The movement as an end-in-itself? An interview with David Graeber

Ross Wolfe

On December 16, 2011, Ross Wolfe interviewed David Graeber, Reader at Goldsmiths College in London , author of Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology *(2004), and central figure in the early stages of the #Occupy Wall Street Movement. What follows is an edited transcript of the interview.*

Ross Wolfe: There are striking similarities between the #Occupy movement and the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle. Both began in the last year of a Democratic presidency, were spearheaded by anarchists, motivated by discontents with neo-liberalism, and received the support of organized labor. As an active participant in both the anti/alter-globalization and the #Occupy movements, to what extent would you say that #Occupy is a continuation of the project inaugurated at Seattle? What, if anything, makes this movement different?

David Graeber: I think a lot of the people involved in the globalization movement, myself included, felt this was a continuation of our efforts, because we never really felt the globalization movement had come to an end. We'd smash our heads against the wall every year, saying "Oh yes, this time we're really back. Oh wait, maybe not." A lot of us gradually began to lose hope that it was really going to bounce back in the way we always thought we knew it would. And then it happened, as a combination of tactics, from trying to create prefigurative models of what a democratic society would be like, to organizing protest or actions that were directed against an obviously undemocratic structure of governance.

At the same time, I think one reason why the tactics seem appropriate in either case is because, in a way, we're talking about two rounds of the same cycle of really the same debt crisis. One could make the argument that the world has been in one form of debt crisis or another since the seventies, and that for most of that time, the crisis was fobbed off onto the global South, and to a certain degree held off from the North Atlantic, countries and places with the most powerful economies, which more or less use credit as a way of staving off popular unrest. The global justice movement ultimately was a quite successful form of popular uprising against neoliberal orthodoxy, Washington Consensus, and the tyranny of the debt enforcers like the IMF and the World Bank. It was officially so successful that the IMF itself was expelled from large parts of the world. It simply can't operate at all in many spaces within Latin America anymore. And it eventually came home. So it's the same process: declaring some kind of financial crisis which the capitalists themselves are responsible for, and demanding the replacement of what are termed "neutral technocrats" of one type or other, who are in fact schooled in this kind of neoliberal orthodoxy, who've been in the economy for wholesale plunder on the part of financial elites. And because #Occupy is reacting to the same thing as the Global Justice Movement, it's not surprising that the reaction takes the same form: a movement for direct democracy, prefigurative politics, and direct action. In each case, what they're saying is that the tools of government and the administration are inherently corrupt and unaccountable.

RW: Against the malaise that followed from the dissolution of the anti/alter-globalization movement after 9/11, you argued that the primary reason for its eventual defeat was that it did not know how to handle the shock of its early victories—its participants had become "dizzy with success" along the way: "[O]ne reason it was so easy for [the global justice movement] to collapse, was… that once again, in most of our immediate objectives, we'd already, unexpectedly, won."[1] In other words, for you the path to defeat was largely paved by victory. In an uncanny way, this appears to mirror, albeit from the opposite direction, Karl Marx's counter-intuitive understanding of June 1848. Marx wrote that "only the June defeat has created all the conditions under which France can seize the *initiative* of the European revolution. Only after being dipped in the blood of the *June insurgents* did the *tricoleur* become the flag of the European revolution—the *red flag*!"[2] For Marx, then, the path toward victory was seen to be paved by defeat. How, if at all, are these two seemingly opposite views related? Do they mutually exclude one another, or are they perhaps complementary? Is it proper or even possible to speak of a "dialectics of defeat"?[3]

DG: That's an interesting analogy. One would have to ask: "Was Marx right?" He said that defeat was necessary for the ultimate victory, but it's not clear that that victory ultimately did occur. It's certainly true that certain sorts of defeat can be mythologized, and may turn into victory, or things that seem like defeats on the field are in fact victories that you didn't realize you had. I think that happens quite regularly in revolutionary history. In a way, tactical defeat is almost randomly related to strategic victory. There's no predictable pattern, kind of like Immanuel Wallerstein's idea of the series of world revolutions starting with the French revolution, the world revolution of 1848, which didn't achieve tactical victory anywhere, but radically transformed the way governments operated in Europe. That's where you get universal education, redistricting, etc.

RW: The French Revolution even failed internally, insofar as it was turned into an empire by Napoleon. But it still helped spread the nationalist and liberal/republican ethos.

DG: Absolutely. There were institutional, concrete forms that came out of that that have remained with us ever since. Same thing with 1917: It only was successful in Russia, but it had almost as much of an effect on other countries as it did at home. Nothing was the same afterwards. Basically, Wallerstein argues that 1968 was a similar revolutionary moment, sort of along the lines of 1848. He's now talking about the world revolution of 2011. But it really isn't clear which model this is going to resemble.

This made me think of what neoliberalism is really about: It's a political movement much more than it is an economic movement, which is a reaction to those series of victories won by social movements in the 1960s, whether the anti-war movements, feminism, the counterculture, and so on. That became a kind of a sanction, in achieving political victory by preventing any social movement from feeling that it had been successful in challenging capitalism in any great, empowered way, or providing any sort of viable alternative. So it became a propaganda war that was continually hierarchized, over creating an actually viable capitalist system. The way the Iraq War was conducted is another great example of that. It's very clear that the real obsession on the part of the people planning the war was to overcome what they called "the Vietnam syndrome," i.e., the wave of anti-war demonstrations in the sixties that had really prevented the U.S. from deploying large ground forces in any kind of major land war for 30 years. In order to get over that, they needed to fight the war in a way that would prevent widespread opposition and resistance at home. What they calculated was that "body count is everything," therefore they had to create rules of engagement such that few enough American soldiers would die that there would be no mass uproar in the form of an anti-war movement. Of course, in order to do that, their rules of engagement meant that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi and Afghani civilians died, which in turn pretty much ensured they couldn't win the war. But it seemed more important to them to prevent the anti-war movement than to win the war.

Of course, the anti-war movement of the last decade was put in a terrible situation by the attacks of 9/11, an attack on U.S. soil on a scale that hadn't ever happened. Now, it's also true that there's a pattern where 9/11 came at a very opportune moment, and had it not been for that attack, they probably would have tried to come up with some other excuse for an overseas war. Because it seems that, when you finally see a grassroots political movement, whether it's the civil rights movement, the anti-nuclear movement, the global justice movement, or any kind of glimmering, that is what happens. The remarkable thing to me is how immediately the ruling class panicked and felt that they had to make massive concessions and invariably seem to commence some sort of overseas war. It seems like they've trapped themselves in something like a box. It's clear that we've got a situation here in America, but it's not really clear who they're going to attack, or who they could attack overseas.

RW: One of the central debates within #OWS is over the degree to which the movement remains ideologically inclusive and open to all. From early on, the demonstrations at Liberty Plaza drew a number of neoliberal ideologues: Ron Paul supporters, Tea Partiers, and right-wing conspiracy theorists. While their visibility within the movement has perhaps diminished in recent weeks, they remain an undeniable, if marginal, presence at #Occupy events. Some have rejected the very idea of being placed along the political spectrum of "left" and "right," as they both consider these categories to be too constrictive and fear that identification with one or the other risks alienating potential supporters. Would you say the language of "right" and "left" still have any utility with respect to #Occupy Wall Street? Does #Occupy represent a new popular movement on the Left?

DG: There is an unfortunate tendency to identify "the Left" not as a set of ideals or ideas, but of institutional structures. A lot of individualists, anarchists, insurrectionists, and primitivists see the Left as the various leftist political parties, labor unions, what we would generally call "the verticals," and I can see why one would feel rather chary about wanting to identify himself with these. But at the same time, we've been hearing at least since the end of World War II that the difference between right and left is no longer relevant. It's something that's said about every five years in making some great pronouncement. And the fact that they have to keep doing it so regularly shows that it isn't true. It's sort of the way that people keep making these grand declarations that the whole narrative of progress is gone. They make that about once every generation. But why would they have to announce this every generation if it was actually gone? So I think that these concepts remain.

"Graeber" continues on page 3

Issue #43 / February 2012

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

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

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

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

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

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1 **The movement as an end-in-itself?**
An interview with David Graeber
Ross Wolfe

2 **A destroyer of vulgar-Marxism**
Book Review: Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*
Karl Kautsky

4 **Thirty years of counter-revolution**
An interview with Clyde Young
Spencer A. Leonard

The **Platypus Review**
Issue #43 | February 2012

Graeber, continued from page 1

The Tea Party was also claiming that they weren't a right-wing group and that they were a broad populist rejection of the structure of the existing political order, in the same way that people want to see #Occupy Wall Street. But one is a very right-wing populist rejection, while the #Occupy movement is inspired by left-wing principles. And a lot of it has to do not even with one's attitude towards market economics but corporate capitalism. It has this utopian ideal about what capitalism should be, which is actually far more utopian than any conception of what socialism, or whatever else would exist for the Left, would be. So the ultimate utopias of the Tea Party and #Occupy are profoundly different, which indicates a difference in their basic orientations. And #Occupy Wall Street is, in the end, anti-hierarchical. And I think that's the key. The Right is not, in the end, anti-hierarchical. They want to limit certain types of hierarchy, and promote other types, but they are not ultimately an egalitarian movement. So I think that ignoring that broad left legacy is kind of silly. It strikes me as patently dishonest. I understand that it is sometimes tactically useful to throw as broad a net as possible, because there actually is a lot of common ground. Many right-wing populists have certain sincere objections to, for example, the monopolization of culture, or the fact that there is objectively a cultural elite. A certain social class monopolizes those jobs whereby you get to engage or pursue forms of value that aren't all about money. The working classes have an overwhelming hatred of the cultural elite and a celebration of the army, to support our troops. It comes down to the fact that if you come from a working-class background, you have a very slim chance of becoming a successful capitalist, but there's really no possibility that you could become a drama critic for *The New York Times*. I think it would be wonderful if we could find a way to appeal to such people in a way that wouldn't be patronizing. But still, rejecting this split between the Right and the Left entirely, strikes me as going in completely the wrong direction.

What we have is this terrible synthesis of the market and bureaucracy which has taken over every aspect of our lives. Yet only the Right has a critique of bureaucracy. It's a really simple-minded critique, but the Left really doesn't have one at all.

RW: Some have characterized the #Occupy movement as sounding the alarm for "class war." They cite the now-ubiquitous #Occupy Wall Street motto, "We are the 99%!" as evidence of this fact. As the ostensible originator of this slogan, do you believe that #Occupy Wall Street is an outward manifestation of the latent class struggle underlying civil society? Whatever its rhetorical effect, does this metric provide an adequate framework for the analysis of class struggle?

DG: I don't think of it as an analysis so much as an illustration. It's a way of opening a window on inequality. Of course, a slogan doesn't ever answer the real structural question of how social classes get reproduced. What a slogan does is point you to how you can start thinking about a problem that you might not have even known existed. It's been remarkably effective at that, for two reasons: one, because it points out just how small the group of people who have benefitted from economic growth, from our productivity, has been. They basically grabbed everything. Also, the slogan has successfully made #Occupy inclusive in a way that other social movements have had trouble with before. So I think that's what was effective about it. Obviously there are infinite shades of difference between us, and class is a much more complicated thing than just the fact there is a certain group of people that is super rich or has a lot of political power. But nonetheless, it provides people with a way to start talking to each other about what they have in common, thus providing the form in which the other things can come to be addressed. You have to start with what you have in common. And that's one thing we've had a really hard time doing up till now.

RW: Most within the #Occupy movement recognize the raw fact of dramatic social inequality, but disagree over the method to pursue in looking to resolve this problem. Many hope that #Occupy will provide the grassroots political momentum necessary to pass a set of economic reforms, which typically would come by way of legislation passed through the existing channels of government. Others see #Occupy as potentially revolutionary, as pointing to something beyond the merely "economic." These two perspectives seem to indicate radically different directions this movement might take. Would you characterize this movement as "anti-capitalist"? Should it be? If so, what is the nature of its "anti-capitalist" politics?

DG: I'll start by saying that the people who were originally involved in the creation of #Occupy were overwhelmingly anti-capitalist, very explicitly. Whether we thought we were going to be able to overthrow capitalism in one go, well, obviously no. We're working toward that as an ultimate goal. That's why it's key to have an effect that will genuinely benefit people's lives. #Occupy certainly doesn't contradict that revolutionary impulse, and helps move us in a direction towards greater freedom and autonomy, by which I mean freedom from the structures of both the state and capitalism. Now, to create broad alliances along those lines, you'd have to be very careful about your organizational and institutional structures. Because one of the things that is revolutionary about the #Occupy movement is that it's trying to create prefigurative spaces in which we can experiment and create the kind of institutional structures that would exist in a society that's free of the state and capitalism. We hope to use those to create a kind of crisis of legitimacy within existing institutions.

Of course, I can only speak for myself. But most of the people I was working with, who were putting the vision together, had this belief in common: that the great advantage we had was that people across the political spectrum in America shared a profound revulsion with the existing political system, which they recognize to be a system of institutionalized bribery that has very little to do with anything that could be meaningfully called democracy. Money clearly controls every aspect of the political system. Thus, we would only have to delegitimate a system that has already almost entirely delegitimated itself. We adopted what amounts to a "dual power strategy." By creating autonomous institutions that represent what a real democracy might be like, we could provoke a situation for a mass delegitimation of existing institutions of power. Obviously, the ones that are the most violent are the hardest to delegitimate. In American society, for various ideological reasons, people hate politicians, but they have been trained to identify with the army and police to a degree that is hardly true anywhere else in the world. There's been relentless propaganda to create sympathies for soldiers and policemen, ever since the cowboy movie turned into the cop movie. I think that it would be a terrible mistake to go from these prefigurative structures to running some sort of political candidate. But even the idea of turning into a lobbying group pursuing a specific reformist agenda is wrongheaded. The moment you engage with a system, you're not only legitimating it, you're delegitimating yourself, because your own internal politics become warped. Even accepting money has pernicious effects. The moment you're interfacing with vertically organized structures of power, which are ultimately based on coercion, it poisons everything. By actively delegitimating the structure, we are in a position, perhaps as a side effect of our actions, to create the forms that will actually be of the most benefit to ordinary people.

RW: One division that emerged early on among the occupants concerned the need to call for demands. You have in the past rejected the idea of politics as policy-making, feeling that demands focused on electoral reform or market regulations would only steer the movement in a conservative direction. If not demands, what kind of "visions and solutions," as you've put it, do you think the #Occupy movement should provide?

DG: There is a profound ambiguity in the language of protest politics. I always point to the grammar of signs or slogans. Someone says, "Free Mumia" or "Save the whales." But who are you asking to do that? Are you talking about pressuring the entire system do so? Or are you calling on us as a collectivity to pressure them to do so? So yes, one could make the argument that the distinction between "visions," "demands," and "solutions" is somewhat arbitrary.

When we were first putting together the idea for #Occupy Wall Street, there were some who argued that we could make a series of demands that are part of the delegitimation process, by making demands for things that are obviously commonsensical and reasonable, but which they would never in a million years even consider doing. So it would not be an attempt to achieve the demands, but rather it would be a further way to destructure the authority, which would be shown to be utterly useless when it came to providing what the people need. What we're really talking about here is rhetorical strategies, not strategies of government, because #Occupy Wall Street does not claim to take control of the instruments of power, nor does it intend to. In terms of long-term visions, one of our major objectives has already been achieved to a degree which we never imagined it could have been. Our goal was to spread a certain notion of direct democracy, of how democracy could work.

For spreading the idea, the occupation of public space was very fruitful. It was a way of saying, "We are the public. Who could possibly keep us out of our space?" They adopted a Gandhian strategy of provoking violence. Of course, the problem with the Gandhian strategy has always been that you need the press to cover it that way. One reason the window-breaking in Seattle happened was that a majority of the people involved had been forest activists who had previously used exclusively Gandhian tactics—tree-sitting, chaining themselves to equipment to prevent the destruction of old-growth forests, etc. The police reaction was to use weaponized torture devices. So these activists had decided that Gandhian tactics don't work; they had to try something else. Now suddenly the Gandhian approach has been relatively successful. There has been this window, and it's interesting to ask yourself: "Why?"

RW: One of the tropes of #Occupy Liberty Plaza was that its participants were working together to build a small-scale model of what an emancipated society of the future might look like. This line of reasoning posits a very intimate connection between ethics (changing oneself) and politics (changing the world). Yet it is not difficult to see that most of the services provided at Liberty Plaza were still dependent on funding received from donations, which in turn came from the society of exchange: Capitalism. Since the means for the provision of these services can be viewed as parasitic upon the capitalist totality, does this in any way complicate or compromise the legitimacy of such allegedly prefigurative communities?

DG: I think the "capitalist totality" only exists in our imagination. I don't think there is a capitalist totality. I think there's capital, which is extraordinarily powerful, and represents a certain logic that is actually parasitic upon a million other social relations, without which it couldn't exist. I think Marx veered back and forth on this score himself. He did, of course, support the Paris Commune. He claimed that it was communism in action. So Marx wasn't against all experimental, prefigurative forms. He did say that the self-organization of the working class was "the motion of communism." One could make the argument, if you wanted to take the best aspects of Marx (though I think he was deeply ambivalent on this issue, actually) that he did accept the notion that certain forms of opposition could be acted out prefiguratively. On the other hand, it's certainly true that he did have profound arguments with the anarchists on this matter, when it came to practice.

I think that the real problem is Marx's Hegelianism. The totalizing aspect of Hegel's legacy is rather pernicious. One of the extremely important disagreements between Bakunin and Marx had to do with the proletariat, especially its most advanced sections, as the necessary agent of revolution, versus the peasants, the craftsmen, or the recently proletarianized. Marx's basic argument was that within the totality of capitalism, the proletariat are the only ones who are absolutely negated and the only ones who can liberate themselves through the absolute negation of the system. Everyone else is some kind of "petit-bourgeois." Once you're stuck with the idea of absolute negation, that opens the door to a number of quite dangerous conclusions. There is the danger of saying that all forms of morality are thrown out the window as no longer relevant. You no longer know what form of morality will work in a non-bourgeois society, thus justifying a lot of things that really can't be justified.

Indie folk singer Tea Leigh at the #Occupy site, holding a homemade sign.

The point I'm trying to make is that it's much more sensible to argue that all social and political possibilities exist simultaneously. Just because certain forms of cooperation are only made possible through the operation of capitalism, that consumer goods are capitalist, or that techniques of production are capitalist, no more makes them parasitical upon capitalism than the fact that factories can operate without governments. Some cooperation and consumer goods makes them socialist. There are multiple, contradictory logics of exchange, logics of action, and cooperative logics existing at all times. They are embedded in one another, in mutual contradiction, constantly in tension. As a result, there is a base from which one can make a critique of capitalism even at the same time that capitalism constantly subsumes all those alternatives to it. It's not like everything we do corresponds to a logic of capitalism. There are those who've argued that only 30–40% of what we do is subsumed under the logic of capitalism. Communism already exists in our intimate relations with each other on a million different levels, so it's a question of gradually expanding that and ultimately destroying the power of capital, rather than this idea of absolute negation that plunges us into some great unknown.

RW: There is an ambiguity in capital highlighted by Marx: That which presently enslaves us also potentially emancipates us. There is an emancipatory element to capital in the sense that it undermines more traditional modes of domination.

DG: That turns out to have been slightly overstated. Expropriation does take place through the wage relation. That certainly makes capitalism ideologically more effective. But I think one of the things that we've had to potentially learn since Marx's time is that the revolutionary potential of capital was far more limited than he imagined. It did not destroy all feudal relations; it's even kind of bringing them back. Capitalism did not drive the technological change that ultimately mechanizes away labor, such that capitalism falls into a crisis. It's even become technologically regressive at this point. So that romantic faith in the "all that is solid melts into air" aspect of capitalism turns out to have been a bit exaggerated. Capitalism was like that in its birth, but has become in a lot of ways almost a classically reactionary force.

RW: The version of anarchism that you subscribe to stresses this relationship of means to ends. You've written that "[anarchism] insists, before anything else, that one's means must be consonant with one's ends; one cannot create freedom through authoritarian means; in fact, as much as possible, one must oneself, in one's relations with one's friends and allies, embody the society one wishes to create."[4] It seems that you tend to endorse a "diversity of tactics" approach to direct action. If one insists upon a strict identity of means and ends, might not a violent course of action violate the principle of attaining a non-violent society?

DG: The idea of the identity of means and ends particularly applies to the way revolutionaries deal with one another. You have to make your own relations with your fellow comrades, to be an embodiment of the world you wish to create. Obviously, you don't have the liberty to make your relationship with the capitalists or the police into an embodiment of the world you wish to create. In fact, what I've found ethnographically is that this boundary has to be very clearly maintained. People used to criticize the global justice movement because it would use terms like "evil," but really what that word indicated was a borderline. There are certain institutions that we can at least deal with, because they're not fundamentally inimical to what we're trying to do. There are others that are irredeemable. You just can't talk to them. That's why we refused to deal with the WTO. "Evil" meant, "we can't extend that prefigurative logic to them." When dealing with people who are "in" the circle of our prefigurative practice, you have to assume everyone has good intentions. You give them the benefit of the doubt. Just as (and this is another anarchist principle) there's no way better to have someone act like a child than to treat him as a child, the only way to have someone act like an adult is to treat him as an adult. So you give them the benefit of the doubt in that regard, as well-intentioned and honest. But you have to have a cutoff point. Now, what happens at that cutoff is where all the debate takes place. What would one do in a free society if he saw people behaving in ways that were terribly irresponsible and destructive?

RW: While the democratic ideology it represents has certainly helped popularize the #Occupy movement, many have complained that within the consensus decision-making model, process ultimately becomes fetishized. The entire affair can be massively alienating, as those with the greatest endurance or the most leisure time can exert an inordinate amount of influence on the decision-making process. Another perceived problem with consensus decision-making is that only the most timid, tentative, or lukewarm proposals end up getting passed. Either that, or only extremely vague pronouncements against "greed" or "injustice" get passed, precisely because the meaning of these terms remains underdefined. The structure of consensus, passing proposals that most people agree upon already, tends to favor the most unambitious ideas, and seems to me an inherently conservative approach. Do these criticisms have any legitimacy with regard to the #Occupy movement?

DG: You can't create a democracy out of nothing without there being a lot of kinks. Societies that have been doing this over the long term have come up with solutions to these problems. That's why I like to talk about the example of Madagascar, where the state broke down, but you couldn't even really tell. People carried on as they had before, because they were used to making decisions by consensus. They'd been doing it for a thousand years. At the moment they have a military government. But in terms of the day-to-day operation of everyday life in a small community, everything's done democratically. It's a remarkable contrast to our own society, ostensibly more democratic in terms of our larger structures. When was the last time a group of twenty Americans (outside of #OWS) sat down and made a collective decision in an equal way?

Yes, you're right: you'll only get broad and tepid solutions if you bring everything to the General Assembly. That's why we have working groups, empower them to perform actions, and encourage them to form spontaneously. This is another of the key principles in dealing with consensus and decentralization. In an ideal world, the very unwieldiness of finding consensus in a large group should convince people not to bring decisions before this large group unless they absolutely have to. That's actually the way it's supposed to work out.

RW: To what extent do you think that the goal of politics should be freedom from the necessity of politics? Is ethics even possible in a world that hasn't been changed? Theodor Adorno remarked in *Minima Moralia* that "the wrong life cannot be lived rightly." In other words, can we even speak of ethics in the Aristotelian sense of the good life within the totality of the wrong? Or would this require a prior political transformation?

DG: I think that kind of totalizing logic ends up requiring a total rupture. Perhaps after the revolution we can *imagine* a rupture, whereby we now live in a totally different society, but we all know it's not going to happen through a total rupture. And if you really adopt that Hegelian logic, it begins to seem as if it's not possible at all. It almost necessarily leads to profoundly tragic conclusions and extremely quietist politics, as indeed it did with the Frankfurt School. I don't think that politics can be eliminated. And just as the perfect life cannot be achieved, the process of moving toward it *is* the good life.

I think that in terms of ethics that is the case. I can't imagine a world in which we aren't revolutionary ourselves, and revolutionizing our relations with one another, and revolutionizing our understanding of what is possible. That doesn't mean that we will not someday—perhaps someday soon, hopefully—achieve a world whereby the problems we have today will be the sort of things in stories told to scare children. But that doesn't mean we'll ever overcome the need to revolutionize ourselves. And the process by which that comes about *is* the good life.

RW: So does the movement itself become the goal? Must this process become an end in itself?

DG: It has to be. I mean, what else is there to life? | **P**

1. David Graeber, "The Shock of Victory," in *Revolutions in Reverse: Essays on Politics, Violence, Art, and Imagination* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2010), 17.
2. Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1851*, in *Collected Works, Volume 10: 1849–1851* (New York: International Publishers, 1977), 70. Available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/class-struggles-france/index.htm>.
3. See Platypus's discussion at the 2009 Left Forum, *Dialectics of Defeat: Toward a Theory of Historical Regression*. Available online at <http://www.archive.org/details/PlatypusDialecticsofDefeatLeftForum2009NYC041809>.
4. David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), 7.

Thirty years of counter-revolution An interview with Clyde Young

Spencer A. Leonard

Last summer, Spencer A. Leonard interviewed Clyde Young, a veteran member of the Revolutionary Communist Party. The interview was broadcast on June 31, 2011 on the radio show Radical Minds *on WHPK–FM Chicago. What follows is a shortened version of the edited transcript—a longer version is available online at <http://platypus1917.org/2012/02/01/interview-with-clyde-young/>.*

Spencer A. Leonard: Everyone hears a lot about the 1960s, the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, as well as the Students for a Democratic Society, the worldwide political upheavals of 1968, and the new social movements that gained strength in the late 1960s and 1970s. But there is a sort of embarrassed silence when it comes to the question of the New Left's turn towards Marxism in the 1970s, one example of which is your party, the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). Tell us about your experience of the 1970s and that of your party, and how you understand both today.

Clyde Young: I was a prisoner for most of the late 1960s. When I went in, I wasn't political, much less a radical. I was convicted of robbery and was sentenced to 20 years. Prison at that time was hell, though today it is even worse. While in prison, I was provoked by what was going on in the world outside, by the demonstration against the Vietnam War at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968, by the murder of the students at Kent State and Jackson State, and the many other events of those times. By the late 1960s, the Black Panther Party (BPP) had emerged on the scene; the BPP put revolution on the map in a way that it hadn't been before. They turned me on to the *Red Book* and Mao. It was around then that I began to read Marx, Lenin, and Mao. Revolution was surging throughout the Third World, and the Cultural Revolution in China was having a profound impact across the globe. It was in this context that I became a revolutionary and a communist, while serving time in prison. I could not then closely follow the debates taking place in the early years of the anti-revisionist communist movement, but I knew they were happening. I knew of the effort to build a new communist party, sharing the view held by many that the Communist Party, USA (CPUSA) had ceased to be revolutionary, if in fact it ever was.

In the anti-revisionist communist movement we were setting out like peasants, going off to war, and forging weapons from the tools we had at hand. We picked up Marxism and tried to apply it to the conditions that we found ourselves in. This is what the Revolutionary Union (RU) did, like many other organizations at that time. But, certainly, the 1960s were themselves a very profound upsurge, one that Bob Avakian and our party has repeatedly gone back to, to try to analyze whether or not a revolutionary situation could have developed in the 1960s. The conclusion is that a revolutionary situation could have developed, and if certain things had come together, and if a party had been formed at that time, then it is possible that a revolutionary situation would have emerged, and a revolution could have been made.

There was a very powerful movement at that time, driven forward by the national question. There were profound changes taking place in this country and throughout the world, with people in this country, black people, being uprooted from the South and going to the North, like my family and millions of others after World War II. This was a tremendous transformation. There was a push off of the land with the mechanization of agriculture and a strong pull into the cities. Of course, there was not a one-to-one relationship between those changes and what subsequently happened. But there did develop a revolutionary struggle in this country, the engine of which was the struggle of black people, and this was in unity with national liberation struggles throughout the world.

This is the context in which the RU and many others took up revolution and communism. At the time, millions of people were sympathetic to revolution. The RU, the predecessor of the RCP, did a tremendous amount of theoretical work. A lot of questions needed sorting out. There was a need for a deeper understanding of the reversal of the revolution in the Soviet Union. What was the path to liberation for black people, Puerto Ricans and other oppressed people in this country? These were not just academic issues.

SL: Addressing the revolutionary potential at the time of its formation, and how we think about that potential today, in the autumn of 1981, the chairman of the RCP, Bob Avakian, wrote in "Conquer the World":

> One of the things about which there is a great deal of confusion and therefore is a cause of demoralization to many revolutionaries—more than is objectively necessary—is the question of why the '60s movement receded into an ebb in the '70s, speaking in broad terms, and why and how the upsurge that characterized the '60s generally in the world and particularly in the "Third World" turned into its opposite not just in particular countries, but in many aspects internationally.[1]

Avakian then adds that it is important, indeed crucial, to make a "scientific summation of that [experience]." In this spirit, then, how does the RCP view the decade that gave it birth? How best to think about what now seems like the decline of political possibility in the 1970s, given the turn to Marxism, to the party question, and to more serious thinking, generally? What did it mean to organize and channel discontent in a revolutionary direction in such circumstances?

CY: It became very clear at a certain point that the movement was ebbing. When we talk about the 1960s, we are talking about the late 1960s into the early 1970s, when it reached its high point. As things moved further into the 1970s, particularly by 1973 or 1974, contradictions on a world level began to shift and change. What began to come to the fore was the conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union which in the 1980s took a very pronounced shape as things headed towards, as we analyzed, a third world war. This change began, as I have said, probably as early as 1973 and 1974. And there was a recognition on the part of the RU that if anything of importance was going to come out of that period, it was very important to form a vanguard organization, a vanguard party.

When I speak of a vanguard party, it is a matter of taking responsibility for the movement as a whole, it's not an ego thing or anything of that sort. A hallmark of the RCP (and the RU before it) has been to always proceed from the question: "How do you make revolution in a country like this one as part of the worldwide revolutionary struggle?" That has been our point of reference from the beginning. Seeking out ways and means, and looking for the openings in which a revolution could be made. At the same time, another hallmark of our organization has been to approach every question scientifically. So, again, what was going on at the beginning of 1970s—and we made a lot of analysis of this in "Conquer the World" and in *America in Decline*[2]— was that the contradiction between imperialism and the oppressed nations was receding as the main factor in the world. And what was emerging in the mid-1970s was a world characterized by contention between the Soviet social-imperialists and the U.S.; this contradiction began to define the world situation much more than the contradiction between imperialism and oppressed nations.

SL: Tell me a bit about the significance of forming a party in those years. What motivated the constitution of a vanguard party at that time and what was hoped it might allow for? What kind of action, what kind of consciousness, did it facilitate?

CY: The revolutionary forces emerging out of the 1960s had developed a deep understanding of Marxism. As I said earlier, in the beginning, we were like peasants marching off to war, taking up the tools that we had at hand. There were some things that could be drawn from the international communist movement, but the CPUSA had become a revisionist party; it had changed colors in essence from red to white. So there was a certain amount of re-learning to be done, a clarification of issues in terms of what was a revolutionary line and what was not. This was not an abstract process, but turned on vitally important questions, like the emancipation of black people. How do black people get free? What is the correct analysis of their condition? If there is to be a revolution, if you are serious about that, there needs to be a vanguard party. We learned that from Lenin and from Lenin's *What is to be Done?* We knew that we needed not just a party of average workers, but a party of professional revolutionaries. And as the movement ebbed in the 1970s there was a recognition that if the party was not formed, a lot of what came out of the 1960s might be lost. I think this was the motivation behind the RU reaching out to various new communist forces, to try to pull them into a much more organized expression. In 1974, in particular, Bob Avakian and the RU led a nation-wide, party-building tour to unite Marxist-Leninist and Maoist forces into a single vanguard party.

SL: In 2008, your party published a manifesto entitled *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage,*[3] which says the following about the significance of the defeat of the Chinese Revolution in the wake of the death of Chairman Mao:

> We should not underestimate this defeat in China, and everything it has brought forth, everything the imperialists have done on that basis, and have built on that. China, and everything it represented for the international proletariat and the world proletarian revolution—to lose that after the Cultural Revolution [in China], after millions and millions of people went through that upheaval, and yes, a significant process of remolding their world outlook—this is something we're still coming to terms with, both in objective reality and in our own thinking.[4]

Explain the significance of the Chinese Revolution for the RCP and your party's understanding of what transpired in the 1970s and how that shapes our situation today.

CY: In the 1960s and 1970s, China was a beacon of revolution. This was the period of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), a revolution within the revolution to prevent the restoration of capitalism and

"Young" continues below

Young, continued from above

to further advance on the socialist road to communism. It was an unprecedented struggle that advanced revolution to the highest point yet in the whole history of the international communist movement. There had been the Paris Commune, and there had been the revolution in the Soviet Union. Learning from those experiences, through the GPCR, Mao led the revolution to the highest pinnacle that has been achieved.

And then in 1976, when Mao died, that revolution was reversed. There's a lot that we can get into about that, and, in fact, I'd refer people to the document that you referenced, *Communism: the Beginning of a New Stage, A Manifesto from the RCP.* The loss of China was *devastating!* I came to political life because of the Black Panther Party, and what they did to spread Mao's *Red Book*. I studied the *Red Book* and subsequently read many things by Marx, Lenin, and Mao, and I became a Maoist. And a lot of people in this country, and all over the world, became Maoists in the 1960s, not because somehow this was part of a Third World revolution (though some may have viewed it that way), but because this was a *communist revolution* in motion. This was a laboratory of communism, a socialist society in transition to communism. This was extraordinarily important. And the reversal of that revolution was a devastating blow.

And the question was, were you going to understand why that happened, or were you just going to turn away from it in one form or another? So it has had a big impact, it has had an impact in lowering sights, it has had an impact in lowering ambitions in terms of what's possible. Is it possible anymore to make a revolution in the world or in a country like this one? Yes, it is! So the loss of China was devastating and continues to be devastating. And not only that, what has come behind it has been an attack on communism, thirty years of counter-revolution against communism. So this is the atmosphere in which we have been working. But what we are doing is far from being demoralized and defeated. These are some of the things that we fought out in the Cultural Revolution in our party, where some people were not only feeling the effects of the loss of China, but also feeling the ebbing of the movement of the 1960s, and they had given up on revolution, settling into an alternative lifestyle. The Cultural Revolution was a struggle between two fundamentally antagonistic lines: the developing body of work, method, and approach of Bob Avakian, in contrast to the "official" line of the party, published in documents and publications on the one hand, and a "revisionist package" on the other, as discussed in *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage*.

SL: The RCP is the only organization I know of actively grappling with the issue of the continuity and discontinuity in the tradition, going back to Marx and Engels, and beyond them, to the rise of the workers' movement and the still earlier struggle for human emancipation of the 17th and 18th centuries. It is very difficult for many people to imagine revolutionary emancipation today. No doubt that is related to the incomprehensibility of history.

CY: That is a very good point. This is one of the things that we talk about in terms of the contributions that Avakian has made to communist theory, which need to be promoted right now. People need to know what he has been bringing forward as a source of hope on a scientific basis.[5] His work is both a continuation, and a rupture with, communist theory up to now, with the continuation being the main aspect. If you look at "Conquer the World," Avakian himself has said that "Conquer the World" was an initial epistemological break with certain aspects of weaknesses in the international communist movement. In particular, the question, "Do you go for the truth or not?" Or do you just go for "political truth?" This is a rupture with what has been a tendency in terms of going for political truth and not dealing with the truth of things.[6]

SL: The RCP understands the 1970s as a moment of ebb in the revolution, but also, potentially, as a moment of summation of the first century of Marxist revolution. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries within the key Marxist parties of the Second International—the German and Russian Social Democratic parties—there occurred what is known as "the revisionist debate" in which revolutionary Marxists such as Kautsky, Luxemburg, and Lenin debated Bernstein and other reformists who emphasized the achievement possible within the prevailing social order. They argued for ongoing reform to accumulate gains for the working class, a view Bernstein summarized with the phrase, "the movement is everything, the goal [of socialism] is nothing." Does Avakian have this precedent in mind when he talks about the prevailing revisionism on the Left today? What sort of battle does he think he is fighting after the end of "the first phase of communism"?

CY: That is a very important question. The theoretical battles that you mentioned did not occur in the abstract. They were life and death struggles, and that is why they were fought so fiercely. I would again direct people's attention to *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage – A Manifesto from the RCP, USA*. There, the crossroads facing the communist movement at this point in history are bluntly posed: "vanguard of the future, or residue of the past?" These are the stakes in which people take up and grapple with Bob Avakian's new synthesis of communism, which is the theoretical framework for the advance to a new stage of communist revolution. | **P**

Transcribed by Pac Pobric

1. Bob Avakian, "Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will," <www.revcom.us/avakian/index.html# 1981>.
2. Raymond Lotta, *America in Decline: An Analysis of the Developments Toward War and Revolution, in the U.S. and Worldwide, in the 1980s* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1984).
3. *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage: A Manifesto from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2009).
4. Continuing this statement, Avakian makes a very important point:

> If you add to this the whole 'death of communism' phenomenon, and the constant barrage of anti-communism and abuse and slander heaped from all directions and in all forms on this GPCR (The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China), on the Chinese Revolution and socialism there, and in fact on all of the experience of socialist society and the dictatorship of the proletariat; if you think about the effect of all that, and you are a materialist and you apply dialectics, it is very difficult to think that we are immune from the effects of all that and that it only influences people outside the Party. Even in our thinking and our souls, if you want to use that term, in our heart of hearts, don't we have questions about whether we were wrong about all this: Why did we lose? If we were so right, and if what we're for is so correct, why did it end up this way? I don't think there are very many comrades who can say they haven't had those questions agonizing within them, probably more than once. *We have an answer to those things, but you have to dig for that answer and you have to keep on digging–and you have to be scientific. You have to go to materialism and dialectics*. [Emphasis added.]

Fulfilling a great need, this is precisely the kind of digging that Avakian did after the reversal of the revolution in China.

5. See *Communism: The Beginning of a New State* (29):

> This new synthesis, in its many dimensions... has put revolution and communism on a more solid scientific foundation. As Avakian himself has emphasized: "[I]t is very important not to underestimate the significance and potential positive force of this new synthesis: criticizing and rupturing with significant errors and shortcomings while bringing forward and *recasting* what has been positive from the historical experience of the international communist movements and the socialist countries that have so far existed; in a real sense *reviving*—on a new, more advanced basis—the *viability* and, yes, the *desirability* of a whole new and radically different world, and placing this on an ever firmer foundation of materialism and dialectics.... So, we should not underestimate the potential of this as a source of hope and of daring on a solid scientific foundation.

6. See Raymond Lotta, Nayi Duniya, and K.J.A., "Alain Badiou's 'Politics of Emancipation': A Communism Locked Within the Confines of the Bourgeois World," <www.demarcations-journal.org/issue01/demarcations_badiou.html#footnoteref1>:

> "Class truth" refers to the view, which has had considerable currency in the international communist movement, that truth—especially in the realm of the social sciences—is not objective, but rather specific and relative to different classes, i.e., the bourgeoisie has its truth and the proletariat has its truth. But what is true is objectively true: It either corresponds to, or does not correspond to, reality in this motion and development. "Class truth" overlaps with the erroneous idea that people of proletarian background have a special purchase on the truth by virtue of their social position. But truth is truth no matter who articulates it; and getting at the truth, for proletarians, as well as for people of other social and class origins, requires the grasp and application of a scientific approach to society and the world.

Korsch, continued from page 2

ever more Bakuninist traits into it. Marxism after the Inaugural Address was badly suited to this, even for the most experienced Talmudists. More suitable propositions in the early Marxist works had to therefore be discovered.

Thus from the obvious fact that, in many respects, Marxism of the second half of the nineteenth century has a different character than that of its first years, a preference for primitive Marxism emerges in opposition to the later, more mature Marxism.

To be sure, this conception can indeed not lay claim to universal validity, but for Russia it becomes psychologically understandable.

However, whoever accepts it in Germany, and even exaggerates it to a point where primitive Marxism is the only true Marxism, and the more developed Marxism, signifies a debasement and impoverishment, only shows his intellectual dependency and uncritical reliance on foreign models from a backward milieu, his incomprehension of the conditions of proletarian class struggle in more developed capitalist countries, and his own boyish callowness. | **P**

Translated by Ben Lewis

1. Kautsky's review was first published in *Die Gesellschaft: Internationale Revue für Sozialismus und Politik* (Berlin: Dietz, 1924), 306-314.
2. See also David Black's response to Cutrone in *Platypus Review* 18 (December 2009), online at <http://platypus1917.org/category/pr/issue18/>, and Cutrone's subsequent comments in *Platypus Review* 20 (February 2010), online at <http://platypus1917.org/category/pr/issue-20-pr/>.
3. Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1923/marxism-philosophy.htm>.
4. Marx to Engels, 4 November 1864, available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1864/letters/64_11_04.htm>.
5. Karl Kautsky, Preface to Friedrich Engels, *Die Inauguraladresse der Internationalen Arbeiterassoziation*, ed. Kautsky (Stuttgart, 1922), 11.
6. The phrase "leading Marxist party in Europe" does not appear in the translated version on the Marxists Internet Archive.
7. Kautsky is formally correct on the history here. Yet he actually dodges the main issue at hand. Engels's main objection to the draft of the Erfurt programme was that it did not clearly state the aim of German Social Democracy: the democratic republic. This democratic republic was conceived as the culmination of the political demands of the minimum program and thus the "form" of working class rule, or the dictatorship of the proletariat. The fact remains that Kautsky's own draft did not address this central point either. For a discussion of Kautsky's changing conception of working class rule throughout his career, see Lewis, Ben, "Kautsky: from Erfurt to Charlottenburg" in *Weekly Worker* 889, available online at <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/article.php?article_id=1004610>.
8. Korsch attempts to deal with this apparent "misunderstanding" in a 1930 article written in response to Kautsky and other critics of his *Marxism and Philosophy* . Entitled "The Present State of the Problem of *Marxism and Philosophy*—An Anti-Critique," it is available online at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/19xx/anti-critique.htm>.

A destroyer of vulgar-Marxism Book Review: Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (Leipzig: C.L. Hirschfeld, 1923)

Karl Kautsky

Karl Kautsky's 1924 review of Karl Korsch's extremely controversial "Marxism and Philosophy" (1923) appears below in English for the first time.[1] *It is hoped that other reviews of "Marxism and Philosophy" will also be made available in the very near future, not least by leading German communists such as August Thalheimer. Given the highly disputed theoretical legacy of both Kautsky and Korsch, the publication of this review will doubtless add to the debate on the idea of a "coming of age" of Marxism in the late 1860s. For an earlier discussion of Korsch's book, see Chris Cutrone's review of the 2008 reprint* Marxism and Philosophy *released by Monthly Review Press, in* Platypus Review 15 *(September 2009), available online at <http://platypus1917.org/category/pr/issue15/>.*[2]

We find the entire quintessence of this highly philosophical essay compressed into a small sentence of a footnote, where the author explicitly states: "During the entire (!) *second half of the nineteenth century* the debasement and impoverishment of the Marxist theory into vulgar-Marxism gradually set in" (28).

We must not assume that this is an incidental slip of the pen. On page 61 Korsch asserts once again: "We see that the second half of the nineteenth century did not merely *vulgarize* Marxism." The entire work is dedicated to proving that this is really the case. The "debasement and impoverishment" of Marxism set in while Marx and Engels were still alive, during the period in which the First International was founded and *Capital* was written. Should Marx and Engels themselves bear guilt for this debasement?

Korsch does not quite say this. He instructs us: In its first epoch, up until the 1848 revolution and its demise, Marxism was a "theory—saturated through and through with philosophical thought—of social revolution, comprehended and actualized as a living totality" (29–30).

But then came the "practically completely un-revolutionary epoch, which essentially filled the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe" (30).

Unfortunately, this also rubbed off on the works published by Marx and Engels in this epoch. However, the change in language that resulted from this did not equally signify a change in their thought.

> It is only to the superficial glance that a pure theory of thought seems to have displaced the practice of the revolutionary will. This revolutionary will is latent, yet present, in every sentence of Marx's work and erupts again and again in every decisive passage, especially in the first volume of *Capital*. One need only think of the famous seventh section of Chapter 24 on the historical tendency of capital accumulation. (32)[3]

We "epigones" are not supposed to have paid attention to this subtext of Marx and Engels's works in the second half of the nineteenth century. Hence our extraordinarily debased and simplified vulgar Marxism (26).

I personally am falsely attributed with deliberately distorting Marx for this purpose. For in my Preface to the reprint of the *Inaugural Address* of 1864 (1922), I "tellingly" left out a sentence from a letter I quote written by Marx to Engels. This sentence states, "that it will take time before the revival of the movement allows the old boldness of language to be used."[4]

For Korsch, it was necessary for me to omit this sentence in order to "create the opportunity… to play off the Inaugural Address of 1864, which was given in a more cautious tone, against the fiery-flowing style of the Manifesto of 1847/48 and against the 'illegal agents of the 3rd International'" (31).

In reality I have not played off the Inaugural Address against the "illegal agents of the Third International." In the Preface to which I alluded earlier, I came to speak about this in an entirely different context, namely in relation to a "confidential communication" about Bakunin, which in 1870 Marx addressed to the German party-committee, and in which he exhibited the "old boldness of language" in a completely unhampered manner. Especially today, this communication is of utmost, topical interest.

Marx explained why he held England to be the great lever of proletarian revolution. The English possessed all the material preconditions for the great revolution. What they lacked was "the spirit of generalization," i.e., a sense for theory, and "revolutionary passion."

At any rate, I cited these passages extensively in my Preface to the Inaugural Address supposedly because I did not want to let Marx's "revolutionary passion" of that time come to light.

The "confidential communication" fell into the hands of the Leipzig public prosecutor following a house search, and was used against August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht at their high treason trial in Leipzig. As against Bakuninism, Marx said in the communication, among other things, that the General Council of the International was choosing to put "important and *unseen* activity in place of the sheer howls of the local crier [*Marktschreierei*]." From this, the public prosecutor concluded that the General Council was conducting underground, and therefore illegal, work. On this I remark in my Preface that the public prosecutor had falsified things, because here "unseen" work is not in contradiction to legal work, but to loud mouth-ism. "Illegal, underground work does not however preclude loud mouth-ism, rather it is often closely bound up with it. There are no noisier bawlers than the illegal agents of the Third International."[5]

Does Korsch really believe that I would have lost the opportunity to deride the loud mouth-ism of the Third International if I had shared with my readers the little sentence about the "old boldness of language?"

Indeed, directly after the sentence I cited from my Preface above, are the words: "The Inaugural Address and the Communist Manifesto are born of the *same spirit*." In this way I seek to "play off the Inaugural Address of 1864, made in a more cautious tone, against the fiery-flowing style of the Manifesto of 1847/48."

Certainly I noted that, "for all the agreement on the fundamentals," the Inaugural Address "exhibits an entirely different character than the Communist Manifesto." This change relates however not only to the "fiery flowing style," as Korsch puts it. That was entirely trivial. As I say in the Preface:

> The standpoint Marx took in 1864 was the same as that of 1847. But the situation had completely changed…. Thus in 1864 Marx deemed it appropriate to speak in a different language than that of seventeen years earlier. In those seventeen years he had learned an enormous amount. This was the period in which *Capital* was written. Given this, he not only had to change his language, but also many of his views. (Preface, 12–13)

Thus, in 1850 Engels (and probably Marx, too) held the ten-hour day in a capitalist state to be impossible. In the Inaugural Address he observes briefly its deep-reaching effects as that of a recognized institution. Besides the ten-hour day, he praised co-operatives of production, if they were developed at a national level and with national means. Thus there were substantial changes in *opinion*, not just language. However, Korsch is not concerned with these, but merely with the "fiery-flowing style."

How the analysis I mention above would have become impossible if I had quoted the sentence about the "old boldness of language" remains Korsch's secret.

What merely appears to him as the moderation of fiery-flowing style, is what, in his analysis, the "epigones" have turned into a full "deformation" of Marxism, about which Marx and Engels themselves would have been highly indignant. The regression becomes clearly visible if we compare Marx's statutes of the First International to the programs of the Socialist Parties of Central and Western Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, and especially to that of the German Social Democratic Party, the leading Marxist Party in Europe.[6] It is well known how bitterly critical Marx and Engels were of the fact that German Social Democracy made almost entirely reformist demands in the political as well as the cultural and ideological fields in their Gotha (1875) and Erfurt (1891) programmes (36).

Yet this fact does not actually appear to be "well known." To me, at least, it is entirely new. I am surprised to learn that in 1875 German Social Democracy was "the leading Marxist party in Europe." Before Korsch, party history had accepted that in 1875 there was no Marxist party in the whole of Europe. The first socialist journals that stood on Marxist ground (not counting those published by Marx himself), the Zurich *Sozialdemokrat* and the Stuttgart *Neue Zeit*, were only founded during the anti-Socialist laws (1878–1890).

Only with the existence of both of these publications can we speak of a Marxist school. It took some time before this school made the majority of the party a Marxist one. The Erfurt programme evinced this progress.

Here too it is in no way "well known" to me that Engels had spoken of the Erfurt programme in a "bitterly critical" way. Korsch of course points to Engels's "Comments on the Erfurt draft programme." But Korsch's glowing hatred of the "debasement" and "simplification" of Marxism unfortunately prevented him from reading these comments closely, otherwise he would have noticed that they are not directed at my draft,[7] which then was accepted by the congress, but at a previous one. Not only did Engels not reject my draft, he even recommended its adoption.

The other big socialist party in "Central and Western Europe," whose founding Marx and Engels were still alive to see, was the French Labor Party of the Marxists Lafargue and Guesde. Its program was written by Marx himself (1880). This does not seem to be "well known" to Korsch either, otherwise he would hardly have dared to state that, when comparing the socialist party programs of Western and Central Europe with the statues of the International, the "deformation" of Marxism by its "epigones" clearly comes to light.

Korsch follows the same method of writing party history in his entire work. Thus he notes on page 6:

> Most of the philosophizing Marxists (Kantian, Dietzgenist, and Machian Marxists) have since then (since 1914) proven in word and deed that, not only in their philosophy, but, as a necessary consequence, in their political theory and practice as well, they have in reality not been able to detach themselves from the standpoint of bourgeois society.

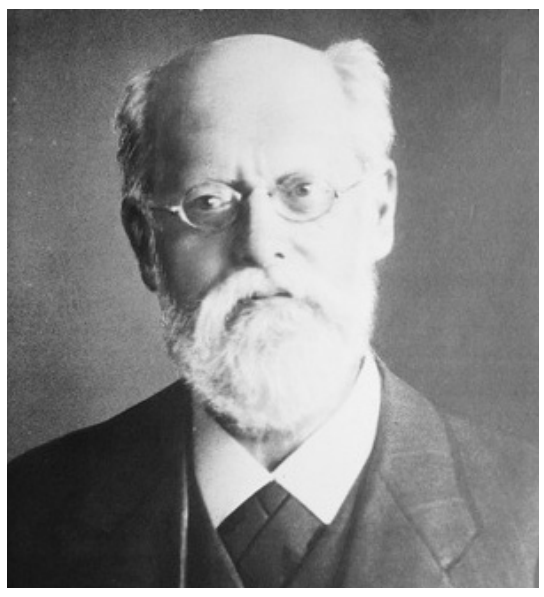
The "bourgeois-reformist character of Kantian-Marxism" appears so obvious to Korsch that he considers it unnecessary to put forward any evidence. Back in 1908 Lenin had already said everything necessary about Mach, and the fact that Dietzgen must lead to bourgeois-reformist thinking is proved by his son. Thus the Machian Fritz Adler, and even Max Adler, who sympathizes with Bolshevism on many points, are "bourgeois-reformists." Korsch skips any evidence for this. However, the fact that the elder Dietzgen, the contemporary of Marx and Engels, produced nothing but bourgeois-reformism will very much astonish those of his followers, who in the Netherlands are amongst the most radical communists.

Following these achievements in the field of party history, one can imagine the faithfulness with which Korsch depicts the views of the "vulgar-Marxists," who are condemned by him lock and barrel. One small example will suffice.

With utmost assurance, Korsch claims that the "Marxist epigones" explained the materialist conception of history in a way in which only real facts are behind economic views, but behind other social forms of consciousness there is not much, or nothing at all.

> Many vulgar-Marxists to this day have never, even in theory, admitted that intellectual life and forms of social consciousness are comparable realities. Quoting certain statements by Marx, and especially Engels, they simply explain away the intellectual (ideological) structures of society as a mere pseudo-reality that only exists in the minds of ideologues as error, imagination, and illusion, devoid of a genuine object … This can be formulated concisely, with only a slight caricature, by saying that for vulgar-Marxism there are three degrees of reality: First, the economy, which in the last instance is the only objective and totally non-ideological reality; Second, Law and the State, which are already somewhat less real because they are clad in ideology, and third, pure ideology, which is objectless and totally unreal ("utter nonsense"). (54–5)

He is quite right: utter nonsense. Korsch places this phrase in quotation marks, as though he were quoting a "vulgar-Marxist." Unfortunately, he forgets to even point out from whom amongst us he has discovered this "utter nonsense." Following the method so beloved to him, he also considers this point of view to be so "well known" that it requires no evidence.



Photograph of Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), date unknown, Library of Congress, Bain Collection.

He repeatedly chafes at Rudolph Hilferding, whose *Finance Capital* he also counts amongst the products of "debased," "simplified," "reformist" Marxism. Hilferding differentiates very well between the method of Marxism and its results. He notes how, today, these results lead to socialism; therefore this method is rejected by the champions of the establishment. "Only in this sense is it (Marxism) the science of the proletariat and the opponent of bourgeois political economy, since it holds unflinchingly to the claim made by every science about the objective universality of its conclusions." Korsch counts this very important sentence of Hilferding amongst the pernicious "deformations" of Marxism. How can a class fighter lay claim "to universal validity" (here, meaning standing above classes) for his theorem? At best he may do so out of "practical-tactical considerations for the benefit of the proletarian class" (Footnote, p. 34).

Thus proletarian science, as understood by Korsch, is not only characterized by the fact that it looks at the world from the proletarian point of view, but also that it lays no claim to the universal validity of its propositions. They are only to be correct for the proletariat! We may at best claim their universal validity for the purpose of agitation!

For Korsch, Marxism is nothing but a theory of social revolution (62). In reality, one of Marxism's most outstanding characteristics is the conviction that the social revolution is only possible under certain conditions, thus only in certain countries and times. The communist sect, to which Korsch belongs (the German Communist Party, or KPD–BL), has entirely forgotten this. For them, the social revolution is always possible, everywhere, under all conditions.

Were Bolshevism not of this out-and-out un-Marxist point of view, it would be impossible to say that Marxism is one with the social revolution. In what way shall the materialist conception of history only hold true for the social revolution? Was this conception of history not won through examining previous history, all of which comes before the social revolution? And will it not also apply to the time after the social revolution, when there is no longer a proletariat?

It is thus entirely absurd to claim that it stands in contradiction to the theory of class struggle, if Marxism claims the universal validity of its theorem also for the other classes, not just for the proletariat, and that Marxism is limited to the stage of the social revolution.

However, Korsch has compelling proof of just how ruinous the proposition of the universal validity of Marxist theory is. For him, whoever accepts the universal validity of Marxism, opens the way for those who draw anti-socialist consequences from the Marxist method. "Hilferding can see from the example of such Marxists as Paul Lensch, that this sort of 'scientific science' (!) certainly also allows itself to be used 'quite well' against socialism" (34).

Again, this argument shows Korsch to be a great expert on party history. To other people it is "well known" that, until 1914, Lensch was not Hilferding's most faithful follower, but Rosa Luxemburg's—the same Luxemburg whom Korsch on page 39 celebrates as the one who had regenerated Marxist theory and theoretically destroyed vulgar-Marxism in Germany.

Even the most revolutionary views do not provide a safeguard against renegacy—not even Korsch's.

And there are a few parallels between Korsch and Lensch. Both share, for example, an enthusiasm for dictatorship. However, they do not agree on who that dictator is: One prefers Hugo Stinnes, the other Lenin. But the antagonism between both dictators is diminishing from day to day, the Stinnes-ists and the Leninists are already doing fairly good business with each other and their rapprochement is promoted in no small part by their hatred of their common enemy: "vulgar-Marxism."

Yet this is not to say that Lensch's and Korsch's views on dictatorship are entirely the same. In this respect, Korsch succeeded in taking the crown and outbidding both Stinnes and Lenin—even Mussolini! Thus he explains at the end of his work:

> Just as political action is not rendered unnecessary by the economic action of a revolutionary class, so intellectual action is not rendered unnecessary by either political or economic action (are both of these actions not intellectual as well, or does Korsch consider politics as unthinking action? Kautsky). On the contrary it (intellectual action) must be carried through to the end in theory and practice, as revolutionary scientific criticism and agitating work before the seizure of state power by the proletariat, and as scientific organization and *ideological dictatorship* after the seizure of state power (70).

Dictatorship in the realm of ideas—until now this had not occurred to anyone, not even [Comintern leader Grigory] Zinoviev or [Cheka founder Felix] Dzerzhinsky! Deep insight is shown by the fact that Korsch only deems scientific critique necessary up to the seizure of state power by the "revolutionary proletariat," that is, by him and his friends.

Afterwards it becomes frowned upon. The critique, which is leveled against him, is a crime worthy of death. Woe the vulgar-Marxists after the seizure of state power by the communists, namely after the installment of "ideological dictatorship!"[8]

Unfortunately we do not find out what this ideological dictatorship will look like. Perhaps all of the country's thought-apparatuses should be expropriated and placed at the disposal of the dictator, whose directives they will have to follow?

It is clear what we "vulgar-Marxists" think about this. Korsch himself asserts that, according to his understanding of vulgar-Marxism, all higher ideology is "utter nonsense." So he will have to admit that dictatorship in ideology for us can be nothing but the height of nonsense.

However, there is a deeper meaning to the childish game presented to us by the communist "theoretician." It encompasses a series of absurdities, all of which are caused by him. But he shares the crux of his outlook in common with the entire communist doctrine. All theoreticians of communism delight in drawing on primitive Marxism, on the early works, which Marx and Engels wrote before they turned thirty, up until the revolution of 1848 and its aftermath of 1849 and 1850. Apart from a few isolated sentences, the communist theoreticians have little use for Marx and Engels's later works, especially *Capital*. That is not a coincidence. In the early works we already see the paws of the Marxist lions, the greatness of their method. But these works arrive at a number of conclusions, at individual views and demands, which Marx and Engels themselves later deemed out of date. It is precisely these obsolete findings that particularly enrapture Bolshevism, and which it holds up as true Marxism against the later "debased," "simplified," "deformed" Marxism "of the second half of the nineteenth century."

When Marx and Engels wrote their first works, they stood before a Germany that was economically backward, like Russia today, and was not yet politically able to overcome absolutism. This is also like Russia today, where an absolutist regime still enslaves the masses, even though this regime was briefly interrupted, and even though this absolutism today assumes a different form. No wonder that the products of revolutionary German thought of the 1840s particularly encourage a party, which arose as a revolutionary party in absolutist Russia, and which wants to continue to live up to its revolutionary birth certificate at least in theory, even though in practice it became unfaithful to this a long time ago.

Thus, after the revolution, Marx came to England, the classical land of capitalism, became familiar with its capitalist mechanism in detail, and observed the effects of a free press and public mass organizations of the proletariat. The awakening of the workers and the weakening of the absolutist governments in continental Europe, especially in Germany and France, suggested to him the attempt to graft the mass organizations and the fight for the rights they needed with the International, and to bring these into close contact with the English workers' movement in order to prepare the workers' struggle for political power. When finally, from 1870, a new France and a new Germany emerged, in which the rise of the working class and its conquest of political rights became irresistible, Marx, and with him Engels, perfected the Marxist method and expanded their theory of class struggle in a way that made it applicable not only to the stage of revolution, but also for non-revolutionary times. This expansion of theory above and beyond the *Communist Manifesto* was initiated by the Inaugural Address (1864) and concluded with Engels's Preface to the republication of Marx's *Class Struggles in France* (1895).

This expansion of theory naturally claims universal validity for all countries. Yet precisely from the Marxist point of view it is understandable that for those Russian socialists who, like the Mensheviks, took as their starting point Marxism as a whole, did not deal merely in the obsolete aspects of primitive Marxism. This theoretical superiority became an element of practical weakness against those socialists who adapted the West European conceptions of socialism to Russia's unique character and thus created a national-Russian socialism, like Herzen and Bakunin, and, following them, the populists and social-revolutionaries. In a relentless struggle against these elements, the Mensheviks brought Marxism to the Russian proletariat. But it was not the Mensheviks that were the beneficiaries of the fruits of their arduous labor, but the Bolsheviks. As long as the main focus of Bolshevism remained in exile, it was affected by the theoretical superiority of Menshevism, from which it sprang. The stronger the position of the Bolshevik organization in Russia, the more it succumbed to the influence of the Russian milieu, and the more it sought to adapt Marxist theory, whose popularity it exploited, to the specifically Russian practical needs of the moment, to incorporate

"Korsch" continues on page 4