable of picking it up were in fact the clerical organizations.

SL: So the Left was already decimated, with the only politics on offer being the clerical elements and pop front, focus-on-main-enemy support? What exactly was the situation of the Left in 1977 and 1978?

EA: Leftist organizations could not function in the SAVAK [Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar, Iran's National Intelligence and Security Organization] police state. Former members were imprisoned. You could not really organize anything—no trade unions, or underground organizations. In many ways the Shah's regime was more effective than traditional police states. In addition, the repression had fragmented the Left into many groups, many of which saw each other as rivals. I could enumerate about 30 different leftist groups that existed in Iran by about 1977, but they were small cliques more than actual organizations.

SL: It is customary to regard the Iranian Revolution as a watershed moment in world history, as undoubtedly in many respects it was. But are there some lines of continuity between the regime of the Shah and the revolutionary Islamic regime that overthrew it? What are the most important lines of continuity stretching across the revolutionary divide, and what are the most important breaks between the Shah's Iran and the Iran forged by the Revolution?

EA: Well, the present regime's ideology is Islam, the Shah's ideology was monarchism or Pahlavism. But if you put aside ideology, if you look at how the states behave in terms of its neighbors and what drives its state policies, I would say both share a very strong attachment to national prestige and national image. So the way the Islamic Republic has behaved is not so much about espousing or encouraging the spread of Islam. The Republic has much more acted in terms of national state interests. When there is a conflict between Islam and Iranian national security, the latter takes precedence. For instance, in the Caucasus, after the fall of the Soviet Union there was bitter fighting between Christian Armenia and Muslim (Shia) Azerbaijan. Iran supported the Armenians. They sided with the Christian state over a fellow Muslim state. Why? Because of purely national self-interest. Azerbaijan had territorial claims on Iran, Armenia did not. Likewise in Chechnya, Iran supported Russia against the Chechen rebels. All along the line what motivates the Iranian state is national security.

Supplemental questions asked by email:

1). You mention Fanon as being especially influential on the generation of intellectuals that came of age in the fifties and sixties. Would it be correct to see the events leading up to 1979 as a product of the intellectual divide between the Old and New Left? As your work describes, after World War II the Iranian Left was dominated by a Stalinist popular front organization, the Tudeh, set up to support the Allies during the war. After the Tudeh failed to take power during the 1953 coup and was then brutally suppressed by SAVAK in the early 1960s, it seems as if most of those who emerged on the Left later took up a kind of anti-Stalinist Stalinism influenced by Mao, Ho Chi Minh, or Che Guevara. How did this ideological rift (as opposed to just the Shah's repression) cause confusion and help lay the seeds for the Iranian Left's self-marginalization and ultimate demise?

EA: The landmark event that divided the younger intelligentsia from the older one was the shooting down of demonstrators in 1963. This bloodletting proved, at least to the younger generation, that street protests were no longer effective against the regime. Consequently, many younger members of the Tudeh and the National Front were drawn to the concept of "armed struggle" as articulated by either Mao, Ho-Chin Minh, Che, or Fanon. This became the dividing line in Iran between the Old and New Left. The fascination with the armed struggle lasted from 1963 until 1975 and in its hay day in 1972–74, scores of young guerrillas—both Marxists of various stripes as well as Muslims from the Mojahedin-e Khalq—died fighting the regime. The irony of the whole story, which is often forgotten, is that the guerrilla organizations had all been crushed by the time the revolution started, and their survivors were increasingly talking about taking their message to the factories and forming underground networks. Of course, the whole revolution of 1977–79 was accomplished not by armed struggle but by the traditional tactic of mass demonstrations.

2). In an article you wrote about the guerrilla movement you quote Mehdi Bazargan speaking on French television as saying that "the revolution would not forget the role played by the guerrillas and the Tudeh Party."[1] Was Bazargan right to point to the Left's role or, given its total disorganization, was the Left just opportunistically tailing behind a movement that it could neither control nor shape? Is the traditional story of 1979 as one of revolution and counter-revolution misleading, or at least an overly simplistic framework through which to understand events?

EA: When Bazargan paid his dues to the Left it was to say that many of the martyrs that died fighting against the regime came from this guerrilla wing of the opposition. In 1979, the clerics had few martyrs. Almost all those who had been killed fighting the regime came from the Left, both from the secular as well as the religious Left. Bazargan at that time referred to the Mojahedin as the children of his own organization. It is hard to talk of the Left as a monolithic bloc since there were so many rival groups. Some, especially Maoists but not all of them, saw the downfall of the Shah as the first step towards a total revolution in the style of China and Russia. Others, including the Tudeh and surprisingly some Trotskyists, argued that the 1979 revolution faced imminent threat from American imperialism and therefore needed to be supported to prevent a counter-revolution. That is how the various groups viewed reality; I would not use the term "opportunistic."

3). Today, there are many comparisons being made between the protests after Iran's election results were announced and the atmosphere just prior to the 1979 Revolution. In what ways do you think this analogy is correct? Do you see any sort of dissonance between the actions of the protests (the repeating of "Allah-u-Akbar" on rooftops for example) and the pragmatic reality of post-electoral Iran?

EA: There are many parallels between the present crisis and the 1977–79 Revolution: street protests, mass meetings cutting across class lines, mass rallies in exactly the same places, the regime resorting to the notion that the "hidden foreign hand," especially the BBC, is behind the crisis, and many others. But behind these similarities lie fundamental differences. First, the new regime has the means of violence, the Revolutionary Guards, to crush the opposition. By contrast, the Shah knew by 1978 that he could not rely on his armed forces. Second, the new regime, even though it no longer has the mass support it had in the past, still has a social base—the evangelical believers who form some 20–25 percent of the public, as well as the sectors of the bazaars that are plugged into the state through contracts, benefits, and the clerical foundations.

4). If the 1979 Revolution was catastrophic from the point of view of the Left, then might not the 2009 election crisis have a similar legacy? How does the prevailing disorganization diminish leftists' ability to act politically or to even understand the situation unfolding in contemporary Iran?

EA: The 1979 Revolution was necessarily a catastrophe. It achieved its main aim shared by the Left as well as other groups. It brought about the end of the ancient regime and national independence. The 1979 Revolution was for Iran what national independence was for many countries in the Third World in the 1950s and 1960s. The aims of the present movement—even if they do not succeed in the near future—have a great deal of relevance to the Left. They inevitably include the creation of a civil society in which independent unions, political parties, professional associations, women's organizations, minority viewpoints, and individual rights are protected. It is for this reason that most Leftist groups in Iran, both inside and outside the country, support the reform movement and deeply distrust the "populism" of the Right. **|P**

1. Ervand Abrahamian, "The Guerrilla Movement in Iran, 1963-1977" *MERIP Reports* 86 (Mar/Apr 1980): 13.

The failure of the Islamic Revolution

The nature of the present crisis in Iran

Chris Cutrone

THE ELECTION CRISIS THAT UNFOLDED after June 12 has exposed the vulnerability of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), a vulnerability that has been driving its ongoing confrontation with the U.S. and Europe, for instance on the question of acquiring nuclear technology and its weapons applications.

While the prior U.S. administration under Bush had called for "regime change" in Iran, President Obama has been more conciliatory, offering direct negotiations with Tehran. This opening met with ambivalence from the Islamic Republic establishment; some favored while others opposed accepting this olive branch offered by the newly elected American president. Like the recent coup in Honduras, the dispute in Iran has been conditioned, on both sides, by the "regime change" that has taken place in the United States. A certain testing of possibilities in the post-Bush II world order is being mounted by allies and opponents alike. One dangerous aspect of the mounting crisis in Iran has been the uncertainty over how the Obama administration might address it.

The U.S. Republican Party and neoconservatives, now in the opposition, and recently elected Israeli right-wing politicians have demanded that the U.S. keep up the pressure on the IRI and have expressed skepticism regarding Iranian "reform" candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi. European statesmen on both Right and Left have, for their part, made strident appeals for "democracy" in Iran. But Obama has tried to avoid the pitfalls of either exacerbating the confrontation with the IRI or undermining whatever hopes might be found with the Iranian dissidents, whether of the dominant institutions of the Islamic Republic such as Mousavi or of the more politically indeterminate mass protests. Obama is seeking to keep his options open, however events end up resolving in Iran. While to some this appears as an equivocation or even a betrayal of Iranian democratic aspirations, it is simply typical Obama *realpolitik*. A curious result of the Obama administration's relatively taciturn response has been the IRI's reciprocal reticence about any U.S. role in the present crisis, preferring instead, bizarrely, to demonize the British as somehow instigating the massive street protests.

The good faith or wisdom of the new realpolitik is not to be doubted, however, especially given that Obama wants neither retrenchment nor the unraveling of the Islamic Republic in Iran. As chief executive of what Marx called the "central committee" of the American and indeed global ruling class, Obama might not have much reasonable choice for alternative action. The truth is that the U.S. and European states can deal quite well with the IRI so long as it does not engage in particularly undesirable behaviors. Their problem is not with the IRI as such—but the Left's ought to be.

The reigning confusion around the crisis in Iran has been expressed, on the one hand, in statements defending Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's claim to electoral victory by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and by individual writers in the supposedly leftist *Monthly Review* and its *MRZine* web publication (which also has republished without comment official Iranian statements on the crisis), and on the other hand by supporters of Iranian dissidents and election protesters such as Danny Postel, Fred Halliday, and the various Marxist-Humanist publications in the U.S.[1]

Slavoj Žižek has weighed in on the question with an interesting and sophisticated take of his own, questioning prevailing understandings of the nature of the Iranian regime and its Islamist character.[2] Meanwhile, the indefatigable Christopher Hitchens has pursued his idiosyncratic brand of a quasi-neoconservative "anti-fascist" denunciation of the Islamic Republic,[3] pointing out how the Islamic Republic itself is predicated on Khomeini's "theological" finding of *Velayat-e Faqui,* that the entire Iranian population, as victims of Western "cultural imperialism," needed to be treated as minority wards of the mullahs.

Halliday addresses the current protests as if they are the result of a "return of the repressed" of the supposedly more revolutionary aspirations of the 1978–79 toppling of the Shah, characterizing the Islamic Republic as the result of a "counter-revolution." In the interview published in this issue of the *Platypus Review*, historian of the Iranian Left Ervand Abrahamian characterizes the present crisis in terms of demands for greater freedoms that necessarily supersede the accomplished tasks of the 1979 revolution, which, according to Abrahamian, overthrew the tyranny of the Pahlavi *ancien régime* and established Iranian "independence" (from the U.S. and U.K.)

All told, this constellation of responses to the crisis has recapitulated problems on the Left in understanding the Islamic Revolution that took place in Iran from 1978–83, and the character and trajectory of the Islamic Republic of Iran since then. All share in the fallacy of attributing to Iran an autonomous historical rhythm or logic of its own. Iran is treated more or less as an entity, rather than as it might be, as a symptomatic *effect* of a greater history.[4] Of all, Žižek has come closest to addressing this issue of greater context, but even he has failed to address the history of the Left.

Two issues bedevil the Left's approach to the Islamic Republic and the present crisis in Iran: the general character of the recent historical phenomenon of Islamist politics, and the larger question of "revolution." Among the responses to the present crisis one finds longstanding analytic and conceptual problems that are condensed in ways useful for critical consideration. It is precisely in its lack of potential emancipatory or even beneficial outcome that the present electoral crisis in Iran proves most instructive. So, what are the actual possibilities for the current crisis in Iran?

Perhaps perversely, it is helpful to begin with the well-reported statements of the Revolutionary Guards in Iran, who warned of the danger of a "velvet revolution" akin to those that toppled the Communist Party-dominated Democratic Republics of Eastern Europe in 1989. The Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev sought to reform but only ended up undoing the Soviet Union. So it is not merely a matter of the intentions of the street protesters or establishment institutional dissidents such as Mousavi that will determine outcomes—as the Right, from Obama to the grim beards of the Revolutionary Guards and *Basiji*, do not hesitate to point out. By comparison with such eminently realistic practical perspectives of the powers-that-be, the Left reveals itself to be comprised of daydreams and wishful thinking. The Revolutionary Guards might be correct that the present crisis of protests against the election results can only end badly.

Perhaps Ahmadinejad and those behind him, along with the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, will prevail, and the protests against the election outcome will dissipate and those involved be punished, repressed, or eliminated. Or perhaps the protests will escalate, precipitating the demise of the Islamic Republic. But, were that to happen, maybe all that will be destroyed is the "republic" and not its Islamist politics, resulting in a rule of the mullahs without the accoutrements of "democracy." Perhaps the protests will provoke a dictatorship by the Revolutionary Guards and Basiji militias. Or, perhaps, even these forces will weaken and dissolve under the pressure of the protesters. Perhaps a civil war will issue from the deepened splitting of the extant forces in Iran. In that case, it is difficult to imagine that the present backers of the protests among the Islamic Republic establishment would press to undermine the state or precipitate a civil war or a coup (one way or the other). Perhaps the present crisis will pressure a reconsolidated regime under Khamenei and Ahmadinejad to continue the confrontation with the U.S. and Europe, only more hysterically, in order to try to bolster their support in Iran. If so, this could easily result in military conflict. These are the potential practical stakes of the present crisis.

Žižek has balanced the merits of the protests against the drive to neo-liberalize Iran, in which not only American neoconservatives but also Ahmadinejad himself as well as the "reformers" such as Mousavi and his patron, the "pistachio king" and former president of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Rafsanjani, have all taken part. In so doing, however, Žižek rehearses illusions on the Left respecting the 1979 Islamic Revolution, as, for instance, when he points to the tr aditional Shia slogans of the protesters, "Death to the tyrant!" and "God is great!," as evidence of the "emancipatory potential" of "good Islam," as an alternative to the apparent inevitability of neoliberalism. But this concession to Islamist politics is gratuitous to the extent that it does not recognize the ideological limitations and practical constraints of the protest movement and its potential trajectory, especially in global context. The protests are treated as nothing more than an "event."

But if the protests were to succeed, what would this

"Failure" continues below

A *Mujahidin-i-khalq* demonstration in Tehran during the Revolution. To the left, the figure of Dr. Ali Shariati; to the right, Khomeini.

Failure, continued from above

mean? It could mean calling a new election in which Mousavi would win and begin reforming the IRI, curtailing the power of the Revolutionary Guards and Basiji, and perhaps even that of the clerical establishment. Or, if a more radical transformation were possible, perhaps a revolution would take place in which the IRI would be overthrown in favor of a newly constituted Iranian state. The most likely political outcome of such a scenario can be seen in neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq, a "soft" Islamist state more "open" to the rest of the world, i.e., more directly in-sync with the neoliberal norms prevailing in global capital, without the Revolutionary Guards, Inc., taking its cut (like the military in neighboring Pakistan, through its extensive holdings, the Revolutionary Guards comprise perhaps the largest capitalist entity in Iran). But how much better would such an outcome really be, from the perspective of the Left—for instance, in terms of individual and collective freedoms, such as women's and sexual liberties, labor union organizing, etc.? Not much, if at all. Hence, even a less virulent or differently directed political Islamism needs to be seen as a core part of the problem confronted by people in Iran, rather than as an aspect of any potential solution.

Žižek has at least recognized that Islamism is not incompatible with, but rather shares in the essential historical moment of neoliberal capital. More than simply being two sides of the same coin, as Afghanistan and Iraq show, there is no discontinuity between neoliberalism and Islamism, despite what apologists for either may think.

Beyond Žižek, others on the Left have sought to capture for the election protests the historical mantle of the 1979 Revolution, as well as the precedents of the 1906 Constitutional Revolution and the "Left"-nationalist politics of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq, overthrown in a U.S.- and British-supported coup in 1953. For instance, the Tudeh (Masses) Party (Iranian Communist Party), the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK, People's Mujahedin of Iran) and its associated National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCORI), and the Workers' Communist Party of Iran (WCPI, sister organization of the Workers' Communist Party of Iraq, the organizers of the largest labor union federation in post-U.S. invasion and occupation Iraq) have all issued statements claiming and thus simplifying, in national-celebratory terms, this complex and paradoxical historical legacy for the current protests. But some true democratic character of Iranian tradition should not be so demagogically posed.

The MEK, who were the greatest organizational participants on the Left in the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79 (helping to organize the massive street protests that brought down the Shah, and participating in the U.S. embassy takeover), were originally inspired by New Left Islamist Ali Shariati and developed a particular Islamo-Marxist approach that became more avowedly and self-consciously "Marxist" as they slipped into opposition with the rise to supremacy of Khomeini.[5] (Shariati considered himself a follower of Frantz Fanon; Jean-Paul Sartre once said, famously, "I have no religion, but if I were to choose one, it would be that of Shariati." The 44-year-old Shariati died under mysterious circumstances in 1977 while in exile in London, perhaps murdered by Khomeini's agents.)

However disoriented and hence limited the MEK's inspiration, Shariati's critique of modern capitalism, from the supposed perspective of Islam, was, it had the virtue of questioning capitalist modernity's fundamental assumptions more deeply than is typically attempted today, for instance by Žižek, whose take on the "emancipatory potential" of "good Islam" is limited to the rather narrow question of "democracy." So the question of how adequate let alone well-advised the "democratic" demands such as those of the present Iranian election protesters cannot even be posed, let alone properly addressed. 2009 is not a reprise of 1979, having much less radical potential, and this is both for good and ill.

On the Left, the MEK has been among the more noisy opposition groups against the Islamic Republic, for instance using its deep-cover operatives within Iran to expose the regime's nuclear weapons program. Most on the Left have shunned the MEK, however. For instance, Postel calls it a "Stalinist death cult." But the MEK's New Left Third Worldist and cultural-nationalist (Islamist) perspective, however colored by Marxism, and no matter how subsequently modified, remains incoherent, as does the ostensibly more orthodox Marxism of the Tudeh and WCPI, for instance in their politics of "anti-imperialism," and thus also remains blind to how their political outlook, from the 1970s to today, is bound to (and hence responsible for) the regressive dynamic of the "revolution"—really, just the collapse of the Shah's regime—that resulted in the present theocracy. All these groups on the Iranian Left are but faint shadows of their former selves.

Despite their otherwise vociferous opposition to the present Islamist regime, the position of the Left in the present crisis, for instance hanging on every utterance by this or that "progressive" mullah in Iran, reminds one of the unbecoming position of Maoists throughout the world enthralled by the purge of the Gang of Four after Mao's death in the late 1970s. Except, of course, for those who seek to legitimize Ahmadinejad, everyone is eager if not desperate to find in the present crisis an "opening" to a potential "progressive" outcome. The present search for an "emancipatory" Islamist politics is a sad repetition of the Left's take on the 1979 Revolution. This position of contemplative spectatorship avoids the tasks of what any purported Left can, should, and indeed must do. From opportunist wishful thinking and tailing after forces it accepts ahead of time as beyond its control, the so-called Left resembles the Monday quarterbacking that rationalizes a course of events for which it abdicates any true responsibility. The Left thus participates in and contributes to affirming the confused muddle from which phenomena such as the Iranian election protests suffer—and hence inevitably becomes part of the *Right*.

This is the irony. Since those such as Žižek, Halliday, Postel, the Marxist-Humanists, liberals, and others on the Left seem anxious to prove that the U.S. neoconservatives and others are wrong in their hawkish attitude towards the Islamic Republic, to prove that any U.S. intervention will only backfire and prevent the possibility of a progressive outcome, especially to the present crisis, they tacitly support the Obama approach, no matter how supposedly differently and less cynically motivated theirs is compared to official U.S. policy.

Like the Obama administration, the Left seems more afraid to queer the play of the election protesters than it is eager to weigh in against the Islamic Republic. This craven anxiety at all-too-evident powerlessness over events considers itself to be balancing the need to oppose the greater power and danger, "U.S. imperialism," producing a strange emphasis in all this discourse. Only Hitchens, in the mania of his "anti-fascism," has freed himself from this obsequious attitude of those on the Left that sounds so awkward in the context of the present unraveling of what former U.S. National Security Advisor and then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice once, rightly, called a "loathsome regime"—a sentiment about the Islamic Republic that any purported Left should share, and more loudly and proudly than any U.S. official could.

Indeed, the supporters of the election protesters have trumpeted the rejection of any and all help that might be impugned as showing the nefarious hand of the U.S. government and its agencies.[6] Instead, they focus on a supposed endemic dynamic for progressive-emancipatory change in Iranian history, eschewing how the present crisis of the Islamic Republic is related to greater global historical dynamics in which Iran is no less caught up than any other place. They thus repeat the mistake familiar from the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the reactionary dynamics of which were obscured behind supposed "anti-imperialism." The problems facing the Left in Iran are the very same ones faced anywhere else. "Their" problems are precisely *ours*.

With the present crisis in Iran and its grim outlook we pay the price for the historical failures—really, the *crimes*—of the Left, going back at least to the period of the 1960s–70s New Left of which the Islamic Revolution was a product. The prospects for any positive, let alone progressive, outcome to the present crisis are quite dim. This is why it should be shocking that the Left so unthinkingly repeats today, if in a much attenuated form, precisely those mistakes that brought us to this point. The inescapable lesson of several generations of history is that only an entirely theoretically reformulated and practically reconstituted Left in places such as the U.S. and Europe would have any hope of giving even remotely adequate, let alone effective, form to the discontents that erupt from time to time anywhere in the world. Far from being able to take encouragement from phenomena such as the present election crisis and protests in Iran, the disturbing realization needs to be had, and at the deepest levels of conscious reflection, about just how much "they" need *us*.

A reformulated Left for the present and future must do better than the Left has done up to now in addressing—and opposing—problems such as political Islamism. The present manifest failure and unraveling of the Islamic Revolution in Iran is a good occasion for thinking through what it might mean to settle this more than thirty year old score of the betrayed and betraying Left. **IP**

1. In particular, see Danny Postel's *Reading Legitimation Crisis in Tehran: Iran and the Future of Liberalism*, 2006; Fred Halliday's "Iran's Tide of History: Counter-revolution and After," OpenDemocracy.net, July 17, 2009; and the Marxist-Humanist periodical *News & Letters*, as well as the web sites of the U.S. Marxist-Humanists and the Marxist-Humanist Initiative.
2. See Žižek's "Will the Cat Above the Precipice Fall Down?," June 24, 2009 available at http://supportiran.blogspot.com/2009/06/slavoj-zizeks-new-text-on-iran.html, based on a June 18, 2009 lecture at Birkbeck College, London, on "Populism and Democracy," and followed by the more extended treatment in "Berlusconi in Tehran," London Review of Books, July 23, 2009.
3. See Hitchens, "Don't Call What Happened in Iran Last Week an Election," Slate, June 14, 2009.
4. For excellent historical treatments of the Islamic Revolution and its local and global context, please see: Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (1982) and *The Iranian Mojahedin* (1992); Maziar Behrooz, *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (2000); Fred Halliday, "The Iranian Revolution: uneven development and religious populism" (*Journal of International Affairs* 36.2 Fall/Winter 1982/83: 187–207); and David Greason, "Embracing Death: The Western Left and the Iranian Revolution, 1979-83" (*Economy and Society* 34.1, February 2005: 105–140). The critically important insights of these works have been largely neglected, including subsequently by their own authors.
5. The MEK have been widely described as "cult-like," but perhaps this is because, as former participants in the Islamic Revolution, in their state of betrayal they focus so much animus on the cult-like character of the Islamic Republic itself; the official term used by the Khomeiniite state for the MEK is "Hypocrites" (Monafeqin), expressing their shared Islamist roots in the 1979 Revolution. But the success of the MEK over Khomeini would have hardly been better, and might have indeed been much worse. Khomeini's opportunism and practical cynicism in consolidating the Islamic Revolution might have not only produced but also prevented abominable excesses of "revolutionary" Islamism.

   Of all the organized tendencies in the Iranian Revolution, the MEK perhaps most instantiated Michel Foucault's vision of its more radical "non-Western" character (see Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism, 2005). But just as Foucault's enthusiasm for the Islamic Revolution in Iran ought to be a disturbing reminder of the inherent limitations and right-wing character of the Foucauldian critique of modernity, so should the MEK's historical Shariati-inspired Islamism stand as a warning against all similar post-New Left valorizations of "culture."

   More recently, the MEK has found advocates among the far-Right politicians of the U.S. government such as Representative Tom Tancredo, Senators Sam Brownback and Kit Bond and former Senator and Attorney General John Ashcroft—precisely those who are most enchanted by the ideological cult of "America." The MEK's former patron, the Baathist Saddam Hussein, had unleashed the MEK on Iran in a final battle at the close of the Iran-Iraq war 1980–88, after which Khomeini ordered the slaughter of all remaining leftist political prisoners in Iran, as many as 30,000, mostly affiliated with the MEK and Tudeh, in what Abrahamian called "an act of violence unprecedented in Iranian history—unprecedented in form, content, and intensity" (*Tortured Confessions*, 1999, 201). After the 2003 invasion and occupation, the U.S. disarmed but protected the MEK in Iraq. However, since the U.S. military's recent redeployment in the "status of forces" agreement with the al-Maliki government signed by Bush but implemented by Obama, the MEK has been subjected to brutal, murderous repression, as its refugee camp was raided by Iraqi forces on July 28–29, seemingly at the behest of the Iranian government, of which the dominant, ruling Shia constituency parties in Iraq have been longstanding beneficiaries.

   The grotesque and ongoing tragedy of the MEK forms a shadow history of the Islamic Revolution and its aftermath, eclipsed by the Khomeiniite Islamic Republic, but is essential for grasping its dynamics and trajectory.
6. See, for instance, Sean Penn, Ross Mirkarimi, and Reese Erlich, "Support Iranians, not U.S. Intervention," www.CommonDreams.org, July 21, 2009.

What is a movement?

A discussion on the meaning and direction of Left political "movements" historically and today

Luis Brennan, Elena Davis, Chuck Hendricks, Jorge Mujica, and Richard Rubin

On October 16, 2008, a panel discussion titled What is a Movement? A Discussion on the Meaning and Direction of Left Political "Movements" Historically and Today *was held in Chicago. The panelists were Luis Brennan of the new Students for a Democratic Society, Elena Davis of Pomegranate Health Collective, Chuck Hendricks of UNITE/HERE, Jorge Mujica of Movimiento 10 de Marzo, and Richard Rubin of Platypus. The following edited transcript represents only a portion of a more extensive and wide-ranging discussion.* The Platypus Review *encourages interested readers to listen to the complete recording of the event at <http://platypus1917.org/2008/10/16/what-is-a-movement>.*

Opening remarks:

Jorge Mujica: Whenever you get two people together and they talk about doing something, I think you have a movement. It may be big or small, clandestine or legal, whatever; but it is still a movement. Is "Obama for change" a movement? Yes. So are the right-wing politicians who push things further to the right. Any kind of gathering of people that tries to influence politics and put forward an agenda is a movement.

But movements, more often than not, end up becoming non-profit organizations. The women's movement of the 60s has become the National Organization for Women. The Civil Rights Movement has become the Rainbow PUSH Coalition. These big organizations continue in certain to advance the issues of the movements that gave birth to them. But they do not represent *the* movement. The movement is well beyond and behind and ahead of such organizations. It may be that only the disruptive, non-institutionalized part of the movement can really generate results. So when movements become big, self-sustaining non-profit organizations, do they still truly intend to change the status quo? That is one of the major questions in the immigration movement and, I suspect, many other movements as well.

Luis Brennan: I would like to echo Jorge's remarks that two people who want something make a movement. So the question of what is a movement, as a guiding question, is almost vacuous. It is open to anything; anything is a movement. For me, the question needs some reframing, it needs some work before we can make stuff happen. I take it as a given that, for people on the Left interested in political change, a movement is a success term, that imbedded in the term "movement" is the idea that it is good. The next question is then going to be what properties we want this movement to have. I think a lot of us would say we want a radical movement. What is radical? "Radical" involves radical analysis, radical solutions, and radical practice. Radical analysis is seeing the world in a way that takes nothing for granted, looking at the world in search of the sources of unfreedom and injustice. A radical solution is saying, How do we fix these problems? How do we address these sources of injustice and unfreedom? Radical practice is something that does not over-valorize or over-legitimate the system of political action that currently exists. The goal should be to define "movement" and to find those properties that would inevitably make a movement radical, so it would make some definite, radical impact on society.

Richard Rubin: I am here representing Platypus, and Platypus is not a movement. Its project is about problematizing questions on the Left. So, I am going to problematize the question of a movement. Hidden behind the question "What is a movement?" are the questions, "What is politics?" and "What is the relationship of politics to human history?" On the one hand, politics is one of the oldest of human activities; like art, literature, and music. But in another sense politics, like these other activities, is a much younger activity, a few centuries old at most. There is a discontinuity in the meaning of politics from before the development of modern capitalism and since, though this is not immediately obvious. In fact there is a widespread conception on the Left that tends to blur this distinction between modern politics and what came before. So, if we talk about resisting oppression, and go back, for example, to the late 14th century the distinction does not seem salient. If you looked at Eurasia, say in the decades from the 1360s to the 1380s, you'd see several major upheavals, from the peasant rebellion in China led by Zhu Yuanzhang, which led to the establishment of the Ming Dynasty, to the revolt of the Ciompi in Florence, which was a sort of proto-working class rebellion, to a peasant rebellion in England that traumatized the British feudal ruling class and perhaps accelerated the end of feudalism. The first of these upheavals was successful, though it did not really change anything; the other two were put down, and yet they were not without effect. All three were "acts of resistance." But there was no Left in the 14th century, nor even the conception of a Left. Yet because the Left today focuses purely on resistance, emphasizing a narrative of resisting oppression, it blurs a central transition in the history of humanity, namely the rise of modern capitalism, even as it fails to comprehend itself. In fact, earlier movements that opposed oppression, have a different meaning from modern movements against oppression. In the course of the 19th century there developed a different type of politics, particularly on the continent of Europe, which witnesses the rise of Marxism and of mass working class parties. In principle, these mass working class parties were revolutionary in that they were dedicated to the abolition of capitalism. As Marx himself realized, the sort of politics he advocated and helped bring into existence was new.

However, many problems in this perspective come up. A man famous for articulating a revisionist perspective vis-à-vis Marxism was Eduard Bernstein. In the mid-1890s, Bernstein criticized what he took to be a doctrinaire, fundamentalist Marxism. One of his famous phrases was, "The movement is everything, the goal is nothing." Now, through a large part of the 20th century a type of politics developed—and I am treating both liberal and Marxist politics together here—that was premised on the experience of Marxism, so it was always caught in this dilemna of either abolishing capitalism or reforming it. Over roughly the last 40 years, I would argue that this argument on the Left has been settled in Bernstein's favor. Our conception now is that the Left is composed of a bunch of movements. In place of a goal-oriented Left we now have a series of goals but no Left. The Left is the movement of movements. This notion has now become so deeply naturalized that it is hard to imagine the Left as anything else. But this conception of the Left as a movement of movements masks its weakness. It represents an internalization of defeat and even a fear of victory.

After opening remarks each panelist was given an opportunity to respond to one another:

Chuck Hendricks: A couple of people have talked about a movement being two people in the same room with the same idea. This the problem with the idea of movements. Two people with the same idea is not a movement. Rather, a movement is when organizations with ideas, leadership, and plans, both short-term and long-term, act with the support of a broad majority outside of their organization so that they are able to bring large groups of people onto their side. Movements do not spring up out of two people talking. They do not happen spontaneously. Movements do not spring up directly from ideas or shared discontent. They emerge out of the practice of growing an organization, out of people planning, organizing, recruiting, training, and learning how to make a movement. One of the big problems on the Left is that the notion of a movement seems desirable because it is fuzzier than the idea of organization. It seems less authoritarian. But without doing the work of actually building organizations, whether they are women's rights movements or Marxian movements or student movements or immigrant movements or union movements, you will have nothing worthy of the name "movement." Instead, the Left ends up with, occasionally, lots of people on the streets screaming, but without the ability to sustain anything. Movements require leadership, structure, and organization, or they go nowhere. Therefore, I do not agree with Luis that our task is simply to talk about what constitutes a radical analysis. We know plenty of things that are wrong in the world. The question is how to make change happen, how to build organizations with the capacity to do that.

As to the question of what is politics, politics is power, as far as I can tell, and the truth is that all of these movements, from my movement to Elena's movement to Luis's movement, lack power. It is up to us to figure out how to gain power through organizing millions of people, drawing them into strong organizations that have the economic, social, and political leverage to force the state and management to respond and, ultimately, to alter our institutions.

Mujica: I think that is precisely the problem, to confuse the organization with the movement. A movement is a lot stronger than any organization. Organizations do not really ask their membership what kind of change they want; they only push the agenda the leadership believes in. They are unable to go to their bases and ask them, "What would you like to see done?"

On the question of leadership, people say that the biggest problem with the Latino immigration movement is that it lacks a leader. We say, "Well, we are thankful that we do not have a leader," because Cesar Chavez did many good things, but he also did many incredibly bad things. We would rather have a collective leadership that, for example, gathers together when the time comes for big mobilizations and then disbands when we cannot agree on anything else.

Brennan: Going off this difference between an organization and a movement, I think the important part about a movement, and why it may be good that it is a fuzzy term, is that a movement is going to go beyond us. A movement is going to go beyond what we put into it and have a life of its own. To a large extent, it will be out of our control. This is a good thing. It means a movement has greater potential to change circumstances than does an organization.

"Movement" continues below

Movement, continued from above

Rubin: I think that there is a bit of ambiguity in the way the term "movement" is being used. "Movement" can mean many different things. For one thing, there are right-wing movements. For another, there are different types of left-wing movements. I do not think you can assume that the existence of movements is a sign of strength. Ultimately, the fact that the Left has a conception of politics based on movements is, again, a sign of our weakness. I understand why people would organize around a specific goal. Obviously the Civil Rights Movement, for example, was a good thing. But it is important to recognize that the Civil Rights Movement originated in the context of previous failures of the Left in the United States to address the issue of racism. I am not saying that one should be opposed to movements, and of course a strong left-wing movement would be better than a weak left-wing movement, but I think that the conception of politics solely as building movements and the idea that the Left itself is this whole global family of movements are issues that we as leftists should seek to problematize.

Hendricks: Jorge spoke of the agenda of organizations. I think if we do not have an agenda we are not going anywhere. We will not know what we are actually fighting for. If we do not have the ability to lay out a short-term plan, we cannot lay out a long term plan, and then we will lack a vision for the future and thus any sense of why, in fact, we are seeking to gain power. As for asking the membership about what kind of change they want to achieve, this actually happens more often and more democratically in organizations than it does in movements. When 400,000 people march through the streets of Chicago, the organizers do not actually solicit the views of every marcher. Such leaders are actually unaccountable to the marchers. They are not representative.

Mujica: Of course, a revolution requires organization. Movements and organizations require agendas, there is no doubt about that either. Leadership too is required. All this is true, but what I am saying is that the current organizations, the current agendas of powerful organizations do not really have anything to do with what we would call the revolutionary movement.

Elena Davis: I would hesitate to confuse Tyler Durden-style working class organization with the kind of movement we are discussing here. That is part of what a movement is, but that does not encompass it in its entirety. And, to say that something is not a movement unless there is a leader and people who look up to that leader for direction and to set goals is very limiting.

Rubin: Chuck spoke about questions of social power. Does not organized labor in the United States potentially have great power? With organized labor it is not so much a question of having or not having the power, but rather that it does not exercise its power. Politically, the leadership is tied to the Democratic Party and that is not simply a question of organization, or strength, or leadership. It is a question of politics. It seems to me the question of leadership and organization substitutes for the question of the politics of organizations.

Pressing the issue of the immigration rights movement, a remark from the audience suggested that differences within the Republican Party may have had more to do with the defeat of the Sensenbrenner Bill than the 2006 protests and that, in general, it is at present difficult to determine what effects leftist actions have.

Mujica: Certainly, it is sometimes difficult to say what kind of success one has or what kind of consequences come out of marches. Some people say that the raids and deportations that are currently going on are also consequences of the marches, but I do not believe it. As far as the effectiveness of the marches goes, in December 2005, when James Sensenbrenner introduced into the House of Representatives HR 4437, 56% of the American public favored tougher measures against immigrants, since immigrants were closely related with national security issues and terrorism. Sensenbrenner's bill passed the House with considerable support from Democrats. We started to act in February of 2006. Initially there were six people in a room planning the demonstrations. On May Day, by some calculations, six to seven million people marched simultaneously all over the United States. After those demonstrations, 76% of the American public supported legalization for illegal aliens or undocumented workers. This, I think, shows the success of the marches.

Hendricks: I think that it is impossible to tell what stopped the Sensenbrenner bill. Having millions of people march definitely helped stop it, but so did the opposition of chambers of commerce. Having every major union in the country except for the machinists coming out against the bill also helped stop it. It is not that the movement did not have a success in stopping the bill, but if you look back historically, say to the 30s, the president was forced to negotiate with Walter Reuther. In the 60s the president was forced to meet with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to talk about the Voting Rights Act. Those organizations had the power to force the government, or major industry, to sit down, make concessions, and take actual positive steps forward. What the movement for immigrant rights in the country has done so far is to stop things from getting dramatically worse, but it has not made things better. And I am sick of the Left defending regression. We do not have a vision for what positive change is. Both the labor movement and the Civil Rights Movement did have such a vision as well as organizations that were able to advance it.

Rubin: I am finding myself somewhat frustrated with the conversation. Part of the problem is that I think we are talking at different levels. Again, people have been oppressed for thousands of years. The conditions of resisting that oppression, and this was my example starting with the 14th century, have radically changed in the last 150 years or so. It is because of this change that the meaning of politics has itself changed. When you talk, for example, about movements for change or movements for freedom, the issue becomes—and it goes back to the question posed about the 30s—if you imagine that the goal of movements is just to put pressure on the government to do something or to not do something, which sometimes will succeed and is sometimes a very desirable thing, then you leave aside the possibility that the global environment in which movements operate could itself ever be radically changed. We will have movements against bad things, such as war, poverty, oppression of immigrants, oppression of women, and so on, but we are going to keep fighting essentially the same struggles under different conditions, sometimes better and sometimes worse. That, I think, is the dominant conception of politics on the Left. What I was trying to point out earlier is that this is a profoundly pessimistic conception for the Left to have, and it is not the one it always had. At one time the Left had a much more triumphal conception of its own capacity to build a radically new world. So what I was trying to say is not whether movements are good, or what a movement is, but that a conception of politics centered on movements is one that has already taken a huge amount of defeat and pessimism for granted.

Brennan: Richard, you have said that the conditions for politics of change are fundamentally different from the 14th century and that what we are dealing with is no longer the same as some pure resistance movement against some form of domination. What, specifically, are these new conditions?

Rubin: The new condition is the development of capitalism. Capitalism has fundamentally changed the possibilities inherent in human history. It has linked the world together in ways that would have been unthinkable beforehand. It has created huge technological development that essentially renders possible the abolition of poverty. There is also the possibility, through the development of modern science, of the destruction of the species. So there are possibilities, both negative and positive, that did not exist before. Capitalism also opens up, so to speak, individual possibilities for human development that did not exist before, possibilities for human freedom. We have to take capitalism as both a profound threat to humanity, and a profound opportunity. To speak only of "anti-capitalism" or resistance to domination closes off this sense of historical possibility.

The meaning of a movement in the 14th century could not have been the same as what it can be now, because movements now have the possibility to transcend their specific goals in a profound way. But that is not inherent in their being a movement; it is inherent in the structure of modern society.

A member of the audience asked, "What would it take to reconstitute a revolutionary party on a large scale?"

Rubin: I think the question would be, "What would it take to reconstitute a revolutionary *politics* on a large scale?" I do not think that many people can really imagine a socialist revolution, including, I think, most people who put it forth as their aim. I personally have known a fair number of old radicals from the 30s, and I remember once having the rather pessimistic thought that that generation of radicals may have been the last to actually believe they were going to win.

Hendricks: I think we are going to win. The concept of building a revolutionary party, or a revolutionary organization, or a radical organization, or any such thing comes down to a decision that each person has to make, about how hard they want to work for that. It is a decision that you make as an individual, a decision about what you are willing to do to make something happen. So the question of how to build a revolutionary party rests with each one of you.

Another in the audience asked, "What is the role of students in progressive radical movements? What should the goal of a student movement be?"

Hendricks: I think that, as part of their time of learning, students need to learn how to organize people by being active in organizations like unions as volunteers, interns, and trainees.

Rubin: Essentially, I think student movements are historically auxiliary to other movements. Being a student is generally a temporary condition. I think that the advantage of students is the relative freedom that they have. Intellectuals often come from a background that is relatively privileged, and they are frequently more radical than the rest of society. This too is a function of modern capitalist society, this creation of a disgruntled, radical intelligentsia, which is something that did not exist in previous types of class society.

On the question of radicalism, one of the problems with being radical—in the etymological sense of the word, meaning going to the root—is that being radical now means facing a great deal of defeat. Radical intellectuals need to think very soberly about the history of, say, the last hundred years, and to ask themselves why movements for profound radical change have failed. That is a very difficult task; and not a very cheerful one.

Mujica: My invitation would be to revive the spirit of 1968. Be realistic, demand the impossible. **lP**

Transcribed by Soren Whited