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Statement of purpose

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

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

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

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

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

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: review_editor@platypus1917.org. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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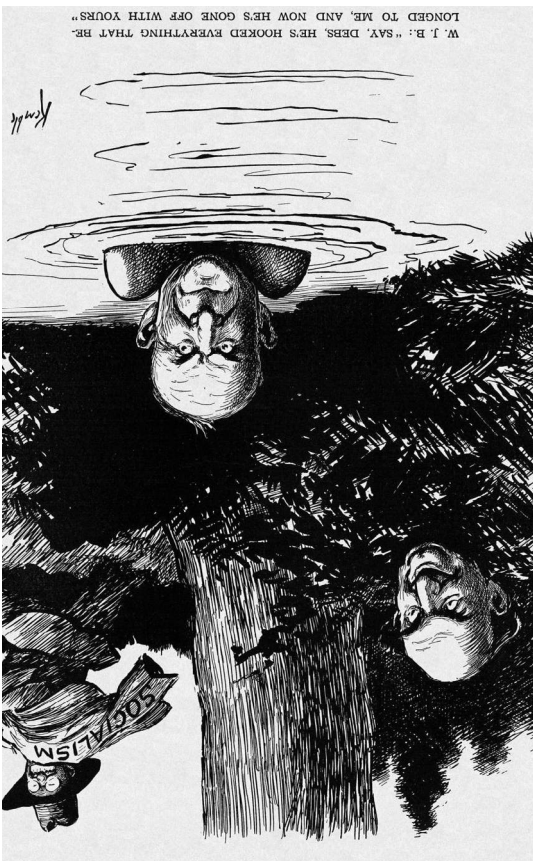
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Great Again” sounded like nostalgia for the 1950s, Deal and Great Society. While Trump’s “Make America returning to a pre-neoliberal politics—of the New Discontent with neoliberalism found an advocate for primarries the impulse to change was expressed it was appropriate that in the Democratic Party opportunity neoliberalism presented its past. Neoliberalism was not well processed in terms of Reagan and up through Bill Clinton’s Presidency. very weak in the face of such phenomena—ever since “Marxists” and the “Left” more generally have been did Sanders.

also expresses the crisis of Clintonism–Obamaism. So expresses the current crisis common to all of them. He elements of the Reaganite Republican heritage—but conservatism. Trump represents none of these Party libertarian Strict Constructionist Constitutional Christian Fundamentalist politics, as well as of Tea in particular, but also of neoconservatism and of a crisis of not only neoliberalism as economic policy crisis of the Reagan Coalition of the Republican Party: New Deal Coalition, Trump’s election expresses the itself—expressed the crisis of the Democratic Party’s For just as the New Left—and then neoliberalism both the Republican and Democratic Parties in 2015–16. most obvious in the inability to regard the relationship between Sanders and Trump in the common crisis of Trump, it faces a new and different dilemma. This is has grown too accustomed in opposition. Now, with is particularly ill-equipped to address Trump. It is and last year got behind the Sanders campaign, then continued in Occupy Wall Street under Obama, initially against the Iraq war under George W. Bush and More specifically, the Millennial “Left” that grew up the right (Democratic Party or UK Labour) candidates. failure that could be easily reversed by simply electing neoliberalism was a more or less superficial political into the prevailing sentiment on the “Left” that account of neoliberal political corruption. This played years forgo his earlier insights in favor of a caricatured its diagnosis of the problem. His work from more recent book *The Condition of Postmodernity*—was very acute in Harvey’s work from the 1980s, for example his 1989 around Trump’s election now. For instance, while reputation and compounding of this failure is manifesting events ever since Thatcher and Reagan’s election. A neoliberalism, which has scrambled to chase after



A cartoon drawn by Edward Windsor Kemple and published on September 21, 1912 in Harper’s Weekly depicting Progressive Party candidate Theodore Roosevelt stealing the political clothes of populist Democrat William Jennings Bryan and Socialist Eugene Debs.

What is needed—indeed required—is seeing how a crisis and change may *point beyond* itself. What is the Trump phenomenon, as an indication of possibilities *beyond* it? This is the question that must be asked— and answered. Unfortunately, the only way the “Left” might be posing this question now is in order to advise the Democrats on how to defeat Trump. But this is to dodge the issue. For even if the Democrats were to defeat Trump, this might avoid, but cannot erase the crisis of neoliberalism, which is not an accident of the 2016 election outcome, but a much broader and deeper phenomenon.

The heritage of 20th century “Marxism”—that of both the Old Left of the 1930s and the New Left of the 1960s—does not facilitate a good approach to the present crisis and possibilities for change. Worse still is the legacy of the 1980s post-New Left of the era of

But capitalism has also been reconstituted through democratic means. From instance, FDR’s New Deal, to “save capitalism from itself,” was achieved and sustained through (small-d) democratic politics. But that form of democratic politics experienced a crisis in the 1960s–70s. That crisis gave rise to neoliberalism, economic downturn but also and perhaps especially through the crisis of the Democratic Party’s New Deal Coalition and its related politics elsewhere, such as in the U.K., and the rise of Thatcher’s neoliberal revolution against not only Labour but also the established Conservative Party. The same with Reagan, who had to defeat the Nixonite Republican Party as well as the Great Society Democrats. Similarly, Trump has had to defeat the neoliberal Republican Party as well as the neoliberal Democrats.

Just as David Harvey found it helpful to describe neoliberalism not as anti-Fordism but as post-Fordism, it is necessary to consider Trump not as an anti-neoliberal but as a post-neoliberal. There will be continuity as well as change. There will be a political realignment of mainstream, liberal-democratic politics—just as happened with FDR and Reagan. The “Left”—the Communist Party—initially called FDR a “fascist,” just as the New Left called Reagan a “fascist” when he was elected—as if liberal democracy were collapsing rather than experiencing a political transformation. Such hysteria amounts to thinly-veiled, wishful thinking. The problem with the “Left” is that its hysterics are less about society than about itself. The “Left” cries foul when mainstream politics steals its thunder—when change happens from the right rather than through the Left’s own “revolutionary politics.” Capitalism has continued and will continue through political revolutions of greater or lesser drastic character. Awowed “Marxists” have failed to explain the past several transformations of capitalism. Neither the Great Depression, nor the crisis of the New Deal Coalition leading to the New Left of the 1960s–70s, nor the crisis of Fordist capital that led to neoliberalism, have been adequately grasped. Instead, each change was met with panic and futile denunciation.

As such, the “Left’s” response has actually been affirmative. By the time the “Left” began to try to make sense of the changes, this was done apologetically—justifying and thus legitimating in retrospect the change that had already happened. Such “explanation” may serve as a substitute for understanding. But reconciling to change and grasping the change, albeit with hindsight, let alone taking political opportunity for change, is not the same as adequately *critiquing* the change.

On April 7, 2017 the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a discussion at its Ninth Annual International Convention in Chicago on the subject of “Marxism in the Age of Trump.” The event’s speakers were Chris Cutrone, President of the Platypus Affiliated Society and teacher of Critical Theory at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; Catherine Liu, Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Irvine and author of *The American Idyll: Academic Anti-Elitism as Cultural Critique*; and Greg Lucero, a founding member of the Revolutionary Students’ Union and a member of the Chicago chapter of the Socialist Party USA. The event was moderated by Reid Kotlas of Platypus. What follows is an edited transcript of the discussion, an audio recording of which is available online at archive.org/details/platypus_marxismwiththeageoftrumpdbk0717.

Opening Remarks

Chris Cutrone: The present crisis of neoliberalism is a crisis of its politics. In this way it mirrors the birth of political neoliberalism, in the Reagan–Thatcher Revolution of the late 1970s through early 1980s. The economic crisis of 2007–2008 has taken eight years to manifest as a political crisis. That political crisis was expressed by SYRIZA’s election in Greece, Jeremy Corbyn’s rise to leadership of the Labour Party, the Brexit referendum, and Bernie Sanders as well as Donald Trump’s campaign for President of the U.S. Now Trump’s election is the most dramatic expression of this political crisis of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism has been an unclear concept, often substituting for capitalism itself. It clarifies to regard neoliberalism as politics. It is neoliberal politics that is not exactly in conflict, for the entirety of its history. Capitalism and democracy have been in tension. Capitalism and democracy through “populism”—demagoguery, with Trump, this is attributed to the perversion of the outcome of democracy is undesirable, as apparently to distinguish between populism and democracy. When is a crisis of democracy. Perhaps this is what it means opposite. If neoliberalism is in political crisis, then this is a crisis of democracy, not its and Barack Obama.

elections) of Thatcher, Reagan, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, democracy as demonstrated by the elections (and re- are in conflict. But neoliberalism triumphed through This suggests that democracy and neoliberalism and SYRIZA are “left-wing populist” phenomena? wing populist”—presumably, then, Sanders, Corbyn politician. This is what it means to call him a “right- it is easy to mistake Trump as an anti-neoliberal crisis.



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actually it was more a call for a return to the 1990s, to Clintonite neoliberal prosperity and untroubled U.S. global hegemony. In the 2016 campaign, Sanders was more the 1950s–60s-style Democratic Party figure. Indeed, his apparent age and style seemed to recall the 1930s—long before he was born—and not so much the New Left counterculture, whatever youthful writings of his that were dug up. What’s remarkable is that Sanders invoked the very New Deal Coalition Democratic Party that he had opposed as a “socialist” in his youth, and what had kept him independent of the Democrats when he first ran for elected office in the 1980s Reagan era during which the Democrats were still the majority (Congressional) party. Sanders, who had opposed the Democrats, now offered to save them by returning them to their glory days.

But Trump succeeded where Sanders failed. It is only fitting that the party that led the neoliberal turn under Reagan should experience the focus of the crisis of neoliberal politics. If Sanders called for a “political revolution”—however vaguely defined—Trump has effected it. Trump has even declared that his campaign was not simply a candidacy for office but a “movement.” His triumph is a stunning coup not only for the Democrats but the Republicans as well. Where Sanders called for a groundswell of “progressive” Democrats, Trump won the very narrowest of possible electoral victories. Nonetheless, it was a well-calculated strategy that won the day.

Trump’s victory is the beginning not the end of a process of transforming the Republican Party as well as mainstream politics more generally that is his avowed goal. Steve Bannon announced that his main task was to un-elect recalcitrant Republicans. Trump’s economic advisor Stephen Moore, a former neoliberal, declared to Congressional Republicans that it was no longer the old Reaganite neoliberal Republican Party but was going to be a new “economic populist” party. Trump said during the campaign that the Republicans should not be a “conservative party” but a “working-class party.” We shall see whether and how he may or may not succeed in this aim. But he will certainly try—it only to retain the swing working class voters he won in traditionally Democratic Party-voting states such as in the Midwest “Rust Belt.” Trump will seek to expand his electoral base—the base for a transformed Republican Party. The Democrats will necessarily respond in kind, competing for the same voters as well as expanding their electoral base in other ways.

Is this a process of “democratization”? Yes and no. The question is not of more or less “democracy” but rather how democracy takes shape politically. “Populism” is a problematic term because it expresses fundamental ambivalence about democracy itself and so fails to clarify the issue. It is understood that new and expanded political mobilization is fraught with danger. Nonetheless, it is a fact of life for democracy, for good or for ill. The frightening specter of “angry white voters” storming onto the political stage is met by the sober reality that what decided Trump’s victory were voters who had previously elected Obama.

So the question is the transformation of democracy—of how liberal democratic politics is conducted, by both Democrats as well as Republicans. This was bound to change, with or without Trump. Now, with Trump, the issue is posed point-blank. There’s no avoiding the crisis of neoliberalism.

Oreg Lucero: I’m honored and humbled to be a speaker at this convention. A fundamental thesis held by many in this room is that the Left is dead. It’s a widespread point of unity. I will argue—and it is not merely a matter of semantics—that the Left is not dead; the Left is neurotic. I’m sure everyone here understands psychoanalysis, so please forgive my very cursory gloss, but I want us to be on the same page.

What do we mean by, “the Left is neurotic”? In psychoanalysis, the neurosis arises from a deadlock. There is a trauma that arises out of the unconscious that prevents the subject from moving forward. The Left is currently at a neurotic deadlock, and has been, as Chris mentioned, for many decades, if not longer. This deadlock is the unconscious psychic trauma. What is the unconscious psychic trauma, the unnamed and unnamable things that affect the Left?

The first trauma is the Paris Commune. Socialists thought that there would be an ever-expanding union of workers who would rise up against the capitalists. The Commune was internationalist, egalitarian, and democratic; and still it was swiftly and ruthlessly crushed by the capitalists. This is a fundamental trauma that communists and leftists have yet to overcome. The notion of a horizontalist, egalitarian future brought about by people collectively and democratically working together *collapsed*. What were the solutions to the deadlock?

The main solution to the deadlock that played out in history was the Leninist vanguard party. The left-communist or council communist notion of reviving the Commune was dead on arrival; instead, the Left adopted the vanguard party. This itself carries a trauma. Is not the vanguard itself a refutation of the Marxist ideals of egalitarianism? Nevertheless, the vanguard party became the very form of revolution adopted during the sequence of revolutionary events in the 20th century. It is not grappled with, but simply came to be accepted as a necessity for us to build our forces, take on the capitalist class, and win. Later, the state was institutionalized as an outgrowth of the vanguard party. How to address this deadlock, the so-called bureaucratization of the “Stalinism” of the Soviet Union, became a fundamental question for the Left. If the Brezhnevite regime was not fundamentally different from the Reaganite regime then what are we fighting for?

If we understand the deadlock of the Paris Commune, the deadlock of the vanguard party, and the deadlock of the party-state, then what is our way through? The most apt solution was the Maoist Cultural Revolution—the unleashing of and return to the masses *contra* the party, *contra* the vanguard, and *contra* the bureaucracy. I’m not talking about people dragged out and beaten and put in dunce caps. The true trauma of the Cultural Revolution was restoration of capitalist readers under Deng Xiaoping. If the mass mobilization of a country as vast and diverse as China is not enough to overcome the bureaucracy of the institutionalized party-state then what is the way forward?

We must also recognize the trauma of Western Marxism. For all of the cultural, theoretical, and artistic analyses that were provided by the Frankfurt School and those who came later, they proved absolutely

unable to prevent the rise of Eurocommunism and social democracy and the eventual degeneration of the Western Marxism movement. This, too, is a trauma we must grapple with.

What can the Left do to build socialism in the age of Trump? We can do *nothing* to build socialism in the age of Trump. Lenin pointed this out quite aptly in *State and Revolution*: these are two different concepts, *separated*. We can only build socialism after the revolution: What we must build now is revolution. What does that mean in the age of Trump? To be revolutionaries we cannot become institutionalized. That is the key problem of the Left. We cannot be institutionalized into the symbolic order of capitalist discourse. We must plot an independent course. We also must hold fast to our desire and we have to be honest about what this is. Do we want to have book clubs and discussions—all good things—or do we want to have revolution? Revolution is the most authoritarian thing possible. It is dangerous. It is violent. It is bloody. And, in all likelihood, we will be consumed in the very forces we unleash. Will we affirm it nonetheless? In the age of Trump, we must reaffirm our desire for revolution, against all odds—against Trump, against the Democrats, against the institutionalized, neurotic Left. We must hold tight to our desire.

And we must be psychotic in the sense that we must abandon the symbolic order. There is a symbolic order here: This is a lecture; there are rules and stipulations. So let me very gently introduce to you a bit of psychosis that breaks through the symbolic order of this room. Sing along if you know the words!

NO TRUMP! NO KKK! NO FASCIST USA!
NO TRUMP! NO KKK! NO FASCIST USA!
NO TRUMP! NO KKK! NO FASCIST USA!

It’s jarring. It breaks through the symbolic discourse we have created for ourselves in this interaction. We must do the same on the political level.

We also must also recognize that neoliberalism, the symbolic structure of capitalism, is collapsing. Neoliberalism’s goal was to address the falling rate of profit, and initially, during the 1990s, it was able to do so. The economic crisis of 2008 has shown, however, that neoliberalism will not permanently solve capitalism’s problem of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. We are again thrown back onto the crisis of capitalism. Moreover, neoliberalism as a political move was unable to suppress the masses. What began as the mega-marches of 2006 became Occupy Wall Street, became Black Lives Matter, became anti-Trump. Neoliberalism as a political system, as a symbolic structure, is in crisis and is looking to reintegrate itself. Now is the time for us to disrupt that reintegration.

Why are Leftists hysterical? The famous Lacanianism is *che vuoi*? What do you want from me? For psychoanalysis, to be hysterical—the hysterical woman, the hysterical man—is to talk to the other and say, “What do you want from me? What are you asking from me?” It is time for us to transition from neurosis to psychosis. We must no longer allow ourselves to be integrated into the symbolic order. We must not make our plans relative to other leftists or to Trump. We must reassert our psychosis.

Traditional Marxist-Leninist parties distinguish between politics and organization: The political line is what we do and the organizational line is how we do it. Going forward, very cursorily, we must also propose a micropolitics that is a set of concrete, nonpolitical actions that can be adopted. This means pitching a tent in the middle of the park, the micropolitics of Occupy Wall Street writ large. We must also form a *metapolitics*, which is a thinking of the possibilities and the impossibilities: What is necessary for this to be possible?

Finally, in the age of Trump they’re trying to integrate Trump into the symbolic order. They’re trying to forge a new symbolic order. Trump is a *real* that has emerged and disrupted neoliberalism and neoliberalism shall not return. A new symbolic order will be integrated. And we can see this. Trump says, “You just grab the pussy.” That is so against the symbolic order of politics, yet you’ll notice he’s liked more because of it, not less. A new symbolic order is coming. We must fight it and we must disintegrate it.

The Left hysterically calls him fascist—why? To reintegrate him into their previous historical modes of the symbolic order. To integrate something into the symbolic order is to castrate it, to remove its life, its vitality. So this is the pressing task for us: we must integrate Trump neither in the new right-wing symbolic order he wants to build nor in the tired old leftist understanding of fascism, that symbolic order that has been disintegrated for years if not decades. Instead we must integrate Trump into a new order of our choosing and the people’s choosing. In short, our primary task is to castrate Trump, symbolically.

Catherine Liu: Thank you, Greg, but I’m no Lacanian. Lacanianism is an esotericism that separates us from the vernacular. I’m going to talk about populism and I’m going to speak in the calm tones of the professional-managerial class, ready to be immolated by the forces upon which I prey!

When I moved to the Midwest in 1994 at height of Clinton years I was astonished to encounter a radical suspicion of the university, experts, and expertise. I had not been exposed to this when living in the bubble of the tri-state New York metropolitan area, which is dominated by whites and by a Jewish respect for education. It was quite traumatic to be confronted with this populism and hostility (also because I wasn’t white) when I got my job at the University of Minnesota. Eventually, it led to my book project on anti-intellectualism and populism in the Midwest, features which make the Midwest such a great place and a place of such enormous revolutionary potential. I initially saw it as reactionary, but through research and deep encounters with the people of Minnesota I realized that populism in the Midwest arose under the conditions of the agrarian revolt of 1892. “Populism” first occurs in the English language in relationship to the People’s Party.

I want to read part of the Populist Party’s 1892 Omaha Platform. Its resonance and power is transmitted through the lived experience of people in this region.

We have witnessed for more than a quarter of a century the struggles of the two great political parties for power and plunder, while grievous wrongs have been inflicted upon the suffering people. We charge that the controlling influences dominating both these parties have permitted the existing dreadful

conditions to develop without serious effort to prevent or restrain them. Neither do they now promise us any substantial reform. They have agreed together to ignore, in the coming campaign, every issue but one. They propose to drown the outcries of a plundered people with the uproar of a sham battle over the tariff, so that capitalists, corporations, national banks, rings, trusts, watered stock, the demoralization of silver, and the oppressions of the usurers may all be lost sight of. They propose to sacrifice our homes, lives, and children on the altar of mammon; to destroy the multitude in order to secure corruption funds from the millionaires.’

This is not from 2016, but from 1892! There was a concrete political crisis that had to do with drought and with mortgages that the railroads sold to farmers in the Midwest. But one of the demands of the prairie Populists—and Richard Hofstadter ignored this in his book—was the demand for popular education, education outside the universities and outside the institutions that Greg denounced. The people of the Midwest felt separated from capital and from the usurers and the plunderers. This is why we have to understand populism. The suffering of the people in this region gave birth to the most powerful third-party movement in the United States, a movement that was eventually destroyed in 1896 when the Democratic Party appropriated the People’s Party’s platform. This is the cry of anguish that we hear ripping through the political fabric of the symbolic, or whatever. I said I wasn’t going to speak in that language, but, unfortunately, I know how to speak it.

Capital separates us from our life world. It separates subjects from their history. If you read the chapter on capital in the *Grundrisse*, you see that capital has worked from the beginning as a process that separates subjects from the commune, that separates subjects from the *ager publicus*, that separates subjects from the clan and the tribe, from the means of self-reproduction, from politics itself, from embodied forms of labor, from use-values, from violence, and from satisfaction.

Today’s populist—Trump and, in another way, Sanders—addresses this cascading series of separations. Trump and other populist leaders have arisen at a time when the function of the professionally managed state is to perform the process of separating the people not only from production but from politics. What Trump offered—and Chris mentioned correctly that Bernie Sanders offered this too, but failed to deliver—was a sense of restoration and immediacy in the face of these cascading separations. The populist leader today holds contempt for mediation and feeds on popular alienation and on popular outrage at a highly censored public sphere, where, as I have been arguing, the language of political correctness teaches us and disciplines us to speak about “the other” in a way that permits us entry into a newly configured bourgeoisie. If you do not speak in this highly ritualized and even precious manner then you have no way of entering the professional-managerial class. I’m perfectly willing to speak this language, not in a neurotic way but because I think it smoothes certain kinds of intersubjectivities. But this technocratic style is the style of rule, and technocracy is separation itself. So, what Trump responds to is that kind of cool, neutral, hip style with which Obama was so able to seduce us.

Trump is a Bakhtinian character. He is of the Rabelaisian carnival. That’s why his appetite and his grotesqueness only makes him more appealing and attractive. He’s low, vulgar, and of the people. He has no truck with this highly precious, refined mode of speaking. He’s authentic: He wants to grab some pussy! Good for him! He wants to talk like other people. That’s why when a lot of women were interviewed they said, “He’s a guy! That’s what guys do!” What Trump actually reveals is the *authoritarianism-lite* of the progressive Democrats. Their repressive modes of progress have created the kind of language-policing that is actually about the extirpation of traditional and working-class ways of dealing with “the other.”

The Democratic Party has secured safe spaces for FIRE (Finance, Insurance, Real Estate) to act with impunity in intensifying processes of separation [while also realizing violence]. So, populists like Trump don’t emerge in a political vacuum. Populist rhetoric addresses the desire for the overcoming of separation as such. William Jennings Bryan, later ridiculed for opposing the teaching of evolution in Kansas, was originally the silver-tongued rhetorician who was able to attract thousands of farmers, their wives, and their families to rural rallies. Bryan could speak to them. He was a political, a religious, and an entertainment figure for people who were starved for a message from the political class. What William Jennings Bryan did, and what Andrew Jackson did—and Steven Bannon has engineered an imaginary relationship between them—was expand the franchise, politically and culturally. The enfranchisement of women and African Americans created a *legalistic* expansion of the franchise. When a real populist revolt takes place here’s a *terrifying* expansion of the franchise. Our populist revolt is directed exactly at the smoothing effects of the technocratic elites. I’d like for us as leftists, as people who want to go forward with revolt, to understand the legacy of populism. This legacy belongs to each of us as Americans.

Q&A

Part of the problem with the Left is Greg’s micropolitics of gesture. It’s true that by becoming psychotic one cures one’s neuroses. But that’s not a formula for changing the world. That’s regression! The real world outside of symbolic structures has to be addressed.

GL: Two phenomena represent the dead-end of the Left. One, the traditional political organization, is a Marxist-Leninist micro-sect, whether it be the Socialist Workers Party or the Revolutionary Communist Party. They think about things in a very tired way. Maybe they go step above and think in a Trotskyist way, or they go step above that and think in a Maoist way. But the entire history of politics and philosophical thought has passed them by. The second, left-communists and anarchists, have adopted a rigorous theoretical study of micropolitics over the defeat of their practical projects—Food Not Bombs, Occupy Wall Street. But they never integrate micropolitics into a political or organizational structure that might be sustainable.

Remember that the original rallying cry was a micropolitical one: an eight-hour workday. As Marxists we know that there’s nothing very serious about an eight-hour workday in itself. It’s the *International* that

“unites us all.” It’s the *International* that became the political and organizational frame in which the struggle for the micropolitical that is the eight-hour day could be adopted. The problem is that they become separated: People who don’t want an overarching organizational or political form do micropolitics, and then the political parties say, “That’s just academic bullshit. We don’t need to think about it.” This has been of great harm to the Left.

As for psychosis: Yes, we live in a real world. We live in *reality*, to be very precise. And when we live in *reality*, there are constraints and horizons to what we see. I am advocating that we break with those horizons. That is incredibly dangerous, because if you break with the horizons and choose the wrong thing then you’re in bad shape. But here are two things to consider: what was the rallying cry of May ’68 that almost toppled the De Gaulle government? It was, “Be realistic, do what’s possible.” That sort of boldness is what is missing in the Left. Instead we are asking, “Where do we belong?” It is not time to ask where we belong. It’s time to ask, “This is where we’re going. Who’s coming with us?” Lenin gave a speech in 1916 in Switzerland when the Second International was in decay and workers were slaughtering each other. Lenin said, “Comrades, if we work our hardest and try our best, we will never see socialism. Our children will never see socialism. But perhaps our children’s children will see socialism.” That’s the sort of psychosis we need.

It’s demand the impossible, not do the impossible.

CC: I want to push back on micropolitics. It’s the trauma of the failed revolutions of 1848 that haunts us, Greg. You didn’t need the positive example of the Commune for this trauma to be in effect. You already had the June uprising of the workers in 1848 that was put down by the liberals in the name of capitalism. But since the Commune came up—and since, Greg, you evoked the *First International*, and also May ’68—I would say that it’s remarkable that we’re driven back to a reunion of Marxism and anarchism, as if those things have not split for a reason, and as if Marxism had not conclusively defeated anarchism for decades before the Russian Revolution [a defeat which actually allowed the Russian Revolution to happen]. Lenin put it best:

“Anarchism is the price that we pay for opportunism.” That was in 1920. Anarchism, like any bourgeois fad, oscillates between enthusiasm and despair. The only solution to that is organization. Now, this organization did, of course, have some potentially bad outcomes. It is always a risk: building up the organization and the political force for the revolution is also simultaneously building up the organization and political force for counterrevolution. It’s always doing both, and you’re risking that. If we’re going to talk in psychological terms about the trauma that the Left suffers from, the trauma is that we know that in building any form of politics, we’re also building a force that might turn against us. But without taking that risk we’re just oscillating from enthusiasm to despair in one bourgeois fad after another—in which I’d include May ’68, Lacan, and everything else. (Although, to his credit, Lacan did criticize the students in ’68.)

CL: Lacan was one of the few intellectuals who dared to do so, because of the Left’s authoritarianism. From lack of a sufferer!

GL: I certainly agree. I am but a humble union worker! The notion of popular education is very important to the American psyche and to American history, no matter how hard Trump tries to get rid of it. But in this epoch there’s a revolutionary aspect which goes beyond the demand for popular education. As Leftists—and, I would hope, as *revolutionaries* more than Leftists—we should follow the dictum, “Proletarianize the intellectual and intellectualize the proletariat.” Now, this gets thrown around a lot, especially in academia. We do need revolutionary intellectuals, like the good people sitting with me. But among those who are pursuing graduate or undergraduate degrees, isn’t it funny how it’s always the *other* intellectuals who need to go proletarianize, whereas your work is so valuable? This is a lack of discipline. It’s a lack of doing hard, painful work and making sacrifices in order to build things—things which may fail.

Had I been around in 1968 I would have been very excited about the future of the Left. There were widespread protests, insurgent movements within center-left parties, and a new generation that looked like it was going to finally move the country beyond the post-war consensus. But in my excitement I would have been extremely wrong about how the next twenty years would’ve turned out. Now there’s another generational boom—of millennials—and they’re much more left-wing than previous generations. The most recent Democratic primary featured the largest age gap of any federal election ever and there are exciting Leftist movements and large-scale protests. I would have been wrong to be excited in 1968 but I still want to be optimistic about the trends of the last ten years.

CL: The Left will have to undergo the strictest forms of self-criticism as the basis of reorganizing itself. I was too young for 1968 but I was always nostalgic; I spent my life thinking about the promise of that moment. In France, an elite group of bourgeois students became anarchists and became enamored with Maoism. They came out of the elite schools called the *écoles normales supérieures*. There’s a very punishing hierarchical system in France that was left basically intact after all that dreaming and all that protest. So what ’68 actually did was consolidate a countercultural style for a new elite with an anti-imperial venter. When Barthes and Lacan and all those people went to China, they were performing a kind of exoticism and tourism that became part of the glamour of being in the Left in France. People who followed that path went into the factories and proletarianized themselves; their lives were obscured and destroyed, and many of them went into psychoanalysis to understand what had happened. That was the movement of Lacanian psychoanalysis. They wanted to ask the question, “Who is acting here?” The question of autonomy in the 70s, in that bitter, post-revolutionary moment, turned into the question “What do I want?”

We know these lessons now. We go in with clear eyes. The young twenty-somethings that are having this

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Marxism, continued from page 3

revolutionary ferment on the American left are much less privileged than that ’68 elite, who acted upon this esoteric theory—post-structuralism without Marx—that they romanticized in the United States as “Theory.” Understanding the historical legacy of the failures of that revolt is our way out—is *your way out*, so you don’t commit those mistakes.

CC: Before the election there was a great deal of mainstream political-cultural commentary on optimism among millennials—how Bernie Sanders represented optimism, whereas Trump represented negativity. Hillary was neither. She was just the status quo. She was not essentially negative about the status quo, nor did she represent anything particularly optimistic about the status quo; whereas Sanders represented the optimism of millennials. I wonder whether that optimism has been given a shock, whether we’re talking about the shock effect of the Trump election. When we talk about adjusting to the “new normal,” I fear that the Trump shock is great enough to reconcile the millennials to the Democratic Party in its most abject form—namely, in its most conservative, status-quo form. I fear that the Sanders phenomenon is just a transition point with respect to that. I now expect the millennial Left to fold into the Democratic Party out of anti-Trumpism. I could be wrong about that, but I anticipate that and I also fear it. After eight-plus years of the economic crisis, it could very well be that people have adjusted to the “new normal” in a profound way in terms of entering into working life. And, of course, those who didn’t adjust died of drug overdoses, etc.

GL: We don’t need to be nostalgic for May ’68. The time to be disillusioned is now.

CC: Ahead of time?

GL: How many people became politically active after Occupy Wall Street and then said “nothing will ever change” after we were beaten out of the streets? How many people called Bernie Sanders a “political revolution” and then said “politics is bullshit” after Bernie failed? We smiled knowingly at them. We knew what was happening and they didn’t. It’s always the time to be disillusioned, but it’s also already the time to be invariant. Think about who you know and who you talk to now and how you can conduct yourself as a revolutionary around them. That is one of the pressing tasks, so that they *don’t* just fold into the Democratic Party—which would be a catastrophe.

How do you characterize the question of Marxism in the present? As Chris has written, Trump is a symptom of the crisis of neoliberalism that exists beyond his campaign. Would it have made sense to hold similar panel called “Marxism in the Age of Hillary,” or does Trump offer something qualitatively new that we need to grapple with that Hillary would not have provided?

GL: Neoliberalism is in crisis whether it’s Trump or not. Trump *represents* something new. Trump is not causing or doing something new. Social forces in the global and U.S. economy have given rise to Trump. It’s dialectical, but Trump is not giving rise to Stalin.

I’ll be an honest, unrepentant Stalinist [Marxist-Leninist-Maoist]: it’s not clear to me that there’s a *Marxism*. There are *Marxisms*. But I’m not advocating for *Marxism*. We have to find a very particular Marxism that works in the United States. There’s a general crisis of Marxism in the industrialist and imperialist world. What does Marxism worldwide look like? It looks like Maoism: the Naxalites in India, the Communist Party of the Philippines. These are concrete answers. What does it look like in the United States? Of course, as the dogmatist, I want to say Maoism. But I have no idea, if we’re being blunt about it—which is why we’re all here, right?

CL: There has been a revival of Marxism within the academy after 20-30 years of not just identity politics but an anti-dialectical, differential, Foucauldian, Heideggerian move. During that period I was a grumpy Frankfurt School-er. Now a lot of Johnny-come-lately types are jumping on the bandwagon: *everyone’s* a grumpy Frankfurt School-er! I’m happy in a certain way. There’s a loosening up of a crypto-anti-Marxism within the academy and people have been shaken up by an explosion of class struggle in the last elections—by the absolute effects of class struggle and by the [very] disorganized rejection of one class’s style. Although I’m not in any revolutionary party, I’ve been in the dissenting position for so long in academia that suddenly the things I always wanted to say are say-able. Graduate students were so sure that to be critical was to “quer” something rather than to make it dialectical. That oppressive consensus has been deeply shaken and for that reason I’m optimistic. Right thought leads to right action.

CC: Absolutely.

CL: Maybe the solidarity of customer and surly worker is the task of building solidarity in the post-Fordist, deindustrializing world.

Can you respond to the refining of the term “class struggle” to mean the proletarian struggle for socialism?

CL: That’s what class struggle is.

CC: Certainly. And it’s true that a certain kind of ruling-class style was delegitimated in the last election, as Catherine says. But as Greg pointed out, that just means that perhaps we’re going to reconstitute a new ruling-class style.

CL: Which would be called an intra-class struggle for legitimacy. There’s still a rejection of it.

CC: Right.

I’m a millennial leftist. One of my professors argues that the classmates were not particularly interested in Sanders’s demands—didn’t think that they were realizable—but that they liked Sanders’s affect. Where some see optimism, I see a deep pessimism about the possibilities of politics. If the left as it exists today was unable to deal with the 1980s and 1990s then what are we able to do about the 1980s and 1990s and the depoliticizing effect that they’ve had on my generation?

CC: The depoliticizing effect that *our* generation...

CL: ...had on *their* generation. I totally get it. I tried, man, I tried! Everyone was down with “biopolitics.” I screamed “No”—but nobody listened!

GL: I’m on the older side of the millennial generation. I was constantly told by older comrades, “You don’t know what it was like going through the 80s and 90s. You’re lucky!”

the last elections. That’s because that’s not where class struggle takes place. If you’d like to see class struggle, I highly encourage you to come down to the café at UIC where I work, where there’s *constant* class struggle...

CC: Yourself?

GL: Not just me, actually! I’m observing others. I have larger goals than immediate class struggle [which, I know, makes me a bad Marxist]. I’m trying to take away a union. My coworkers are uneducated and working-class. I’m the only one who isn’t black. Even the managers are low-level petit-bourgeois. There is an ongoing, immanent class struggle against the upper management, who—surprise, surprise—is a white guy. My coworkers are surly and don’t care about the customers or about the job they’ve done. They will do anything they can to avoid work. The funny thing is that it’s conscious. Of course, they don’t articulate it in the form of the “immanent resistance of the saboteurs” as in volume I of *Capital*. One day the managers were out on account of inclement weather and my highest-educated co-worker—he has an Associate’s Degree—said, “It’s ours now! No management!” That’s a better argument about expropriation than I’ve heard from academics! When the manager returned, I told my coworker, “I guess the People’s Republic of Au Bon Pain has fallen.” He replied, “No, Greg, it hasn’t fallen. There’s more of us than her. We’ll tie her up and put her in the closet!” That’s some class struggle in action!

CC: I would push back against the psychotic and the carnivalesque that Greg is advocating here. The organized socialist working class of a hundred years ago would have done a good job, would have taken care of their customers, would have taken pride of their work, and would have showed the complete superfluity of management. In other words, they would have shown that we can do a good job without management disciplining us. That’s what a working class organized for socialism would have looked like and that’s what it meant when Lenin said, “Any cook can govern.” Not only did it not need psychosis or criminality, but it was actually against that—and that’s what allowed it to ever take power!

GL: I again say: time, place, and conditions. That makes sense in an emerging union movement where the unions have to legitimate themselves not to the bosses but to the wider American population. Now we’re in the exactly opposite situation.

CC: But the customers are workers too—especially at the University of Illinois at Chicago!

GL: True.

CL: This raises the question of the service industry, the deskilling of post-deindustrialized jobs, and the revolt of the unskilled laborer. The revolt of the *skilled* laborer was so terrifying to industrialized capital that they had to destroy all forms of skill and to destroy workers as intellectuals so that no one could grasp the entire process. Now everything is much more black-boxed. But from a strictly materialist point of view, the “surly service worker” as a form of revolt is a very thwarted form of pseudo-revolt.

I heard so many people—*women*—talk about Hillary Clinton like the boss lady. She was the boss! She spoke in the style of the boss. After the election, during the pussy-hat marches, there were around twenty thousand people in Santa Ana; a majority of them were women and they included a lot of union people. Do you know what word they didn’t use? “Boss.” This was the pacification of the class struggle. That could have been a moment of revolution if we had just used the word *boss*. But the march was run by the Democratic Party, so that was the one word we couldn’t say! We could say transgender and we could say that we’re going to embrace all the immigrants. But who’s our enemy? Who’s our class enemy? What emerged from the last election—this is where I disagree with you, Greg—is an *image* of the class enemy.

GL: The key, then, is for the revolutionaries who are with the surly workers to make the connection between the customers and the workers so that the customers understand the workers’ surtiness and understand the workers’ revolt. Then they can form a unity against the bosses.

CC: Absolutely.

CL: Maybe the solidarity of customer and surly worker is the task of building solidarity in the post-Fordist, deindustrializing world.

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GL: I’m on the older side of the millennial generation. I was constantly told by older comrades, “You don’t know what it was like going through the 80s and 90s. You’re lucky!”

When I think about the 1980s and 1990s, I think about how my generation wants to feel good about politics—but they don’t see opportunities to get something out of politics. Think of Obama: the therapist-in-chief making us feel good. The 80s and 90s saw waves of anarchism, which then crashed into pessimism...

CC: You mean anti-globalization, like Seattle?

Yes. And now we’re seeing the resurgence of Black Bloc tactics. The intellectual counterpart of that is the anti-Marxism of the academy. The 80s and 90s also marked the passage of the 60s and 70s left firmly into the Democratic Party.

CC: Greg, when the senior cadre told you that “you’re not battle-scarred like us,” the danger to keep in mind is that Reagan was a trauma for the 80s generation. The problem with the Gen-Xers—the 80s generation—is that we identified too much with the 60s generation. We internalized their experiences as if they were our own. But they weren’t. Reagan was not this deep, fascist reaction; Reagan came along by the time that the New Left had already spent themselves. They just hadn’t admitted it to themselves yet so they blamed Reagan for their own failure—because, of course, there was a good ten years there, during the 1970s, when the New Left promised something and didn’t deliver. That was clear by the time Reagan came around.

CL: There are deep economic reasons for the demise of radical politics at that time and for its incorporation and institutionalization into academia. It had to do with rent-seeking on the part of capital, moving into

Horkheimer on Lenin’s “Empiriocriticism”

Max Horkheimer’s 1928–29 reaction to Lenin’s epistemological polemic *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*

Michael Jekel



Lenin playing chess with Alexander Bogdanov, one of those who brought philosophical disputes into political debates within Russian Social Democracy thereby prompting Lenin to write *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. The photo was taken at Maxim Gorky’s house in 1908.

The following is the first translation from the German-language Platypus Review to appear in the English edition. The original can be found at <platypus1917.org/2016/10/19/horkheimer-uber-lenins-empiriokritizismus/>

Material Basis

AMONGST HIS MANUSCRIPTS Max Horkheimer left behind an essay, written in 1928 but unpublished during his lifetime, whose subject is Lenin’s important work *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, which had appeared in German translation the year before. The publication of Horkheimer’s response to Lenin was eventually undertaken by Horkheimer’s pupil and successor, Alfred Schmidt in 1985.¹ Schmidt’s editorial remarks reveal that Horkheimer’s views on Lenin’s epistemological polemic crystallized sometime in the Winter semester of 1928, when the already habilitated lecturer was teaching at the University of Frankfurt. The manuscript, which originally lacked a title, is contained in a notebook. This original version was then used as the basis for a 17-page typewritten copy [with Horkheimer’s own handwritten corrections]. In addition, a separate 11-page typed manuscript, which seems to have served as the outline for a lecture given in the summer semester of 1928, has also been preserved.²

Horkheimer’s critical confrontation with Lenin’s epistemological polemic takes place at a time when Horkheimer was just beginning to gain a firm foothold in academia. Born in 1895, he received his doctorate in 1922 with a work on Kant’s antinomy of the teleological power of judgment. In 1925, he was habilitated with a work on Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* as the mediation between theoretical and practical philosophy. Both of these theses were supervised by the neo-Kantian philosopher Hans Cornelius, who held a professorship in Philosophy at the recently established University of Frankfurt. In *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* Lenin had directed a sharply worded polemic against Cornelius, dubbing him a “police sergeant in a professorial chair.”³ As Horkheimer was an active research associate with Cornelius when he composed his thoughts on Lenin’s text, it would seem that in Frankfurt, there was an old bill with Lenin still open.

Horkheimer’s Lenin manuscript of 1928–29 can be divided into three sections: In the first, Horkheimer lays out *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*’s argument against the Austrian physicist Ernst Mach. Following this reconstruction Horkheimer sets out a sharp critique of Lenin’s anti-Machean position. Finally, in the last and shortest section of the manuscript, Horkheimer makes clear that, despite the serious deficiencies of Lenin’s argumentation, he nonetheless takes Lenin’s philosophical concern seriously and that *Materialism and Empiricocriticism* is neither obsolete nor irrelevant.

Mirroring the Mirrored

The epistemological linchpin of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* is found in the following central passage (also taken up by Horkheimer) from Engels’ *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*: “Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature and, therefore, in the last instance, assumed world creation in some form or other... comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism.”⁴ Horkheimer comments, “Nature, matter, objectivity are designations for the reality investigated by the positive sciences, the knowledge of which is provisional in the most advanced theories.”⁵

In the 1900s, the conception of matter underwent a fundamental change. The atom, as was said at the time, began to dissolve; waves and vibrations taking its place. Matter dematerialized. In his PhD thesis, published in 1962, Alfred Schmidt explains that “at the turn of the century... the ‘disappearance of matter’ and the future impossibility of a philosophical materialism [were] being mooted in connection with epoch-making discoveries in physics.”⁶ a topic of much debatelt was against this mélange of ideologies of science that Lenin reacted, vigorously opposing any theoretical reformulation of Marxism, any renunciation of its materialistic basis.

In *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, Lenin develops

a perhaps unfamiliar, rather minimalist definition of matter with which he—in response to the apparent disappearance of matter in the new physics of the time—attempts to specify or open up the concept with a view to the more unconventional forms in which matters appears as well. The concept of matter, as Lenin philosophically conceives it, includes not only matter’s seemingly static forms of being, but also matter in its less tangible form of waves, oscillations, and energy. According to Lenin [in a passage both Horkheimer and Schmidt point to], “the sole ‘property’ of matter with whose recognition philosophical materialism is bound up,” is the “property of *being an objective reality*, of existing outside our mind.”⁷

The philosophical concept of matter is, therefore, not rigidly bound to the development of natural science. As Horkheimer explains, “The absolutization of individual phases of the scientific process of knowledge leads to static metaphysics, to the denial of the existence of truth, to relativistic agnosticism.”⁸ According to the materialist view, every true theory, in spite of all errors and relative imperfections, has in a dialectical way an objective (if incomplete) share in the trans-subjective absolute truth “insofar as it is a necessary moment of progress in knowledge, for, through it, we produce not only appearance, but we get closer to an exact image of reality.”⁹ Horkheimer later elaborates that every theory “is subject to correction through practice. This dialectical view distinguishes Lenin from those materialists who regard definite views on atomic structure, etc. as final.”¹⁰ According to Horkheimer, Lenin sees scientific research “as an approximation to the adequate knowledge of the intersubjective reality transcending the consciousness of human beings... and as the only way to the realization of the only reality.”¹¹ Consequently, Ernst Mach according to Lenin is “a pure idealist, his philosophy essentially a mere reprint of Berkeley’s. For Mach, our sensations are at the same time the elements of the material world. The natural things are connections of sensations, [even] the self itself is a relatively stable complex of memories, moods, feelings.”¹²

The doctrine of the Austrian physicist, on whom the Empiriocritacists in Russian revolutionary social-democracy [who mistook themselves for Marxists] were depending in their philosophical opposition against Lenin, Horkheimer further characterizes as follows: “For Mach, it is not the case that an identical reality is reflected in the consciousness of [different] people, that the different perceptions of several persons each correspond to a constant objective thing as the original; this view means for Mach as well as for his predecessor Berkeley a completely useless doubling of the world.”¹³ Here perhaps it might be clear to what extent Ernst Mach can be regarded as a pioneer of positivistic, antirealist, and reality-constructivist theories of knowledge, even if these do not appear under the label of “Empiriocriticism” these days any longer. As Horkheimer characterizes such positions: “The ‘opposition of appearance and reality, of appearance and thing’ corresponds to inaccurate vulgar thought. What we know are not consciousness-transcending things, but, in the end, only our sensations and their functional relations... All our knowledge is related to our sensations. They are the ultimate facts themselves...”¹⁴ Horkheimer’s arbitration of the philosophical contest between Mach and Lenin sees Lenin triumphant, judging the case of Mach’s theory of knowledge thus:

Engels’ definition of idealism undoubtedly applies to this philosophy. Sensations and not nature are regarded as the primary thing, the world of material objects [is regarded] as a product of conceptual orders of the data at hand... Mach’s thought corresponds precisely to the idealistic thesis of the original identity of thought and being, which Engels combats. Empiriocriticism therefore runs counter to the philosophical views of Marx and Engels.¹⁵

According to Lenin, Mach involves himself in insoluble contradictions. As soon as he pursues natural research as a physicist, he stands “like most naturalists, ‘instinctively on the standpoint of the materialist theory of knowledge,’” whereas “his philosophical principles” are to the contrary “the purest idealism.”¹⁶ As an

especially decisive argument against Mach, Horkheimer highlights the incompatibility of his epistemological doctrine with the objective reality of biological evolution and human history. With regard to this weakness in Mach’s theory of knowledge, Horkheimer asks: “How can Mach admit the reality of human and natural history, when, according to him, ‘the entire course of time is bound only to the conditions of sensibility?’”¹⁷ In this respect, Horkheimer arrives at a judgment straightforwardly adverse to Mach: “Lenin’s conviction that the reality of history is not compatible with this doctrine points out, in fact, the weakest part of [Mach’s] philosophy.”¹⁸

Criticism of Criticism

The fact that Horkheimer agrees with Lenin on the central points of his polemic against Mach does not mean that he agrees with Lenin in every respect. Rather, Horkheimer proceeds to follow up his faithful rendering of Lenin’s criticism against Mach with a criticism against Lenin’s own epistemological premises in a choice of language no less harsh. Thus, Horkheimer holds Lenin’s conception of materialism to account—as far as its lack of epistemological sophistication is concerned—as naive and undialectical, and therefore hopelessly lagging behind what had already been achieved by Marx and Engels, and, indeed, by Feuerbach preceding them. Of course, Horkheimer is aware of the context within which Lenin’s philosophical polemic fulfilled a tangible purpose in the inner-party political struggle over the orientation of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party:

The book is an application of selected formulations of Engels, tailored to the then prevailing party situation in Russia. It is the accidental work of a leader who vigorously calls the materialist word to mind and outlaws deviation. Again and again Lenin maintains the same propositions against ever new authors, without their supplying any new substantive basis: In the world there is nothing else but moving matter, and this matter moves in space and time. It is independent of our sensations, which themselves represent only the highest product of definitely organized matter. Our conceptions of reality are relative, but, ‘in their development, they are progressing in the direction of absolute truth, gradually approximating it.’¹⁹

Lenin had succeeded in convincing Horkheimer that Mach’s theory of knowledge was indeed contrary to Marx and Engels’s worldview, something unclear to the Russian Machists who considered themselves good Marxists. Still, Lenin fails to prove either that the materialistic view of the world is indeed correct, or that the idealist or Machean view is itself misguided. At least he does not establish this to the satisfaction of the Frankfurt critical theorist, schooled as he is in the theoretical lore of both Kant and Cornelius. Horkheimer criticizes Lenin for making the same mistake as Mach and his followers, namely, that they juxtapose their own inadequately justified abstract dogmatic views to the ungrounded dogmatic, abstract views of their opponent, instead of resolutely taking up an elevated position, overlooking any such competing dogmatic views from elevated heights. Horkheimer: “The mere opposition of one’s own abstract beliefs to individual views of Mach is little in keeping with the Hegelian sentence otherwise theorized by Plekhanov and Lenin: ‘there is no abstract truth, the truth is always concrete.’”²⁰ Lenin, however, finds himself in a situation in which he is directly taking part in a contemporary philosophical scuffle in which he is personally striving to preserve himself and to prevail with his view, whereas Horkheimer looks back from a much less dangerous vantage point of historical distance at blows exchanged a long time ago.

If we are to try to defend Lenin against Horkheimer’s accusation of dialectical shortcoming, then a comparison of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* with Engels’ *Anti-Dühring* might be further illuminating. When we compare the task that Lenin faces with that of Engels against the vulgar-Marxist demagogue Dühring, it is evident that Engels was chiefly concerned with struggling against an opponent who, though considering himself a materialist, nonetheless entirely distorts materialism due to his ignorance of dialectics. For this reason, Engels “laid the emphasis [...] rather on *dialectical* materialism than on dialectical *materialism*.” He “insisted rather on *historical* materialism than on historical *materialism*.”²¹ For Engels, then, this was all about the defense of dialectical materialism against a vulgar-materialist opponent. Lenin, by contrast, faces a completely different challenge: Materialism is declared superfluous by the philosophical opponent; Marxism is therefore to be purified of it. Dialectics is therefore not an ideological battleground in this dispute, which is why it remains in the background unscathed. The East German Marxist literary theorist Werner Krauss explains:

The danger of idealistic temptations was greater in Lenin’s time than in the time of Marx and Engels. The founders of socialism had, above all, to enforce their dialectical method against the prevailing vulgar materialism. During Lenin’s time, the reactionary bourgeoisie had broadly re-established the connection with pre-Hegelian idealism. This led to the need expressed by Lenin to emphasize dialectical *materialism* more than *dialectical* materialism.²²

Critical *Aufhebung*

Although Horkheimer, with his objections in the critical middle section, cannot find anything good to say about the argumentation of *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, at the conclusion of his manuscript he arrives by a surprising twist at an overall assessment that is unexpectedly Lenin-friendly, at least as regards the function and motivation of Lenin’s epistemological work. After Horkheimer has delivered many of the objections to be expected from somebody educated within the neo-Kantian community of professional philosophers, he performs a radical turn, transgressing the limits of academic, purely ‘inner-philosophical’ philosophizing, thereby opening up a perspective on extra-philosophical contexts and how they determine the reciprocal relationship between social reality and philosophical practice. While he continues to defend Mach, he does so chiefly in the view that during the interwar period the latter’s doctrines were already largely “exiled from the universities,” a phenomenon largely connected to the imminent disappearance of the “positivistic remnants in the petite bourgeoisie” associated with Mach. Therefore, Horkheimer concludes, the “most important and current sense of the book... is not at all the substantive arguments against Mach”²³ (for “Machism” can already be regarded as defeated). Instead, Horkheimer takes up Lenin’s combative impulse in order to wield it, not against Mach himself, but now in a sense towards a materialist critique of the idealistic reversion to philosophical mystification and metaphysics that was coming to increasingly dominate the philosophical institutions of his time. “The philosophy of the present phase of imperialism” is criticized by Horkheimer for its “pantheistic ontology” and “pseudo-practicality” quite contrary to Mach’s scientism and nominalism.²⁴

Horkheimer’s intellectual engagement with Lenin probably serves well to illuminate the path of Horkheimer’s gradual development from the Cornelius pupil to the critical theorist. Through his study of Lenin, the still relatively young junior lecturer felt himself strengthened in his impulse to no longer pursue philosophy in a pretended sphere of “social relationlessness” and professional isolation, but instead to understand philosophy “in the context of the social whole, in which it develops, out of which its contents originate, and in which it works.”²⁵ By introducing this critical change in perspective, Horkheimer sweeps aside the weight of his previous philosophical objections to *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* with, so to speak, a single wave of his hand. Certainly one can try to challenge the work of the philosophical outsider Lenin on various technical and professional grounds. But what this misses, however, is *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*’s capacity, despite the specificity of the context in which it was written, to provoke the critical reader to lift the philosophical blinkers from his eyes and to resist letting himself be so easily misled in the field of the philosophy of science.

First of all, Horkheimer tries to make good on the issue that he feels Lenin fails to carry through to its final consequences: Instead of countering the anti-realist theory of Ernst Mach directly, he makes an attempt to explain in an indirect way its ideological function under the social conditions of its time. As Alfred Schmidt points out, what Horkheimer finds missing “in the Russian revolutionary’s book [is] the application of historical materialism to the critical analysis of the Machian doctrines.” For this reason Horkheimer takes recourse at the end of his lecture (in this way grounding his critique of Lenin directly on Marx and Engels) “to the famous sentences of the *German Ideology*,”²⁶ according to which “the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is... directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men” and that even “the phantoms formed in the human brain are... necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises.”²⁷

Being determines consciousness: This is certainly also true for the epistemological phantoms in the field of Empiriocriticism. The task outlined by Marx and Engels, applied to the challenge of the teachings of Mach, Horkheimer formulates as follows:

It would have been necessary... to show how the social reality of Austria around the turn of the century could lead to the petty bourgeois philosophy of Mach..., what kind of social situation is expressed in such a philosophy... In this way, Lenin could have perhaps found out that this [idealist] epistemological theory, which relocates the criterion for all knowledge in the sensations of the individual subject and identifies the world with the consciousness of the citizen, necessarily corresponds to a more self-assured petite bourgeoisie—one that believes in greater chances of advancement in his society and has a more unbroken faith in the possibility of the individual’s progressing out of his class—than can be the case in later times of the stable domination of trusts.²⁸

Under the conditions of “the stable domination of trusts” in the period around 1928, with the imminent National Socialist catastrophe beginning to loom in the late phase of the Weimar Republic, Machism hardly presented a serious challenge and had long since forfeited its intellectual appeal to the bourgeois camp. For, the “times when every individual subject could appear as a builder and critic of his own world are over.

“Horkheimer” continues on page 4