THE DECLINE OF THE LEFT IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Toward a Theory of Historical Regression

On April 18, 2009, the Platypus Affiliated Society conducted the following panel discussion at the Left Forum Conference at Pace University in New York City. The panel was organized around four significant moments in the progressive diremption of theory and practice over the course of the 20th century: 2001 (Spencer Leonard), 1968 (Atiya Khan), 1933 (Richard Rubin), and 1917 (Chris Cutrone). The following is an edited transcript of the introduction to the panel by Benjamin Blumberg, the panelists' prepared statements, and the Q&A session that followed. The Platypus Review *encourages interested readers to view the complete video recording of the event at www.archive.org/details/Platypus-DialecticsofDefeatLeftForum2009NYC041809.*

Introduction

Benjamin Blumberg

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY, as Platypus does, that the Left is dead? And what does it mean to speak of the history of the Left postmortem? Our task is to address these questions.

First, we might consider how these questions shaped the formation of Platypus's ideas and activities. Platypus began as a reading group held at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. This group was brought together by a shared realization that the social and cultural theory of Theodor Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research contained the legacy of the revolutionary Marxism of the antecedent period. This realization was coupled with another: To claim that Adorno's theoretical ideas were the legacy of the practical politics of Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky put Platypus at odds in numerous respects with the existing Left.

In the present, the Left has turned away from the question of how the defeated revolutionary Marxism of the first and second decades of the twentieth century continued through mid-century in the Frankfurt School. For the Left, Frankfurt School Critical Theory is seen as a justification for abstention hiding behind a critique of participation, whereas the prevailing conception of revolutionary Marxism is of a ruthless actionism, in which the ends justify any means. Beneath these one-sided conceptions lies a greater problem, which has existed openly since at least Marx's time, that theory and practice appear counterpoised and yet inseparable. Also since Marx's time, the Left is best identified as the transformative force in history that directly addresses this problem, although it often does so blindly and ineffectually. This problem of the relation of theory and practice was at the center of Marx's politics, and the best of the Marxist tradition, up to Adorno and the Frankfurt School.

The failure to address the relationship between Critical Theory and revolutionary Marxism evinces a deeper failing of the contemporary Left. The need to address the problem of relating theory to practice has been nullified by turning theory and practice into two oppositional camps. Even when theory and practice are said to coexist, it is apparent that this simply means that one is subordinate to the other.

By falsely resolving the problem of theory and practice the Left has relinquished the defining feature of its politics and ceased to be the Left at all. This has profound effects on the development of the history of capitalism in which the Left traditionally has acted as a transformative catalyst Because its politics no longer mediate theory and practice, the Left has begun to decompose. Following Adorno, Platypus calls this process historical regression.

Therefore, the beginnings of Platypus's intellectual investigation posed the political task of critiquing and eventually overcoming the existing Left, which had become willfully oblivious of the necessity of working through the problem of relating theory to practice. However, this task is not accomplished by merely identifying it. The existing Left's neglect of the problem has led to the accumulation of layers of rationalizations and excuses for carrying on as if nothing were wrong. This has buried the problem deep beneath the surface of today's Leftist politics. Platypus exists to clear away the sediment. The group was founded in 2006 to foster debate and discussion on the Left concerning the question: How has it come to pass that the Left is dead, and how might we, in this situation, make good on the slogan "Long live the Left"?

2001

Spencer A. Leonard

THE ABANDONMENT OF EMANCIPATORY POLITICS in our time has not been, as past revolutionary thinkers may have feared, an abandonment of revolution in favor of reformism. Rather, because the revolutionary overcoming of capital is no longer imagined, reformism too is dead. As the task of achieving human society beyond capital has been abandoned, nothing worthy of the name of politics takes its place, nor could it. The project of freedom has now altogether receded from view. For, while bourgeois thinkers like Hegel were no doubt mistaken in their identification of capital with freedom, they nevertheless grasped that the question of freedom only poses itself with reference to the capital problematic. Realizing for the first time a noble savagery that never was before, contemporary humanity is sunk in the immediacy of second nature.

The year 2001 itself arrived late and now it, too, has slipped into the past. Still, it retains its significance as the moment when the light of freedom was definitively eclipsed, when mankind ceased to be able to discern whether or not night had fallen. For, since 2001, all recognize that we now live in what the Marxist thinker and critic of the New Left, Moishe Postone, has termed the "time of helplessness" (or, as the Spartacist League more colorfully describes it, the "senile dementia of post-Marxism.") Though time continues to pass and, in some sense, continues to intensify, history—understood as the time when the tasks of freedom can still be performed—seems to have come to an abrupt, late-afternoon halt. This has caught most on the Left unawares, though one suspects a widespread relief among many that the task might finally be abandoned for good and all.

Accumulated into the year 2001 is what precedes it in time, a mass of folly and wasted opportunities that may be disaggregated into three constituent moments. Each of these three stages in the "death of the Left" conveniently ends in the digit 9: 1979, 1989, and 1999. Each represents a stage in a process of retrogression that culminates in what is, after all, a crisis far more portentous than the current economic crisis that so dominates our discourse: the crisis of the Left, whose prospects for recovery are, at this stage, very grim. Rather than a crisis date in the history of the Left, 2001 is therefore the year in which the crisis of history became clear, though few noticed, and when it became unmistakable, though few caught the scent, that what passes for the Left today is a "stinking corpse." It was the year in which the founding of Platypus became a necessity, though, here again, consciousness lagged behind events.

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 was and remains a catastrophe. Since the triumph of the Khomeini-ites the country has been dominated by a regime far more backward and repressive than its predecessor, governed in a manner even more reactionary than the way the country was governed under the Shah. With the Stalinist Tudeh Party subordinating itself to the Khomeini faction, the road to Islamist power was paved with the corpses of betrayed Iranian workers and self-betrayed Stalinists, even as the Western Left drowned out all dissent with its loud applause for the blow dealt to American imperialism. As the Iranian unorganized urban masses and the landlord class joined hands under Islamist leadership to crush the Tudeh Party and other leftist groups, the Left of the core capitalist states, hopelessly deluded by a specious Third Worldism, failed almost entirely to recognize the unfolding catastrophe. As David Greason has observed, prior to the Iranian Revolution most had simply assumed that any movement able to topple the Shah would have to come from the Left.[1] The actuality of Khomeini-style Islamism as a reactionary ideology, rather than an authentic "cultural expression" of the masses, was denied, and instead the Western Left acquiesced in the elevation of Khomeini's mullahs to a dominant position in Iran. The Left was incapable of recognizing in Khomeini, who was hailed as a unifier, a threat no less grave than the Shah himself had been. Substituting criticism of American imperialism for the critique of capitalism, dominant strands of the New Left reshaped anti-Americanism as the touchstone of Leftist thought. This rendered impossible an adequate analysis of the Iranian Revolution, and of the Mujahideen's "resistance" to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan as well. In place of an

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IN THE 20TH CENTURY
THE DECLINE OF THE LEFT
SPECIAL ISSUE ON
Benjamin Blumberg
Chris Cutrone
Atiya Khan
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Richard Rubin

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socialism—but, lacking socialism, we feel that we must make do with piracy, and label it a form of "resistance." The sheer misery of the present cannot be confronted head-on. To use a phrase invented by Robert Musil, "*Seinesgleichen geschieht*" ["The like of it now happens," or "Pseudo-reality prevails"]. Pseudo-reality prevails in a world of pseudo-politics. Something like reality is happening, but it is not really real. We sense this, but are unsure how to talk about it. We try to ignore what we know. We seek historical mirrors, but, like a house with a corpse in it, we find that the mirrors have all been covered over.

But how did we get here from the world of 1940? For, in 1940, the world was not as miserably depoliticized a place as it is today. It was a tragic and frightening place, indeed, but still tragically and frighteningly real. The difference of course is not in "the world," but rather in our ability to understand it. The central meaning of "regression" is this: Increasingly, the Left does not address the world but rather its own unresolved history. One should not imagine defeat as something merely imposed on the Left by the right, by mere superior force; rather, defeat has been deeply internalized on the Left by ways of thinking, the goal of which is self-censorship. In particular, two crucial periods must be constantly reenacted and misunderstood: the 1930s and the 1960s. These are not highpoints or models—we must now construct *neither* a new "New Left" nor a new "Old Left." Instead, they are both crucial stages in the long disintegration of the Left. The period 1933–1940 is the last attempt of classical Marxism to rearm itself against the double menace of Stalinism and fascism. Trotsky represents the central figure in this struggle. Trotsky was the last of the Second International radicals, and, with him, the history of classical Marxism ends.

This was simultaneously the source of Trotsky's greatness and his limitation. By contrast, the Frankfurt School, while politically less clear than Trotsky, saw other things perhaps more clearly. One might say that Trotsky understood Stalinism better, and the Frankfurt School understood fascism better. In the end, however, both Trotskyism and the Frankfurt School survived only as standing challenges. Neither would prove intellectually creative in the postwar world. At most one could only hold one's ground. In the end, Adorno remained a lonely figure and the Trotskyists—all 31 flavors—were, even in their own estimation, mere epigones. Indeed, the best Trotskyists would insist that, in over two-thirds of a century since Trotsky's death, there has been hardly anything deserving the name of Marxist theory. While scandalous, this is probably true. If we are to take Marxism seriously, the central task of any Marxist theorist now is to try to answer the question, Why we do not have an adequate Marxist theory of the present?

But if the 1930s were the tragedy, that is, an actual defeat, and the 1960s were the farce, that is, a defeat acted out before actual combat could be engaged, what needs to be understood is the bridge. The 1960s would repeat the 1930s in many ways, without understanding them. Hence, for example, the paradox of Maoism—a rebellion of sorts against Stalinism that was and is itself hyper-Stalinist.

Afterwards, the compulsion to repetition would set in, and there would be an even further evacuation of political meaning. The peace movement never dies, but that is merely because it never wins, nor even needs to reflect on its goals. There will always be war. We can always be "United for Peace and Justice," can't we? There will always be something to "resist." Infinite, never-ending "struggle"—or the simulacrum of struggle—is all that matters. Struggle has become a symptom, not a means. One can no longer even counterpose reform and revolution; increasingly, the Left has ceased to believe in either. Both involve questions of power, and how can a powerless Left dare to think about power? Instead one is sustained by a myth: the myth of the 1960s.

For many decades, it seemed as if the waiting for the 1960s to return would never end. But, in the last year, the *Zeitgeist* has finally begun to change. On the one hand, the election of Obama, a black man who is a post-boomer, unsettlingly conservative, and unsettlingly popular with White America, and on the other, a real economic disaster that brings back all of those good *Zusammenbruchstheorie* ["Crisis Theory"] moments we thought we had lost. Finally, even the Left is starting to realize the 1960s are dead. But now we are waiting for the 1930s. Identity politics is *passé*, yet only in that "class" is the new "black."

The problem, of course, is that we have been here before. For example, some may remember in the 1970s a "turn to the working class" by remnants of the New Left, which had only a few years earlier written off the working class. But even more to the point, the 1930s were a decade of defeat for the Left. The last thing we need is to revisit 1933. The myth of the 1930s is the flipside of the myth of the 1960s. It is precisely because the real but belated possibility of revolutionary politics was defeated in the 1930s that it took on a spectral and confused form in the 1960s, and it is the inability of leftists since the 1960s to overcome the notion that the 1960s represented a higher, better form of politics—that the so-called "New" Left had left the "Old" Left behind—that is the main reason for the nearly total obsolescence and irrelevance of the Left today. Neither the 1960s nor the 1930s offer models for a future Left, unless they are recognized as the two-fold trauma that the Left needs to overcome.

That, at any rate, is the Platypus thesis of regression in a nutshell. Is this a hopelessly pessimistic view? Certainly, it does not partake of Trotsky's revolutionary optimism. The optimism of classical Marxism was once historically justified, but now, alas, is not. In this respect, Platypus is certainly closer to a Benjamin than a Trotsky. But we in Platypus believe that ours is a hopefully pessimistic view. We continue to hope that it is by an accurate recognition of its own defeatism that there is still time for the Left to reconstruct itself and create a future for human freedom. We reject a fake optimism, precisely because we continue to hope—and a false optimism is the deadly enemy of true hope. In answer to Nietzsche's question, "Gibt es einen Pessimismus der Staerke?" ["Is there a pessimism of the strong?"], we answer: "Yes!"

1917

Chris Cutrone

> In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which *the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all*.
>
> — Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* [1848]

> Hegel links the freedom of each to the freedom of all as something of equal value. But in doing so he regards the freedom of the individual only in terms of the freedom of the whole, through which it is realized. Marx, by contrast, makes the free development of each the precondition for the correlative freedom of all.
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> — Karl Korsch, Introduction to Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* [1922]

THE YEAR 1917 is the most enigmatic and hence controversial date in the history of the Left. It is therefore necessarily the focal point for the Platypus philosophy of history of the Left, which seeks to grasp problems in the present as those that had already manifested in the past, but have not yet been overcome. Until we make historical sense of the problems associated with the events and self-conscious actors of 1917, we will be haunted by their legacy. Therefore, whether we are aware of this or not, we are tasked with grappling with 1917, a year marked by the most profound attempt to change the world that has ever taken place.

The two most important names associated with the revolution that broke out in 1917 in Russia and in 1918 in Germany are the Second International Marxist radicals Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, each of whom played fateful roles in this revolutionary moment. Two Marxian critical theorists who sought to follow Luxemburg and Lenin to advance the historical consciousness and philosophical awareness of the problems of revolutionary politics, in the wake of 1917, are Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch.

While neither Lenin nor Luxemburg survived the revolutionary period that began in 1917, both Lukács and Korsch ended up disavowing and distancing themselves from their works, both published in 1923, that sought to elaborate a Marxian critical theory of the revolutionary proletarian socialist politics of Lenin and Luxemburg. Lukács adapted his perspective to the prevailing conditions of Stalinism in the international Communist movement and Korsch became a critic of "Marxist-Leninist" Bolshevism, and an important theorist of "Left" or "council communist" politics. Meanwhile, Luxemburg was pitted against Lenin in a similar degeneration and disintegration of the revolutionary consciousness that had informed the revolution of 1917.

The forms that this disintegration took involved the arraying of the principles of liberalism against those of socialism, or libertarianism against authoritarianism. Lenin and Lukács became emblems of authoritarian socialism, while Luxemburg and Korsch became associated with more libertarian, if not liberal, concerns.

But what remains buried under such a misapprehension of the disputed legacy of 1917 is the substance of agreement and collaboration, in the revolutionary Marxist politics of that moment, among all these figures. Behind the fact of Luxemburg's close collaboration and practical political unity with Lenin lies the intrinsic relationship of liberalism with socialism, and emancipation with necessity. Rather than associating Lenin with revolutionary necessity and Luxemburg with desirable emancipation in such a one-sided manner, we need to grasp how necessity, possibility, and desirability were related, for both Luxemburg and Lenin, in ways that not only allowed for, but actually motivated their shared thought and action in the revolution that opened in 1917.

Both Lenin and Luxemburg sought to articulate and fulfill the concerns of liberalism with socialism—for instance in Lenin's (qualified) endorsement of self-determination against national oppression.

Lukács and Korsch were among the first, and remain the best, to have rigorously explored the theoretical implications of the shared politics of Luxemburg and Lenin, in their works *History and Class Consciousness* and "Marxism and Philosophy," respectively. Both Lukács and Korsch approached what they considered the practical and theoretical breakthrough of the Third International Marxist communism of Luxemburg and Lenin by returning to the "Hegelian" roots of Marxism, a reconsideration of its "idealist" dimension, as opposed to a "materialist" objectivistic metaphysics that lied behind "economism," for example.

This involved, for Lukács and Korsch, an exploration of Lenin and Luxemburg's break from the objectivistic "vulgar Marxism" of the politics and theory of the Second International, exemplified by Karl Kautsky. Lukács's term for such objectivism was "reification"; Korsch addressed it by way of Marx's approach to the philosophical problem of "theory and practice," which, he argued, had become "separated out" in the Second International period, their "umbilical cord broken," while Lenin and Luxemburg had tried to bring them back into productive tension and advance their relation through their revolutionary Marxism.

Ironically, while the title of Lukács's work is *History and Class Consciousness*, it was concerned with a more "philosophical" exposition and categorial investigation of the problem of "reification" and the commodity form as socially mediating, following Marx in *Capital*. Meanwhile, Korsch's "Marxism and Philosophy" actually addressed the historical vicissitudes of the theory-practice problem in Marx and Engels's lifetime and in the subsequent history of the Marxism of the Second International. In both cases, there was an attempt to grasp the issue of subjectivity, or the "subjective" dimension of Marxism.

But it was this focus on subjectivity from which both Lukács and Korsch broke in their subsequent development: Lukács disavowed what he pejoratively called the attempt to "out-Hegel Hegel," making his peace with Stalinist "dialectical materialism," while (later) attempting to found a "Marxist ontology." Korsch, on the other hand, distanced himself from what he came to call, pejoratively, the "metaphysical" presuppositions of Marxism—even and, perhaps, especially as practiced by Lenin, though also, if to a lesser extent, by Luxemburg and even by Marx himself—pushing him ultimately to call for "going beyond Marxism."

In this complementary if divergent trajectory, Lukács and Korsch reflected, in their own ways, the return of the "vulgar Marxism" that they had sought to supersede in their theoretical digestion of 1917—a return marked by the Stalinization of the international Communist movement beginning in the 1920s. For example, Theodor W. Adorno was excited to meet Lukács in Vienna in 1925, only to be repulsed at Lukács's disavowal of the work that had so strongly inspired Adorno and his colleagues in the Frankfurt School, such as Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer. Korsch, who had also, like Lukács, been associated with the Frankfurt School from its inception, had come by the end of the 1930s to scorn the Frankfurt critical theorists as "Marxist metaphysicians," while in the 1960s Lukács wrote contemptuously of them as having taken up residence at the "Grand Hotel Abyss," explicitly deriding them for following his early work. In such disavowals can be found evidence for the repression of the problems Lukács and Korsch had sought to address in elaborating Marxian theory from Lenin and Luxemburg's revolutionary thought and action in 1917–19.

Likewise, in subsequent history, the relation between "means" and "ends" for the Marxist radicals Lenin and Luxemburg in the moment of 1917 became obscured, Lenin being caricatured as believing, in some Machiavellian fashion, that the "ends justified the means," or exemplifying "revolutionary will." Luxemburg was equally caricatured as an upholder of principled emancipatory means in extolling the virtues of practical defeat, seemingly happy to remain a Cassandra of the revolution. Biographically, this is crudely reconciled in the image of Luxemburg's quixotic martyrdom during the Spartacist uprising of 1919, and Lenin's illness and subsequent removal from political power at the end of his life, condemned to watch, helpless, the dawn of the Stalinist authoritarianism to which his political ruthlessness and pursuit of revolutionary ends had supposedly led.

In either case, rather than serving as an impetus for a determined investigation of these revolutionary Marxists' thought and action at the level of the basis for their self-understanding and political judgment—models from which we might be able to learn, elaborate, and build upon further—they have been regarded only as emblems of competing principles, in the abstract (e.g., on the question of the Constituent Assembly, over which they had differed only tactically, not principally). So Lenin's writings and actions are scoured for any hint of authoritarian inhumanity, and Luxemburg's for anything that can be framed for its supposedly more humane compassion. At the same time, the futility of both their politics has been naturalized: It is tacitly understood that neither what Lenin nor Luxemburg aspired to achieve was actually possible to accomplish—either in their time or in ours.

In the words of Adorno's writing on the legacy of Lenin, Luxemburg, Korsch, and Lukács, in his last completed book, *Negative Dialectics*, this way of approaching 1917 and its significance evinced "dogmatization and thought-taboos."[23] The thought and action of Lenin and Luxemburg are now approached dogmatically, and they and their critical-theoretical inheritors, Lukács, Korsch, Benjamin, and Adorno, are approached only with a powerful thought-taboo firmly in place: that the revolutionary moment of 1917 was doomed to failure, and that its fate was tragically played out in the character of the revolutionary Marxism of its time. Their Marxism is thus buried in an attempt to ward off the haunting accusation that it did not fail us, but rather that we have failed it—failed to learn what we might from it. But, like Lukács and Korsch in their subsequent development, after they convinced themselves of the "errors of their ways," we have not recognized and understood, but only rationalized, the problematic legacy of 1917.

1917 remains a question—and it is the very same question that Lenin and Luxemburg went about trying address in theory and practice—whether we ask it explicitly of ourselves now or not. It is the great tabooed subject, even if that taboo has been enforced, either by a mountain of calumny heaped upon it, or the "praise" it earns in Stalinist—or "Trotskyist"—"adherence." For example, it remains unclear whether the "soviets" or "workers' councils" that sprung up in the revolutions of 1917–19 could have ever been proven in practice to be an adequate social-political means (for beginning) to overcome capitalism. The Lukács of the revolutionary period recognized, in "The Standpoint of the Proletariat," the third part of his essay on "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," the danger that

> [As Hegel said,] directly before the emergence of something qualitatively new, the old state of affairs gathers itself up into its original, purely general, essence, into its simple totality, transcending and absorbing back into itself all those marked differences and peculiarities which it evinced when it was still viable.... [I]n the age of the dissolution of capitalism, the fetishistic categories collapse and it becomes necessary to have recourse to the "natural form" underlying them.[24]

Lukács recognized that the "producers' democracy" of the "workers' councils" in the revolutionary "dictatorship of the proletariat" was intrinsically related to, and indeed the political expression of, an intensification of the "reification" of the commodity form. Nevertheless, it seems that the attempt, by Lenin and Trotsky's Bolsheviks, to bring "all power to the soviets" in the October Revolution of 1917, and by Luxemburg's Spartacists in the German Revolution that followed, is something we can learn from, despite its failure. For this revolutionary moment raises all the questions, and at the most profound levels, of the problematic relationship between capitalism and democracy that still haunt us today.

Similarly, Korsch recognized that the revolutions of 1917–19 were the outcome of a "crisis of Marxism" that had previously manifested in the Second International, in the reformist "revisionist" dispute, in which the younger generation of radicals, Luxemburg, Lenin, and Trotsky, first cut their teeth at the turn of the century. But, according to Korsch in 1923, this "crisis of Marxism" remained unresolved. The unfolding of 1917 can thus be said to be the highest expression of the "crisis of Marxism" that Luxemburg, Lenin, and Trotsky—and Korsch and Lukács after them—recognized as manifesting the highest expression of the *crisis of capitalism*, in the period of war, revolution, counterrevolution, civil war, and reaction that set the stage for subsequent 20th century history. Arguably, the world never really overcame or even recovered from this crisis of the early 20th century, but has only continued to struggle with its still unresolved aftermath.

In this sense 1917 was not, in the self-understanding of its thinkers and actors, an attempt to leap from the realm of necessity, but rather the attempt to advance a necessity—the necessity of social revolution and transformation—to a higher stage, and thus open a new realm of possibility. The enigmatic silence surrounding the question of 1917 is masked by a deafening din of opprobrium meant to prevent our hearing it. It remains, as Benjamin put it, an "alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds," whether we (choose to) hear it or not.[25] But the degree to which those who have come later have done so, the repression of 1917 has been achieved only at the cost of a regression that, as Benjamin put it, ceaselessly consumes the past and our ability to learn from it, ceding the meaning of history and its sacrifices to our enemies, and rendering those sacrifices in past struggles vain.

Recognizing the nature of the difficulty of 1917, that the problems we find in this moment comprise the essence of its potential pertinence for us, may be the first step in our recognizing the character of the regression the Left has undergone since then. Like a troubling memory in an individual's life that impinges upon consciousness, the memory of 1917 that troubles our conceptions of social-political possibilities in the present might help us reveal the problems we seek to overcome, the same problems against which Lenin and Luxemburg struggled. Even if a failure, theirs was a brilliant failure from which we cannot afford to be disinherited.

Questions and Answers

What does "emancipation" entail? To what "beyond" does capitalism point? More particularly, in this beyond what would be the role of the state and how would the economy be organized? It seems to me that learning from the past is important, but unless there is some vision of what getting beyond capital looks like, then we are in trouble.

Richard Rubin: In some sense, this is a question about how a socialist economy might work. But I would want to defer that question, because the main problems with socialism in the 20th century were not economic but political. Again, it is a checkered and complicated history, but the Left's main criticism of the Soviet Union was neither technical nor economic. Rather, it focused on the regime's repressive and dictatorial character. As regards the state, I think that Lenin's idea of its withering away remains valid. I mean, the reasons why you had a Stalinist dictatorship and not a genuinely democratic socialist polity are, of course, complex, but I would argue they are essentially contingent, historical questions, not intrinsic to the socialist project, *per se*. If they are intrinsic to it, then we are really wasting our time.

Chris Cutrone: To add one thing to Richard's comments: We do not and cannot yet know what the technical problems of organizing a global economy on a socialist basis would be. When Lenin talks about the withering away of the state, what he means of course is the withering away of the dictatorship of the proletariat. He does not mean the withering away of a national state surrounded by capitalism. There is a sort of traditional Marxist ban on blueprints or images of a future society. The reason for this is that for freedom to be free it cannot be determined in advance. The point of Marxism is to clear the obstacles of capitalism so far as we understand them at this point, and we have only been able to understand them the degree to which we have struggled against them. Part of the thesis of regression is that the struggle against capitalism has ceased, and therefore we do not really understand the problem of capitalism as well as we did. We can only come to understand it, as a real problem, in the process of trying to overcome it. Establishing a global dictatorship of the proletariat would, in this sense, simply allow the problem of capitalism to be addressed.

Another way of getting at this would be to ask, What does it mean to politicize the economy? After all, that is what is raised by Obamaism, right? What kind of a political issue is the economy? Marx's point was that the emergence of a modern worker's movement, a historically new and potentially emancipatory politics, posed the question of the organization of the economy on a democratic basis. *It poses the question*. It has not been worked out by any means, nor does the Soviet experience particularly help in thinking about how it might work. All the Soviet experience points to is the revolution. It would be great if organizing the socialist economy were a technical problem. We lack the political means to render it a technical problem.

What, to your mind, are the forms of political consciousness and practice that block the recognition of regression?

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Rubin: I think people are afraid to acknowledge regression, because it is unpleasant to consider. It is much easier to fall into what one might call a naïve progressivism—telling oneself always that "the struggle continues"—than to think through the failure of the Left in the 20th century, a failure that really determined the course of the century and our own time. By contrast, the 19th century was a century of great historical progress, in ways that are hard for us to even imagine now.

Atiya Khan: We should attend to the ways in which political consciousness has actually adjusted itself to objective conditions. Instead of pushing against the limitations of the present, the Left today tends to adapt itself to present circumstances. In order to accommodate itself to defeat, the Left continually describes it as victory. Of course, the possibilities of revolution are always present, given the contradictory character of capital itself. The problem is that those who claim to be on the Left abdicate the task of thinking this contradiction through as a problem.

Spencer Leonard: I was suggesting some of these points when I brought up the continuous replaying of 1960s politics in the present, dancing on the grave of the administered world. Thus, for instance, modern anarchism does not really have anything that we would call a theoretical perspective. At best, it is a variety of liberalism, at worst, the heir to the worst of 1960s-era infantile leftism. At all events, anarchism fails to pose the problem of capital, except as one of oppression or exploitation. So, I guess I would turn the question around to ask if there is really any politics today that is not condemned to repeat the failures of the past?

Does your regression thesis apply on a larger scale, on the global scale? It sounds like what is being discussed here is very much a European history.

Rubin: I think that the problem can be seen on a world scale. If you look at, for example, the "Third World"—leaving aside the problems with anti-colonial politics in the mid-century (which were numerous and by no means insignificant)—there was a much higher degree of political consciousness in the Third World in the 1950s and 1960s than there is today. This is a clear manifestation of one kind of regression. Moreover, it is a mistake to separate political developments in the Third World from political developments in the First World, particularly as they become more intertwined and reflect more and more off of each other. So, on the one hand, there was a kind of abdication by a large part of the New Left in favor of Third Worldism, the impulse behind which was a pessimism about transforming their own core metropolitan societies. This is the reason they invested their hope in societies that were supposedly outside of capitalism. Also, the New Left's Third-Worldist politics—the dominant expression of the Left by the late 1960s—was a global politics. It was neither just metropolitan nor just peripheral, but a common politics.

Cutrone: The history of anti-imperialism, or, really, decolonization—since most decolonization took place in a highly administered way, not through social-political struggle—was, first of all, a disaster for the ex-colonial world. We can say that the conditions in the post-colonial world are, in many ways, considerably degraded and brutalized in comparison to the early 20th century. In addition to this, as Richard has suggested, the New Left's adaptation to a Third World perspective of revolution was largely predicated on pessimism about revolution in the core. Fanon famously said, "Let's take our leave of Europe," which is essentially a resignation from politics. So, if you say that the world has become more politically integrated, and, in a sense, more inclusive over the course of the 20th century, that has to be matched by a narrative of the degradation and evacuation of politics itself. In other words, people can participate more in democratic politics only to the degree to which politics has become inconsequential.

Leonard: It is by no means the case that the colonial period is the non-political period and the post-colonial, or post-decolonization period is political. On the contrary, in many ways decolonization represented a vast defeat of an earlier and more robust politics. In many ways, then, it is because of the collapse, rather than the radicalization, of the kind of revolutionary networks and internationalist cosmopolitanism that the empires allowed for (or could not subdue), that it has become almost impossible for us to even imagine that past in any but the most caricatured ways.

Rubin: The part of the "non-Western" world that I probably know best is the Middle East, the Arab world. There the rise of Islamic politics is a direct consequence, first of all, of the collapse of the Arab nationalism that had been prevalent in the previous generation. That collapse of Arab nationalism itself has to do with the defeat of the actual Arab Left—mostly a Stalinist Arab Left—but a Leftist Arab politics nonetheless. So the reason you have right-wing Islamist politics is not because of some kind of atavistic impulse in the region. Rather, it has to do with the resounding defeat of the Left. It is both ironic and tragic that two of the places where you had the strongest leftist traditions in the Arab world were, number one, Iraq, and number two, Palestine.

Khan: I could follow-up on that in terms of what is happening in Pakistan these days, namely the Talibanization of the entire society. This results from the failure of the Left, specifically the defeats suffered between 1968–1971, culminating in the Bangladesh War, an event that split Pakistan into what are now the countries of Bangladesh and Pakistan. At that moment the possibility existed for Pakistan to institute a liberal democracy under socialists. And it is in that failure, or because of that failure, that Pakistan has taken the direction that it has.

Leonard: The last thing that I would want to add is that what we are talking about is the political history, so to speak, of global integration. To the extent that we actually live in a globally integrated world, it is the legacy not of anti-imperialist politics per se, but of revolutionary politics. Decolonization in the manner it took place is one form taken by the defeat of internationalist radical politics, though this is not at all how decolonization is generally understood.

I am puzzled by the claim that over the last half-century the Third World has become depoliticized. I wonder if one of the reasons the panelists say this is because the politics that has emerged there is unrecognizable to them as politics. I could not help juxtaposing the themes of this talk—defeatism and regression—with some other, much more hopeful panels here at the Left Forum. I am referring in particular to panels treating developments in South America. The Left in South America is going beyond our notions of what it means to be Leftist, which is primarily rooted in western European theorizing about industrial societies. I would argue that the problems in Bolivia, for example, extend beyond these [traditional leftist] concerns.

Rubin: I think that, if you look at the world today, it is true that, at least in certain respects, Latin America is the least regressive part of the world, and the Middle East the most regressive. So they are sort of opposites. But I think that the fundamental problem is the same in both places. Obviously, Evo Morales is in some sense part of the Left. Certainly he is not part of the right, in the way the Taliban is. But really what you have with both Morales and Chavez (and I prefer Morales) is Left nationalism, and this is nothing new. Politics in Latin America are now, if anything, considerably less radical than they were in the 1980s with the Sandinistas and the FMLN, which in their turn were less radical than the Cuban Revolution. You can only really convince yourself that Latin America is a great beacon of revolutionary hope because the rest of the world looks so dismal.

Well, I was not referring to revolution. I am just talking about hope in general, which might be part of the translation problem here. For instance, you mentioned things like the Cuban Revolution and the Sandinistas. Their basic idea was to take over state power in order to bring about what you call revolutionary changes. But, to me, it is not so much about Evo Morales as it is about the people who elected him, the movement. Morales sometimes trembles before their power. They are talking about things like changing the nature of what it means to be a citizen. One could argue that this is far more radical than anything the Castro or the Sandinistas ever attempted. Of course, it is not revolutionary in the way you define revolution. But I think that is part of the issue I am raising—maybe the idea of revolution has been expanded by people in South America.

Leonard: I think the question really turns on the question of whether an emancipatory politics is possible and desirable. But, I would also argue that it is implausible to speak of the world today—in which prevails poverty, degradation, limited life chances, unfree labor, extended workdays, not to mention the extreme desperation among agricultural workers in the large peasant societies and in the slums of the mega-cities across the global south—I think that to call all this (which characterizes South America as much as Asia or Africa) the realization of a new politics is really very contemptuous of the actual aspirations of people there. I would argue that their conditions do not reflect the world they want to live in. Rather, those conditions represent a terrible defeat of their core political aspirations. Following Richard, I would also argue that, at the level we are speaking here, there is no fundamental divergence between one part of the world and another. Also, it is not as if by analyzing the political and emancipatory potential concentrated in the first world, we are ignoring potentials in Latin America or sub-Saharan Africa or Asia. On the contrary, there is no potential in the core that is not inherently international, because we live in that kind of integrated world. And, as Chris and Richard have both implied, the New Left's turn to the so-called peripheral world required them to misrecognize that world as "non-capitalist," which is to say, non-reified, outside of the prevalence of instrumental reason and of the grey, administered society. This willingness to romanticize the Third World and its struggles was another expression of the New Left's defeatism.

Cutrone: In his opening remarks, Spencer referred to the "worshipping of the accomplished fact." The Left has become adept at calling defeat victory. Indeed, it has long made a practice of that. Today there is a whole industry devoted to it. Entire printing presses are dedicated to dressing up a miserable reality. Something Richard said also needs to be underlined. The idea that the struggle continues is itself the adaptation to defeat. Human beings will always struggle against oppression, they will always resist, but the real question is, are they doing anything that has any prospect of fundamentally altering their circumstances? Since it is assumed that we cannot do that, let's look at where people are struggling, where they are asserting their dignity against horrific conditions, and let's say, "*That* is beyond left and right."

I think the very facile dismissal of Maoism really gets in the way of being able to sum up the first stage of socialist revolution. There is a big debate in the international communist movement today regarding the nature of what Mao's theoretical breakthroughs were, about what socialism is, and about the contradictions the Chinese are dealing with within socialism. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was not a big, democratic movement against the problem of bureaucracy or the dictatorship of a party. Rather, it was actually about dealing with the deeper underlying contradictions of socialism. In it, the Chinese Communists dealt with the fact that, while they were getting out of capitalism, they had not yet arrived at communism on a world scale and that, in consequence, the bourgeoisie kept regenerating itself. So I guess I wanted people to speak to that, because we do have to look scientifically at the experience of the Chinese Revolution. That is the only way we can go forward. It was, actually, profoundly liberating, even though there were very real secondary shortcomings. So I guess if people could speak to this, because I actually do think there is a Marxism that has already looked at this and moved forward.

Rubin: There are two ways in which Maoism, I think, represents a problem. One is the actual Maoism in China, and, the first thing to say about that is that Maoism is a variety of Stalinism, period. Indeed, Mao criticized de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union. But, leaving that aside, the real problem with Maoism that I want to emphasize is not actual Stalinism in China, that is, the dictatorial bureaucratic regime, but rather the effect Maoism had on the western Left in the 1960s and 1970s. The way it functioned in those years was to supply a way of dodging the Trotskyist critique of Stalinism. Now, the various Trotskyist groups all had their own problems, some more grave than others. But what I want to emphasize here is that there simply are no theoretical breakthroughs in Mao. In fact, much of postmodernism has its roots in Maoism.

Khan: I can speak to the case of Pakistan in 1968, and the kind of role that Mao's regime played in suppressing and crushing the Left in Pakistan in that moment by actually arming the Pakistani army to crush the labor movement.

Cutrone: Atiya is referring to the support the Pakistani state received from China in isolating and then eliminating the Pakistani Left. This was in some ways a repeat of the history of Stalinism in the 1930s. But, rather than demonizing Stalinism, or demonizing Maoism, our point is to say, look at what it actually was, look at how it came to specialize in adapting to defeat. In other words, the defeat of the revolution that opened in 1917 led directly to the Stalinization of both the Soviet Union and the international communist movement, not to mention the defeat of 1927 in China, and so on. There is a history of defeats that one can talk about, and one can track these through the histories of the predominant forms of communism in the world. Now, Trotskyism served as a dissenting voice and a memory of 1917, but it itself is obviously inadequate to the project of advancing an emancipatory politics today. It has long since ceased to constitute a real alternative. As for the Cultural Revolution, people projected all sorts of fantasies onto it in the 1960s. But, in essence, the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" is simply the name the Chinese Communist bureaucracy gave to the process of "its" revolution falling into disarray. It called that disarray "revolution." You have social chaos, and you say, "Well, it is the Cultural Revolution," right? That is what happened. As for the disarray itself, it was barbaric. If you look at what actually happened, Mao essentially just rode it out in the same way that Stalin and the Bolsheviks rode out the social chaos of the first five-year plan and the forced collectivization in the Soviet Union.

Khan: One could also point to the form Maoism took in Cambodia...

But isn't that is a facile analogy?

Cutrone: I do not think it is. When society breaks down and people go crazy, you can call it a revolution if you like. The Right is, in essence, the adaptation to prevailing conditions. That is what defines it as a politics. In this sense, the Chinese Stalinists were the Right.

So this is the most optimistic panel here at the Left Forum?

Cutrone: Yes, because we are the only ones who are not going to lie to you.

Rubin: Can I respond a little more concretely to the question? Obviously, there are situations where the Left is defeated merely through superior force. There are military defeats. Having the right theoretical understanding cannot guarantee victory. And, certainly, there are aspects of the defeat of the Left, particularly in the early 20th century, that I would consider tragic. Hence my distinction between tragedy and farce. However, the story about the strength of the right and the resilience of capitalism is typically used to ill purpose. For instance, oftentimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s you would hear this story about how the Left in the 1960s were oppressed by COINTELPRO, and that is why there is no Left today. Now, the German Left was murdered by Hitler, but the collapse of Left in the United States in the 1960s was not really because of state repression. There was state repression and people were killed—I am not denying the existence of state repression—but the core problems were ideological. This is revealed by the fact that, for instance, when the economy collapsed in the early 1970s, the Left did not grow. Rather, it shrank in the 1970s and continued to shrink through the 1980s down to the present, to the point that there is nothing left. There have been four decades of growing conservatism in this country. Now, you cannot explain that just by reference to the shenanigans of the CIA or the FBI. You have to say, if you are honest, that the Left failed to make its case in a way that could be understood or could garner appeal. In some crucial way, the Left failed to understand historical reality.

In the 1990s, I got to know a lot of genuine, old Leftists, people who had been radicals, communists—mostly Trotskyists, actually—in the 1930s. What struck me about them was how much more normal they were than the radicals of my generation. They were the sort of people I could hang out with. They were ordinary people who had ordinary working-class jobs. You did not feel that their radicalism was some kind of a sub-culture. It was not a sub-culture and it was not a psychological symptom. A lot of times I meet people nowadays, who are nice people, but I think they are radicals because they do not have a life. [*Laughter*] I am just trying to be honest, I am not saying that that is the only course of radicalism; in fact, I hope that is not the case with me. [*Laughter*]

It seems to me you have a very clear definition of what defeat is, but that you radically under-specify what victory would be. I would claim that this is because you identify problems as ideological, and thereby you inhabit the theory/practice divide and bracket off economic and material problems. It is as if politics were not a material problem, as if war, and black-ops, and all of that, did not entail material organization.

To say that going beyond left and right is essentially a right-wing statement is profoundly ignorant. I could point you to this book called Breaking with the Enlightenment, *where the author Rajani Kanth argues that the Left and the right share much in common, while many radical movements express premodern ideologies, as in the case of the cocoa-growers movement. Their relationship to nature and their vision of ecology is not "leftist" or "green." Just to point to a concrete example, Bhutan, which is a kingdom and a monarchy, has an index called "Gross National Happiness," with which they are trying to radically redefine what the purpose of a state should be.*

Leonard: The issue of the history of the Left is that the understanding of defeat elucidates what victory would mean. We can only recognize defeat in the light of possibility. It is not a defeat in the sense that there is some set of fixed criteria for it. Rather, it is defeat only in light of the potentialities being produced by capitalism. One of these potentialities is the overcoming of scarcity, the radical overcoming of the "economic." This is at the very heart of Marx's political and intellectual project, that capitalism is the chief limitation to both productivity and sustainability. Of course, capitalism unleashes this potential for overcoming scarcity, but ultimately it constrains that potential. Worker-organized production would precisely be both a more fulfilling and a more productive form of labor, in which the capacity of human knowledge would be harnessed to radically diminish drudgery while increasing productivity.

Cutrone: I want to get to the issue of the degree to which pre-modern cultural forms continue to exist under capitalism. They continue to exist only in the worst sense. Overcoming capital would allow the unlocking of the past in a different way. What remains of non-capitalist, pre-capitalist forms of life (even if they are only after-images and residues), would gain a completely different quality in the future. They would cease to appear, as they do now, to be a sort of outside or site of resistance to capitalism. Overcoming capitalism would allow the best features of non-capitalist social forms that have existed throughout history to find a new salience, such as they lack under present circumstances. That should not be left out.

Transcribed by Soren Whited

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1. David Greason, "Embracing Death: The Western Left and the Iranian Revolution, 1978–83," *Economy and Society* 34 (February 2005): 105–140.
2. Fred Halliday, "Who is Responsible? An Interview with Fred Halliday," interview by Danny Postel, *Salmagundi* 150–151 (Spring–Summer 2006). Available online at <cms.skidmore.edu/salmagundi/backissues/150-151/halliday.cfm >.
3. Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti, "'Action Will be Taken': Left Anti-Intellectualism and its Discontents." Available online at <www.leftbusinessobserver.com/Action.html>.
4. Benjamin Blumberg and Ian Morrison, "Violence at the RNC," *Platypus Review* 7 (October 2008).
5. Ibid.

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6. Theodor W. Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 264.
7. Theodor W. Adorno to Herbert Marcuse, Frankfurt, June 19, 1969, in "Correspondence on the German Movement," *New Left Review* I/233 (January–February 1999): 132.
8. Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 456.
9. Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," 271.
10. Adorno, "Correspondence on the German Movement," 127.
11. Ibid.,125.
12. Theodor W. Adorno, "Resignation," in *Critical Models*, 292.
13. Theodor W. Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and translated by Rodney Livingstone (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), 119.
14. Ibid., 120.
15. Ibid.
16. Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, 446.
17. Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" 124.
18. Müller-Doohm, *Adorno*, 462.
19. Adorno, "Correspondence on the German Movement," 131.
20. Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," 269.
21. Ibid., 271.
22. Ibid., 273.

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23. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), 143.
24. Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 208.
25. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 2, *1927–1930*, edited by Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 218.

Decline of the Left, continued from page 1

adequate analysis of the Iranian Revolution, defeat was transmuted into "victory" by the conjuring tricks of the New Left. It was an act of self-deception that had, by this time, become almost second nature for a generation that, despite its professions of anti-Stalinism, still worshipped the Stalinist idol of the accomplished fact. Accordingly, icons of the New Left like Michel Foucault saluted the Islamic Revolution as representative of a new "spiritual" politics, supposedly free of the instrumental rationality operative in both East and West during the Cold War.

Other events circa 1979 that registered the degradation and disintegration of the Left were its uncritical responses to the Solidarnosc movement in Poland, and the Mujahideen's resistance to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, both of which found support among a disoriented Left, with slogans—now forgotten in embarrassment—of "Ten million Polish workers can't be wrong!" and "Allah-u-Akbar!" The Left failed to recognize the conservatism manifesting before their eyes, the right that they themselves joined. Indeed, by 1979, it was by no means clear, even to leading thinkers of the New Left, how the project of freedom might be advanced. Fred Halliday reports a conversation he had with fellow *New Left Review* editor Tariq Ali, with whom he was politically parting ways, in which he told Ali the following: "God, Allah, called the two of us to His presence and said to us, 'One of you is to go the Left, and one of you is to go to the Right.' The problem is, He didn't tell us which was which, and maybe He didn't know Himself." Halliday then adds, "Tariq laughed. He understood exactly what I was saying, and he didn't dispute it."[2]

The practice of self-deceit, uncritical celebration of supposed revolts against reification, and the retreat from the project of freedom, was again in evidence in the second stage leading up to 2001, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. As the final, anti-climactic collapse of the failed attempt to overcome capital launched in 1917, the rightward fall of the Soviet Union was remarkable for its failure to prompt serious reconsideration on the Left. Instead, it was heralded as a rebirth of freedom, as though what happened were not the institution of neoliberalism but the de-Stalinization of the revolution. With scarcely a thought respecting the now definitive failure of the trajectory of the October Revolution that conserved, in however degraded a form, the emancipatory impulses of Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, and Lenin, the zombie- Left in 1989 congratulated itself on yet another supposed accomplishment of 1960s-style anti-authoritarianism. Celebrating what it ought to have analyzed, dominant strains on the Left helped legitimize the neo-Tzarism that rose on the ruins of Soviet Russia. Mirroring Marxism's degeneration in the Soviet Union to an ideology affirmative of the status quo, and in place of the realization of the emancipatory potential of capitalism, in 1989 capitalism itself was celebrated as emancipation.

The third phase in the total exhaustion of the Left that culminated in 2001 comes in 1999, the year of the anti-globalization protests in Seattle. This event marked the triumph of our current "post-political" activist culture, what Liza Feathersone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti have termed "activist-ism."[3] As Platypus members Ben Blumberg and Ian Morrison have observed, with respect both to activistism in general andthe new anarchism that dominated proceedings in Seattle in particular, "Today's protesters celebrate simple altercations with the police as victories... Each blow of the truncheon dramatizes the difference between protesters [and the society to which they are being integrated]."[4] It is not unfair to say, they argue, "Protesters elicit a police beating to sensationalize their own submission to authority."[5] Here, the regression already in evidence in the 1960s has reached full flower.

Reenacting not only the defeat but the defeatism of the 1960s Left, the Seattle protesters no longer even bother with the old talk about students or youth as a new "revolutionary force." Nor do these new would-be radicals require elaborate rationalizations of their failure. Theirs is a disarmingly frank acting-out of a discontented middle-class youth, for whom the schedule of international trade meetings takes the place of rock concert tours as the site for a peripatetic anti-authoritarian subculture. This generation of activists fulfills rather than rejects the low expectations of their political parents, namely that they should either numb themselves with the pleasures on offer in neoliberalism—"sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll"—or else engage in "revolution for the hell of it." Only, in the new protest culture, one can do both at the same time, achieving in the process only the sensationalizing of one's own submission to authority and social integration of which Blumberg and Morrison speak. Politically, the embrace of the cult of death that characterized the dominant Leftist response to 1979 reaches its anti-climax in the full-blown Romantic-reactionary rejectionism, anti-modernism, and anti-globalization of "black bloc" anarchism and "turtle protest."

The historic Left of bourgeois radicalism, culminating in Marx's auto-critique of utopian socialism, isolates *history* as its problematic and *freedom* as its project. As Marx realized, capitalism posed a question that could only be answered by the overcoming of capitalism. In a similar vein, Postone has argued that proletarian society, the society of commodity-producing commodities, "points beyond itself." But regression has advanced so far now that critical recognitions such as Postone's are the affair of only a handful of intellectuals, while the labor movement, the necessary condition for the practical politics of the Left, is in full-scale rout globally. The point of saying this plainly is not simply to voice a knowing pessimism, but to recognize the actual character of our times. Platypus harps on the "death of the Left" in order to begin the work of rebuilding. After all, the reconstitution of Critical Theory, the specific task to which Platypus is devoted, does not occur in conditions of our own choosing, but in conditions we inherit from the past. Indeed, theory can be reformulated not by supplementing new bits to rectify the supposed inadequacies of past theory, but only by actually working through of the history of the Left.

1968

Atiya Khan

> Theory becomes a material force when it has gripped the masses.
>
> — Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* [1843]

IT MIGHT SEEM COUNTER-INTUITIVE to approach the date of 1968 through the political thought and self-understanding of Theodor Adorno, who is not only considered the most pessimistic in his critique, but also deemed an opponent of the New Left, especially after he infamously called the police on student demonstrators at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Yet Adorno's response to the politics of 1968 can help us understand both the roots of New Left politics and its legacy today. In his late writings, such as "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" (aka "Is Marx Obsolete?"), "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," and "Resignation," as well as his private correspondence with Herbert Marcuse on the character of the student movement in the 1960s, Adorno formulates important categories for a Marxian attempt to grasp the problem of theory and practice. He reminds us, "theory becomes a transformative force" only through "a reasoned analysis of the situation. In reflecting upon the situation, analysis emphasizes the aspects that might be able to lead beyond the given constraints of the situation."[6] Hence, following Marx, Adorno emphasizes that the crucial lesson to be learned from the history of Marxism is that the mediation between theory and practice can only be grasped in the dynamic of revolutionary emancipatory politics. On the basis of Adorno's writings, one can address the problem of "regressive" consciousness that beset the student movement of 1968, one of the critical moments in the history of the Left.

The Left since Marx's day has wrestled with the problem of theory and praxis, but never so much as since 1968, the culminating moment of the post-World War II New Left. In his critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, Marx elucidated the conditions in which an effective relation between theory and practice in the attempt to change the world becomes possible. Such conditions of advancing the relation between theory and practice, as Marx reflected upon around the moment of the revolutions of 1848, arose in the history of modern society with the emergence of the proletariat—the modern working class of wage labor—and the historically specific constitution of industrial labor.

The historically specific, dialectical dynamic of capital is what both gives rise to and constrains the possibility of a post-capitalist, emancipated form of life. Armed with this insight, Marx examined the forms of discontent with capital emerging in the 19th century, which took the form of class struggles of the workers against capitalists, as immanent to the constitutive and contradictory character of social exploitation and domination under capitalism. Thus, in Marx's conception, for the masses to be gripped by theory, for a progressive advance in their consciousness, theory must become a means of revolution.

Like the October Revolution of 1917, the eruption of student protests in 1968 emerged as an international phenomenon extending from Frankfurt, Berlin, Paris, Rome, and Prague to San Francisco as well as to the major cities of Latin America and South and East Asia. The process of politicization that proceeded at a furious pace involved an increasingly militant protest against "authoritarian structures" and traditional values of society. What united the students was their demand for educational reforms, opposition to the war in Vietnam, loathing of the inhumanity of capitalism, and solidarity with liberation movements of the Third World. Yet what set this moment apart from the preceding revolutionary uprisings was an uncritical emphasis on "action" as well as a deep-seated aversion to theoretical reflection and analysis. This attitude found expression in the disruptive modes of behavior of the students, which involved interrupting lectures and discussions, occupying buildings, and going so far as to dismiss intellectuals by using the word "professor"—"to put them down, as they put it so nicely, just as the Nazis used the word 'Jew,'" Adorno remarked in his letters to Marcuse.[7] Slogans such as "We can't get bogged down in analysis" or "Whoever occupies himself with theory, without acting practically, is a traitor to socialism," also affirmed that the student movement on the whole was symptomatic of a particular tendency that was, as Adorno observed, "regressive," fascist in potential, and "authoritarian" in its attitude.

Taking into consideration such developments, Adorno used the epithet of "left-wing fascism," originally coined by Jürgen Habermas, to warn of the dangers of a student movement that could just as easily converge with fascism. This characterization of the New Left, which became a point of contention between Adorno and Marcuse in their private letters, brought to the fore not only their differing views on the politics of the moment, but also offers us insights into the way in which the New Left of the 1960s was a legacy of the unfulfilled potential of the Old Left of the 1930s. Adorno's main point was that the Left had not learned from its past defeats.

In his letters to Marcuse, who had embraced the student movement unreservedly, Adorno frankly expressed his doubts about the political consequences of practical action. He wrote that many of the student representatives tended "to synthesize their practice with a non-existent theory and this expresses a decisionism that evokes horrific memories."[8] This was a gesture to the emergence of counter-revolution—expressed in the form of fascism/Stalinism—that had ensued in the aftermath of the crisis of 1917, leading to the disintegration of revolutionary Marxism by the 1930s, and generating an acute problem of consciousness on the Left. In the postwar period, the devastation of the Left was supplanted by an "authoritarian character structure" that was expressed universally, not only in the fascist rallies, but also in the Popular Front movements, as well as in the anti-colonial, nationalist movements of the Third World. Frankfurt School theorists, including Adorno, theorized the notion of the "authoritarian personality" as a double-sided expression of counter-revolutionary and, simultaneously, revolutionary potential that was rooted in the dialectical contradiction of capitalism. Borrowing from Freudian psychoanalysis, Adorno and his colleagues (Marcuse and Reich) interpreted the constitution of the "authoritarian personality," characterized by "narcissism" and sadomasochism, as evincing a regressive "fear of freedom." Thus, faced with "political hysteria," Adorno observed, "Those who protest most vehemently are similar to authoritarian personalities in their aversion to introspection."[9]

Certainly the 1960s marked a political crisis, but one in which the Left, instead of evaluating the legacy of the 1930s Stalinism, reproduced those very structures and tendencies it sought to overthrow. As Adorno asked of Marcuse, How could one only protest against the horror of napalm bombs, and not revolt against the "Chinese-style tortures" that the Vietcong practiced with such unrestraint? He continued, "If you do not take that on board too, then the protest against America takes on an ideological character."[10] In the course of this correspondence, Marcuse acknowledged that the situation "was not a revolutionary one, not even a pre-revolutionary one," but the situation was "so terrible, so suffocating, so demeaning, that rebellion against it forces a biological, physiological reaction; one can bear it no longer, one has to let some air in. And this fresh air is not that of a 'left-wing fascism.'"[11] Marcuse insisted that the situation had changed qualitatively, that it did not resemble the 1930s in any way, but called "more urgently today than ever for a concrete political position," especially against American imperialism. It may be worthwhile to note that Adorno did not simply oppose Marcuse's assesment of the 1960s New Left, but wished to avoid the pitfalls of either Stalinophobia, the anti-Leninist anarchist tendency espoused by Horkheimer, or Stalinophilia, the militant New Left tendency à la Maoism and Castroism, exemplified by Marcuse's political stance. In his essay "Resignation," Adorno emphasizes that even though the return of anarchism is that of a "ghost," that is, of unresolved problems of Marxism, "this does not invalidate the critique of anarchism."[12] In his attempt to transcend both Stalinophobia and Stalinophilia, Adorno stressed the necessity of critiquing the contemporary form of Marxism and its problematic relation to its past.

Adorno's great insight was that he rooted the problem of authoritarianism in the structure of modern capitalist society. In his essay "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society," he used Marxian categories to analyze the basic structure of contemporary society, which, he explained, was contradictory based on the dynamic of labor and capital. The drive to produce surplus value and capitalize on labor measured in socially necessary labor time was the source of social domination and exploitation. Exploitation in the traditional sense of class antagonism could no longer be established empirically because the working class had been subject to a high degree of social integration in the mid-20th century. Adorno characterized capitalism as a society driven by increasing levels of productivity, resulting in great increases in use-value output. He summed up this organization of social life as "the administered world"—a tendency that was expressed in both state-regulated capitalism and the welfare state system. However, the dynamism of growth displayed certain static tendencies reflected in the dominance of the relations of production, which included relations ranging from those of the administration of managerial bureaucracy to those of the state and the organization of society as a whole. "This creates the impression that the universal interest is to preserve the status quo and that the only ideal is full employment and not liberation from heteronomous labor."[13]

The "administered world" produced a specific kind of mass society, what Adorno called the "culture industry." The culture industry was largely the consequence of high levels of productivity and the widespread availability of consumption goods, but it was also illusory in that it gave the appearance of mass democratization, when in fact production was standardized and tastes were manipulated only to preserve a pretense of individuality. This implied "the impotence of the individual in the face of totality [that] is the drastic expression of the power of exchange relations."[14] Thus Adorno declared, "Marx's dictum that theory becomes a real force when it grips the masses was flagrantly overturned by the course of events."[15] The culture industry eventually paralyzed "the ability to imagine in concrete terms that the world might be different," because the authoritarian character structure had itself become the force of repression.[16] Towards the end of his essay, borrowing from Freud, Adorno pointed to the "free floating anxiety" that arose from the "subjective regression [that] favors the regression of the system." The consciousness of the masses had become seemingly identical with the system, which in turn had become increasingly alienated.[17]

Adorno was not opposed to people organizing themselves for political purposes, but he wished to draw attention to the "Archimedean point" at which "a non-repressive practice might be possible, and one might steer a path between the alternatives of spontaneity and organization." This point, if it existed at all, "can only be found through theory," Adorno maintained.[18] His own position arose from a political judgment that was based on a sober analysis of the situation. He made this clear in his controversy with Marcuse. "You [Marcuse] believe that practice in an emphatic sense is not blocked today; I see the matter differently."[19] Given this scenario, Adorno was convinced that the student movement was bound to fail from the outset. In "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis," he noted that the building of the barricades is "ridiculous against those who administer the bomb."[20] A practice that refuses to acknowledge its own weakness when confronted by "real power which hardly feels a tickle" is deluded and regressive, or, at best, "pseudo-activity."[21]

Adorno's critique of the New Left was an honest attempt to shake the Left out of its state of self-abnegation and self-delusion. The problematic inheritance of the legacy of the 1930s meant that the intent of Marxian theory and practice had become an obscure issue by the 1960s, and the problem of social consciousness reemerged in the guise of "ego-weakness" that "refuses to reflect upon its own impotence."[22] The political "radicalization" of the 1960s only meant further regression and, therefore, subjectively obscured the possibility of progressive transformation beyond capital even when objectively it was still possible. The deep irony of this history is that there has been no progress at all since 1917, and in fact the crisis of Marxism and that of social consciousness has been deepened, not solved. At a fundamental level the problem of consciousness is tied to what Wilhelm Reich had identified as the "fear of freedom" necessitated by a conservative psyche that is wedded to its symptomology. So the symptom needs to be worked through, as this not only provides an occasion for self-understanding and knowledge, but also constitutes the subjective, psychological preconditions of freedom.

1933

Richard Rubin

THE DATE PROPOSED for me to discuss, 1933, immediately summons up two names: Roosevelt and Hitler—Reformism or Barbarism. I wish, though, to couple them with another pair, and another date. The date is 1940. The names are Trotsky and Benjamin. These four names are meant both as contrasts and parallels. At first glance, Hitler and Roosevelt, the New Deal and fascism, might seem polar opposites. But, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch points out, many contemporaries understood Roosevelt and fascism as addressing comparable problems, albeit by somewhat different methods. Similarly, while Benjamin the melancholic mandarin and Trotsky the fiery revolutionary might seem at opposite poles of Marxist discourse, it is the thesis of Platypus that they are both responses to the same crisis of Marxism, just as Hitler and Roosevelt are responses to the crisis of capitalism. These two crises, the crisis of capitalism and the crisis of Marxism, have determined the history of the 20th century, and continue to weigh on the history of the 21st.

These two pairs are also linked by the dates of their deaths: Hitler and Roosevelt in 1945, Trotsky and Benjamin in 1940. While such facts are, in one sense, mere accidents, they can also be read as signs. A generation may be linked by the date of its death as well as its birth.

Two Marxist refugees with great literary talents, two men who experienced "a planet without a visa," both Trotsky and Benjamin were of a type that was common among many Jews in the first half of the 20th century, before the great caesura of the Holocaust and the State of Israel intervened: men of a deep cosmopolitanism that is almost unimaginable today. They were both men who, despite everything that had happened by the mid-20th century, still seemed rooted in the earlier, less bleak beginning of the century. They are of their time, but also out of their time, figures *um neunzehnhundert* ["circa 1900"]. Their unnatural deaths seem to anticipate a new and incomprehensibly horrible world; Auschwitz and Hiroshima are around the corner, yet they just miss them. It is as hard to imagine them in the postwar world as it is to imagine Voltaire and Rousseau living on into the world after the French Revolution. They prefigure, and therefore do not pass beyond. If, as Adorno famously stated, after Auschwitz it will be forbidden to write poetry, they are spared, by the time of their deaths, from the burden of this prohibition. They are two fragments of the unfulfilled, secret counter-history of the 20th century—the history that remains *actual*, by virtue of its unfulfilled potential.

By contrast, Roosevelt and Hitler are the so-called "real" history of the 20th century. If Trotsky and Benjamin speak to the utopian possibilities that remain hidden away in capitalist society, waiting to be unlocked, Hitler and Roosevelt speak, by contrast, to the barbarism that lurks underneath the veneer of bourgeois society, on the one hand, and on the other, to the supposedly "realistic" limits to which we can hope to aspire for a better society. In the end, Roosevelt played the "good cop" to Hitler's "bad cop." It says everything about the poverty of our moment that, in the midst of the greatest capitalist crisis since the 1930s, the highest aspiration of most of the Left is Roosevelt, as evident by the increasingly common question, Will Obama be another FDR? From fantasies of neo-conservative "fascism" a few years ago, much of the Left has moved effortlessly into fantasies of a new Popular Front. But, of course, the obvious is avoided: There is no socialist threat for Obama to head off. On the contrary, protests against the bailouts take the form of an inchoate populism. AIG and "greed," not capitalism, are the targets.

Similarly, if the avowed neo-conservative aim of "spreading democracy" is ideological eyewash, one must also admit that the chief targets of US imperialism are no longer primarily the Left, as during the Cold War. On the contrary, the "wars of empire" are now wars against extreme right-wing forces, as in Afghanistan—right-wing forces that themselves bear more than a passing resemblance to fascism. But this inchoate quasi-fascism is as unlike the world-threatening grand fascism of the 1930s and 1940s as it is unlike the Che Guevaras of the 1960s. Within the metropolitan Left, "anti-fascist" and "anti-imperialist" impulses clash over the problem, and leave only muddle.

Thus, if the Obama administration goes to "war" with Somali pirates, for example, some on the Left will surely feel obliged to express solidarity with the pirates. We will be told that Empires are really pirates writ large, *et cetera*. No one believes, of course, that piracy is really

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