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Ulyanovsk

Responsible Imperialism

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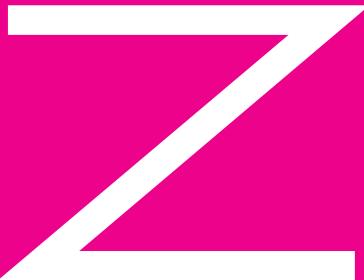
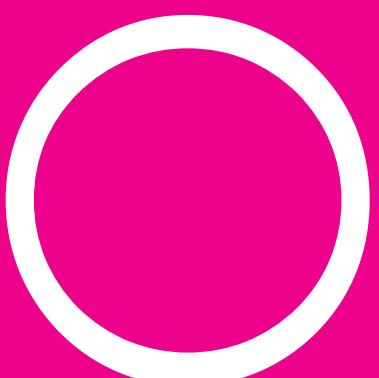
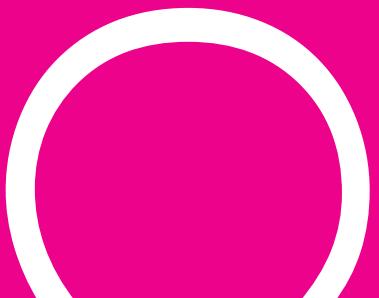
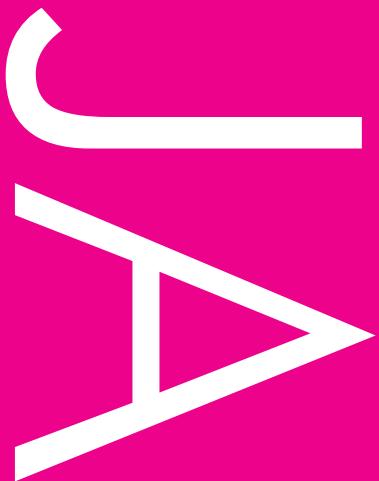
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# Editors' Note:

## Dancing on its Grave

The current political moment is not so much one of conservative triumph as of liberalism's withering away. To say that the American "reform tradition" is in crisis is to underestimate the extent of the debacle, since unlike a crisis, no visible reason exists why the present trend – the gradual abandonment of hope that liberal achievements of the past can be extended or even preserved – cannot continue forever. The great counterexample, Obama's health reform, proves the rule: passed only thanks to a once-in-a-generation Democratic supermajority and the approval of every major industry lobby it affected, it emerged as a painfully inadequate, jerry-rigged palliative, already languishing under the scalpel of austerity. The only true exception to liberalism's demise concerns equal rights for ethnic, sexual, and other minorities – a principle won long ago at a cultural level but whose institutional consolidation is still incomplete and whose most recent advance was New York State's legalization of gay marriage. On all other questions, the watchword is despair.

For a few years, following the centrist resignation of the Clinton years, and especially after the Iraq invasion, a certain spirit of rebellion seemed to well up from the liberal base as it witnessed its Democratic leaders meekly concede to the Bush administration on one issue after another. This impulse helped give rise to the Obama campaign and the enormous, often inexplicable hopes invested in it – a remarkable episode of mass projection, insightfully recognized as such by the candidate himself. Today, except among the president's most die-hard acolytes, this hope has all but flickered out. It is clear to all that Obama, and the Democrats generally, have made themselves the instruments of an energized and revanchist ruling class which has seized a moment of economic dislocation and working class disarray to roll back the meager but long-hated social protections of the New Deal and Great Society.

Traditionally, liberalism's troubles have inspired two kinds of responses from the Left. The first is an abandonment of any critical distance as a crisis atmosphere takes hold and the need to confront the "threat from the Right" supersedes all other considerations. Conservative resurgence is painted as a fascist menace and any liberal alternative is by comparison invested with a "progressive" halo. This dynamic played a part in Obama's rise as a surprising number of figures with impeccable leftist credentials made themselves appendages of the "Obama movement." The second kind of response is a sort of theoretical *Schadenfreude*, a philosophy of "the worse, the better" applied to the political realm. The labor historian Jefferson Cowie has observed this dynamic at play in the late 1970s, as seen through the eyes of the socialist intellectual Michael Harrington: "Unlike many leftists at the time, he understood that the Left depended upon liberalism being strong in order to build upon. Others saw it differently, operating from the idea that if activists tore down liberalism then people would move to the 'true' Left."

Harrington was right. Any future resurgence of the Left will almost certainly coincide with a revival of liberalism, and the liberal ranks will surely supply a disproportionate share of recruits to the radical cause. The 1960s offers a case study of this process. In his history of Americans for Democratic Action, the historian Steve Gillon chronicled the group's transformation over the course of the decade: starting from a stance of sterile anticommunist "growth liberalism," the organization was transformed by a new breed of "reform liberals" who swept into positions of power, pushing out the most conservative stalwarts, bringing Michael Harrington onto the board, and swinging the group by 1969 toward democratic socialism. "There was not a bit of difference between the ADA and Socialist Party on economic issues in the 1970s," remarked one leading ADA liberal from that period.

Radicals must avoid submerging our identities into an insipid and ahistorical "progressivism"; we must remain firmly anchored to the socialist tradition and never shy away from the ruthless critique of liberalism. But socialists should also be wary of slipping into a rhetorical posture of unrestrained invective that only cements the Left's marginal status in American political life. Don't dance on liberalism's grave. There's nothing to celebrate.

— Seth Ackerman & Bhaskar Sunkara

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# WHAT was THE HIPSTER?

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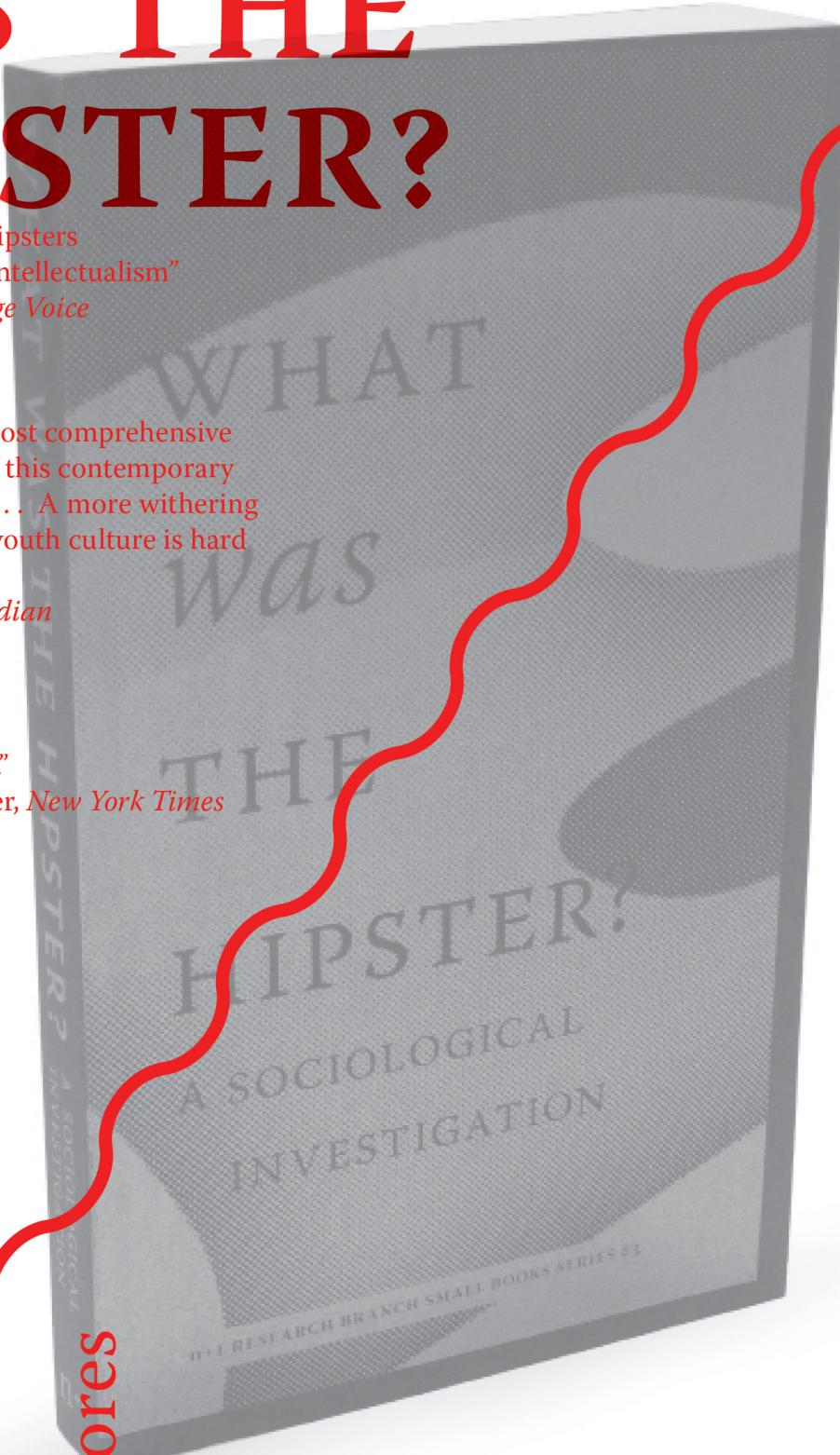
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# Liberals and Racism

when you have nothing else to say ...

BY SETH ACKERMAN

**T**hese are dark times for American liberalism. Health care reform is popularly reviled. Barack Obama's reelection is in doubt. And as I write this, Democrats, under the aegis of debt-ceiling talks with Republicans, appear on the brink of ratifying a savage attack on the welfare state. It seems hard to remember now, but less than three years ago the 2008 election had liberals convinced that America was on the verge of a historic progressive revival. What went wrong?

In a mechanical sense, the economy – more precisely, the Little Depression we are now living through – is at the center of the trouble. But that same bad economy is what catapulted the Democrats into power in the first place, handing them control of both houses of Congress, the presidency, and a brief filibuster-proof Senate supermajority for the first time in thirty years.; liberal optimism, battered and bruised from Bush-era despondency, soared. What's good for the goose is good for the gander: if the liberal fall can be blamed on a fickle business cycle, the original liberal rise, too, must be put down to an economic fluke.

Already one can glimpse the emergence of a liberal narrative of consolation, a sort of comforting theodicy for the politically dispossessed; a story that can explain the cruel whims of the political gods to suffering liberal humanity. If liberalism appears to wobble on the edge of failure, the fault may arise not from anything liberals have done or have failed to do, but if anything from their own moral blamelessness: Liberalism, in this narrative, is faltering because its enlightened political project has run into a wall of blind, irrational racism.

## §

This narrative could be seen in the liberal discourse over the Tea Party. In 2009 and 2010, as the popular right-wing upsurge threatened the whole edifice of Obamism, a virtual cottage industry developed on liberal websites devoted to spotting real or imputed racist sentiments in the Tea Party milieu. Much of it amounted to a mirror image of the sort of anti-guy-with-a-signism that

proved so popular on the Right in the days of anti-Iraq War protests. At one point, *American Prospect* blogger Jamelle Bouie managed to squeeze a whole blog post (headlined "Racism and the Tea Party, Cont.") out of a local newspaper report revealing that one Ron Wight, a "semi-retired music teacher from Lee's Summit, [Missouri]" had made a racially vicious comment at a Kansas City Tea Party rally attended by "dozens."

sonal responsibility, anti-statism), a concoction whose "color-blind" palatability only makes it that much more insidious. According to Kinder, racial resentment is now "the primary ingredient in white opinion on racial affairs."

**H**ow can you tell if someone is racially resentful? Typically, measurement is carried out using a battery of survey questions in which respondents rate their level of agreement or disagreement with four statements:

- "Irish, Italians, Jews and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors."
- "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class."
- "Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve."
- "It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites."

Political scientists have been debating the nature and influence of "racial resentment" for more than thirty years now, and the debate "has been among the most contentious in all of public opinion research," in the words of two scholars who have reviewed the literature. The layman ventures into this voluminous and statistically baroque literature at his own peril.

But one conclusion is clear: liberals who have seized on it to furnish themselves with a usable narrative are not so much enlisting in a noble fight against racism as they are indulging in an ideological evasion. Racial resentment is attractive to liberals less because the Right's racial attitudes are backward (though they are), than because the dominant, non-racial part of its ideology – a reactionary Protestant-capitalist ethic that is deeply entrenched in American discourse – has never been met with any systematic liberal opposition.

## "Already one can glimpse a liberal narrative of consolation"

But anecdotes soon gave way to data as the artillery of social science was brought to bear against the massed forces of anti-Obama reaction. The argument for the fundamentally racist essence of the opposition owed largely to a concept, drawn from the academic study of public opinion, known as "racial resentment." Developed in its modern form by University of Michigan political scientist Donald Kinder and his collaborators, racial resentment is both a theory and a body of evidence that purport to illuminate the influence of racial hostility on the political opinions of American whites.

The argument, in summary, goes like this: Once upon a time, "old-fashioned" racism, based on the belief in the inherent inferiority of blacks and other non-whites, was widespread. Since the civil rights revolution, however, that type of racism has faded, only to be replaced by a newer and more subtle form of prejudice. The new version, originally called symbolic racism (now racial resentment), is a blend of anti-black sentiment and traditional individualist American values (the work ethic, per-



In March, a think tank called the Greenlining Institute released a paper attempting to highlight the role of “racial resentment” in fostering white opposition to Obama’s health reform. Its findings were eagerly flagged on the usual websites like the *Huffington Post* (“Surprising Way Race Colors Attitudes to Health Care Reform”) and the *American Prospect* (“Race, Resentment, and Health Care Reform”). As is common in the literature, the paper’s authors performed a multivariate regression – a statistical exercise designed to sort out the separate influence of different causal factors – to identify the sources of white opinion toward Obama’s health care plan (using data from the 2010 American National Election Study). The paper’s findings sounded impressive: “Whites who were racially resentful were less likely to support the health care reform law, even after controlling for age, gender, education level, income level, employment status, party identification, political ideology, the respondent’s attitude towards President Obama and whether or not the individual had health insurance.”

But the numbers looked less impressive. According to the data reported in the paper’s appendix, the effect of racial resentment on support for health care reform was minuscule – it was dwarfed by the effect of political party (more than twice as large), gender (more than three times as large), and, above all, attitudes toward Obama (almost eight times as large). It was even matched by the effect of age -- that is, the respondent’s age, after controlling for racial resentment, predicted support for health reform just as well as racial resentment itself did (after controlling for age).

One result the authors seemed to find especially significant was that while a more positive attitude toward Obama strongly increased support for health care reform among the less racially resentful, those high in racial resentment didn’t become any more friendly to reform as their opinions of Obama improved. Even on its face, this is a rather ambiguous finding. And the chart in the paper showed that the effect operated in an extremely odd way: Among those who disliked Obama, higher racial resentment actually increased support for health reform; it only decreased support among those who liked Obama. So in the mixed-up world of racial resentment, the racists whose bigotry is depressing support for Obama’s agenda are precisely those who like Obama himself.

A more scholarly look at the same question came from UCLA political sci-

entist Michael Tesler. In a 2010 paper, he found that racial resentment had become a significantly better predictor of white views on health care policy by September 2009, when the health care debate was raging, than it had been before the debate had begun, in March 2009. It’s an interesting finding – one that Tesler quite plausibly attributes to the fact that by September a black president had become the public face of health reform. But the size of the effect Tesler found was still unimpressive, even after the increase. The effects of the respondent’s party and ideology, after controlling for racial resentment, were each one-and-a-half times as large as the effect of racial resentment (after controlling for party and ideology) and they were two-and-a-half times as large as the effects of anti-black stereotypes and judgments.

One interesting aspect of Tesler’s paper was his discussion of a clever experiment designed to tease out the impact that Obama’s racial identity had on white political opinion. Different groups of whites were asked the same battery of questions on health reform and the stimulus package, but for some respondents these were described as Obama’s policies while for others they were described as the Congressional Democrats’ policies. (Or, in the case of universal health care, they were described as policies once advocated by Bill Clinton.) Again and again, Tesler’s charts show that racial resentment became a stronger predictor of policy attitudes when the questions were framed around Obama. On the stimulus package, for example, the distribution of responses was heavily affected by racial resentment when Obama was cited as its author, but resentment had virtually no effect when the policy was attributed to Congressional Democrats.

Yet, as in the Greenlining Institute study, this finding came with a paradox: as Tesler’s chart seems to show, the overall level of white support for stimulus was higher when Obama was cited as the policy’s author. That’s because all but those with the highest racial resentment scores rated stimulus much more positively when it was associated with Obama than when it was associated with Congressional Democrats; the lower the respondents’ level of racial resentment, the bigger the boost that stimulus support received from having the question re-framed around Obama. Now, on one level this isn’t surprising, since in polls Obama is always more popular than Congress or either of the Congressional party caucuses. But it also means that in the final accounting, the activation of “racial

resentment,” triggered by the mention of Obama’s name, actually had the net effect of *increasing support for his stimulus policy*.

A slightly different public opinion construct, called ethnocentrism, has also been advanced as a way of explaining white attitudes. (Like racial resentment, it also owes its fame to Donald Kinder.) The ethnocentrism measure is based on survey questions that ask about different ethnic groups – specifically, how hardworking, honest, and reliable they are. The respondent’s ratings of other ethnic groups are compared with his ratings of his own group; the lower the respondent rates other ethnic groups relative to his own, the more ethnocentric he is considered to be. In their book *Us Against Them*, Kinder and his co-author, Cindy Kam, argue that ethnocentrism is a good predictor of white attitudes on a wide range of issues. For some of the issues they examine, this finding may not be terribly surprising; it’s not a shock, for example, to learn that white opponents of immigration have dimmer views of non-whites than do immigration supporters.

But Kinder and Kam also make the same claim regarding attitudes toward welfare. (This was a point picked up by the blogger Matt Yglesias last year in a post on the Right’s “small-government hypocrisy.”) And indeed, Kinder and Kam show that ethnocentrism was a good predictor of white opinions on welfare in 1996 – the year of Clinton’s welfare reform (and of the noxious debate surrounding it): holding all other factors equal, the chances that a hypothetical “average” white respondent favored cuts to welfare were 64% if she had a “low” ethnocentrism score but 81% if her ethnocentrism score was “high.” But as in the case of the racial resentment studies, ethnocentrism was, again, hardly the most important influence here. Respondents’ levels of “egalitarianism” – as measured by their scores on a separate battery of questions, most of which tapped into notions of equality of opportunity rather than of condition – predicted opinions on welfare and food stamps spending two to three times more strongly than ethnocentrism.

On one question cited by Kinder and Kam – a question measuring support for imposing two-year time limits on welfare recipients – the effect of ethnocentrism was admittedly greater than that of egalitarianism. But again one must be careful to distinguish between the impact of racial attitudes on the *distribution* of opinions and their impact on the *overall* level of opinion. For in the case of the time limit question – and in contrast with

# "... liberals in their ordinary political discourse have no critique of the right-wing concept of freedom."

with most other questions on welfare policy – the overall level of *black* support for time limits did not differ very much from that of whites. Time limits were “strongly favored” by 59.9% of whites and by 58.1% of blacks. Thus, on the one hand, antipathy toward blacks was clearly able, in part, to predict which whites would support time limits. But it would be hard to argue that it explained much of the overall level of white support for time limits, given that the level of black support was almost as high.

The crudest sally into the racial resentment literature – and the one that got the most attention, being picked up by *NPR*, *Salon*, *ThinkProgress*, and others -- was from the University of Washington’s Institute for the Study of Ethnicity, Race and Sexuality (WISER). The point of the WISER study, which was based on the group’s own poll of seven states (heavily weighted toward states in the Greater South, including none in the northeast), was to make the blunt point that the Tea Party is racist. The most widely circulated part of the study was a table comparing the responses of strong Tea Party supporters and strong Tea Party opponents (as well as those in the middle) to the questions from the racial-resentment battery. There we learn, for example, that whereas 88% of strong Tea Party supporters think blacks should work their way up “without special favors,” just like the Irish and Italians supposedly did, “only” 67% of middle-of-the-roaders thought so. And so on. There is nothing surprising about these results, since the vast majority of Tea Party supporters are very conservative Republicans and it’s been a truism in the racial resentment literature for decades that conservatism is associated with higher “racial resentment” scores. The study’s authors gesture towards addressing this point by reporting the results of a multivariate regression in which party and ideology are controlled for. All else equal, we learn there that moving from strong opposition to strong support of the Tea Party — while somehow holding party and ideology constant — increases

the chances of being racially resentful by 25%. But this finding doesn’t get us much further. Any statistical exercise that purports to measure the “effect” of Tea Partyyism while “controlling” for party and ideology logically must conjure up such implausible chimera as liberal Tea Partiers who vote Democrat. The underlying factual point remains: conservative responses to the “racial resentment” questions are associated with a conservative and individualist ideology that finds wide purchase in American society.

## §

The crudeness of the WISER study offers a vantage point from which to consider the underlying soundness of the whole enterprise. As noted above, “racial resentment” is defined by its creators as a blend of racial animus and traditional American individualism. The first point to note, then, is that the label itself is somewhat misleading since, while it highlights the racial aspect of the attitude, it conceals the concept’s close kinship with the individualist ethos.

**C**onsider one of the questions on the racial resentment battery: “It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites.” Agreeing with this statement, on the one hand, evinces a negative opinion of blacks: they don’t work hard enough. But it also demonstrates agreement with one of the hoariest and most beloved elements of the American creed – propounded by everyone from Oprah Winfrey to Barack Obama to Ralph Waldo Emerson – namely that with hard work anyone can overcome their circumstances and succeed. In the 1986 National Election Study, 59% of whites agreed with the statement about blacks being able to succeed if they only worked harder. But in the same study, 86% of them agreed with the general proposition that “any person who is willing to work hard has a good chance of succeeding.” Agreement with the first

statement is counted by social scientists as “racial resentment”; agreement with the second statement is counted merely as a measure of “individualism.” Yet, if taken literally, the second statement implies the first. And the paradox is compounded by the fact that *blacks* agreed with the individualism statement even more strongly than whites did. Thus, “racial resentment” may be thought of as a sort of racially consistent individualism – an individualism that takes itself sufficiently seriously not to be deterred by the overwhelming evidence of structural impediments to black advancement. The racial aspect of “racial resentment” can be seen as analogous to spandrels – those architectural features consisting of an absence, of a negative space defined by some surrounding positive structure. Racial resentment is old-fashioned American individualism without the racially-aware caveats and qualifications that must be appended to it by anyone with a basic awareness of the structurally subordinate position that blacks have occupied in the American political economy.

If the “racial resentment” term itself is misleading, the interpretations put forward by liberals of its role in Tea Partyyism or opposition to health care reform are doubly so. The data show that if *asked* by an interviewer, Tea Partiers are more likely to say blacks could succeed if they worked harder, that they should work their way up “without special favors,” and so on. The inference made by liberals is that while Tea Partiers may rant about stimulus or health care reform, what they’re *really* expressing deep down is their resentment of blacks. But this doesn’t follow, nor does the evidence seem to substantiate it. In fact, the WISER study discussed above included a content analysis of Tea Party websites in eleven states. Their own data show that only 4% of the content dealt with “race” or gay issues and another 6% with immigration. The great bulk of the verbiage addressed exactly the themes that the Tea Partiers always say they’re most concerned about: socialism and the evils of the state (23%); patriotism and “taking our country back” (10%); big government

(14%), and so on. In its crudest form the racial-resentment argument amounts to a sort of debating trick that could be just as easily turned around against liberals. Surveys show consistently, for example, that the more patriotism one expresses, the more likely one is to be a conservative. By the logic of the racial-resentment theory, it could therefore be said – à la Glenn Beck – that while liberals claim to be for equality or civil liberties, what's really motivating them is their hatred for America – and that the statistics prove it. In other words, the liberal fixation on racial resentment as an explanation of conservatism tells us more about liberals than it does about the “racially resentful.”

**M**ake no mistake; my intention isn't to praise or defend the Tea Partiers or the braying geriatrics who bum-rushed the health care reform town halls two summers ago. It is to ask why liberals, when faced with the political idiom of the American Right, gravitate so insistently toward racialized accounts of their motives. The Right talks endlessly about freedom, defined as negative liberty; yet liberals in their ordinary political discourse have no critique of the right-wing concept of freedom. The Right loudly and consistently champions free markets and capitalism; yet liberals have no principled critique of free markets or capitalism.

Unable or unwilling to articulate any coherent rebuttal of their opponents' ideological rhetoric, liberals instinctively resort to accusations that the opposing ideology is covertly racist because racism – unlike Reaganite celebrations of the magic of the market – requires no refutation. ¶

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# How Can the Left Win?



Richard Seymour

Until recently, the Left in most advanced capitalist societies was in a state of serious disorientation – thrown into this state by the very capitalist crisis that one would have expected to put the ruling class on the defensive. The effects of this disorientation are only now beginning to fade, and the strategic difficulties remain. Nor is there any guarantee of success in the future even as social struggles against "austerity" measures take off. Struggles alone do not automatically conduce to successes for the Left, and their victory can only be assured by political practises.

The thrust of this article, focusing on the U.K., will be that the Right has so far had the initiative because it has successfully piloted a series of ideological articulations that speak to a certain neo-liberal "common sense" and thus plausibly explain and offer solutions to the crisis. These articulations mediate between popular discontent (manifested in loathing of the bankers, distrust of the parliamentary process, and fear of penury) and ruling class imperatives. This strategy is obviously not limited to the Right: the Democrats in the U.S. and social democratic parties in Europe perform a classically "transformist" role, absorbing the elements of dissatisfaction among subaltern groups, expunging their oppositional content, and incorporating them into a politics of the pro-capitalist centre. Nonetheless, it is the Right that has played the dominant role in securing the "austerity" narrative, tailed by the center and center-left. This shouldn't be surprising. In organic crises, the forces best equipped to adapt and re-deploy are those of the ruling class and its allied parties.

For the Left to win, it needs to find adequate modes of political organization and an appropriate series of ideological mediations that explain the crisis, mobilize points of discontent and maintain the unity of the anti-austerity alliance. This should not be seen as opposed to "industrial" struggles; rather, it will have a formative, organizing role in the economic class struggle, ensuring that localized conflicts are generalized (rather than isolated in a way that allows them to be picked off one by one by the ruling class), and giving the working class a chance to move into a "hegemonic" moment in which it both leads and incorporates the interests and perspectives of allied groups. In none of the advanced capitalist states are revolutionary groups currently in a position to challenge for leadership of the working class – far from it – but they should be ready to take the initiative in alliance with sec-

tions of the social democratic left, as well as the left-of-social-democratic left.

## I. The Right

The Right's response to the 2008 slump was fast and effective. They first participated in an enormous leveraging of the state, through the unprecedented bailout of financial institutions, and then took every opportunity to explain that the problem was one of over-spending and indebtedness. It wasn't just the banks who had been too gluttonous. That old bogey, the socialist state, bore responsibility for burdening the British people with larcenous rates of taxation, in order to fund a useless and intrusive welfare state that left people miserable and dysfunctional. It's important to recognise how well-timed and well-pitched this was.

Prior to 2008, the Tories could not have made this argument and anticipated making any headway with it. Instead, their strategy was to match Labour's spending totals and conduct a war of position over the priorities within that accepted framework. But in a sequence notably punctuated by the quasi-comical (underwhelming, on its own terms) parliamentary "expenses" scandal, the Right engaged in a series of manoeuvres which blamed Labour "over-spending" for the deficit - "over-spending" which, until then, they were committed to continuing. And they were given credence by a majority of the British people for a period of time.

There was something very Thatcherite in the manner in which the Right sought to mobilize a certain residual culture of masochism behind austerity - you have over-indulged and must now repent. They operated on a series of connotative linkages, eg. between household and state expenditure, in which the private fear that one has borrowed more than one can afford to pay back is bonded to the ideologeme which holds that the state is always inefficient, always overspending, necessarily unproductive, and always in need of perpetual downsizing. This is the petit-bourgeois manner of thinking, universalised - the nation imagined as a corner shop that has to balance its books and keep an eye out for thieves. Of course, no recipient of state largesse is more inefficient, and less productive, than the "benefit scroungers." Tory propaganda duly worked on this theme, and Osborne swung the axe heavily in the direction of the welfare lifeline. Polls tended to find that people approved of this aspect of the cuts agenda.

# "Struggles alone do not automatically conduce to successes"

Why did the Right embark on this project so quickly? The center-left argues that the politics of "austerity" are purely "ideological" – in that they misrecognize the economic realities – and that their rightist opponents are expediting draconian cuts irresponsibly, in spite of their impact on the system. Yet, having spent so long managing neoliberal capitalism, and unable to think the alternatives, they more or less follow the lead of the Right, offering merely an attenuated version of the same goals. The radical left has focused on two alternative explanations: 1) the distributive contents of "austerity," which will see wealth concentrated more narrowly among the dominant financial bourgeoisie; 2) the systemic impact, in which the freeing up of public resources for private investment, the reduction of wage bills and lower taxes on profits and investments, is expected to produce a new wave of capitalist dynamism.

The trouble with the latter is that no one on the left believes that there is a new wave of capitalist dynamism coming, which leaves us in a similar position to the center-left, arguing that the cuts are "ideological." As for the former, it would be no good transferring wealth to financial elites in the City of London if the result was that the long-term ability of capital to appropriate surplus labor was inhibited as a result. Surely, this would be controversial and destabilizing within any ruling bloc – manufacturers, non-financial services, and small businesses would surely resist. Unless, of course, they believe that these measures will restore capitalist dynamism, in which case we're back to "ideology." This is not say that neither of these explanations holds true – both are important aspects of the truth. It is to say that they are by themselves inadequate.

The question can only be answered at the level of politics. A crucial component of the explanation for austerity must be precisely the manner in which it hands the Right, and the ruling class,

the initiative in political class struggles. When the recession struck, the neoliberal discourses securing consent for ruling class strategies, centered on the idea of the self-sufficient market, were immediately in crisis. To preempt leftist mobilization in favor of interventionist social democratic strategies favorable to the working class, business and finance swiftly coordinated a set of responses highlighting state profligacy as a cause of the crisis. As these interests are condensed within the Conservative leadership, it fell to David Cameron to amplify these responses. Focusing on the deficit, which he blamed on Labour over-spending, he reversed the Tories' previous position in favour of matching Labour's spending total. Instead, the Conservatives would settle the nation's accounts and restore its credibility with financial markets as a precondition for resumed prosperity. It was both a defensive and aggressive manoeuvre. If the left called for stimulus, the right had a seemingly compelling answer: there is no money. If the left called for job creation, the right responded: state-led growth is what brought us here, we need a private sector recovery for prosperity to be sustainable. Not only was the political sphere inoculated against serious abridgments of ruling class property, but a pretext for a further, unprecedented transfer of wealth to the ruling class had been established.

This is an unstable solution for the ruling class. Everyone from Marxists to Keynesian economists to the IMF agree that premature fiscal retrenchment will inhibit recovery. Moreover, the risk that social unrest will destabilize the power blocs in neoliberal states and permit advances for the Left is far from negligible. Yet for this reason, the ruling class is likely to keep its options open. The temporary "Keynesian" measures adopted by capitalist states after the credit crunch showed that short-term stimulus by way of emergency management is well within their repertoire. They can always fall back on temporary intervention, provided it doesn't happen in a way that benefits the Left.

## II. The Left

Until late 2010's student protests, the Left was beset on all sides by a pervading dysphoria and utter perplexity. We know the script after all. The capitalist system goes into an unprecedented global crisis, every stable coordinate of the political-ideological universe is unsettled, governments start borrow-

ing and spending like crazy to stave off a complete collapse, suddenly the bastardised Keynesianism of "old Labour" is back in vogue. In such circumstances, the Right should be on the back-foot and class struggles should take off. And by "class struggles," I don't simply mean strikes and factory occupations. It is in the nature of capitalism to multiply sites of antagonism, and in each of these class will be present in different ways, whether it's over healthcare, supermarket chains, women's oppression, immigrant labour, the media, or war. Notably, the struggles that did emerge, in Vestas, Visteon, the Lindsey oil workers dispute, the Tower Hamlets lecturers' strike, etc., cannot be reduced to simple labour-management disputes over jobs, pay and conditions. Rather, each contained a pronounced "political" element - the environment, pensions, education, immigration, etc.

Given an organic crisis in capitalism, a crisis in productive relations that could not be localized, but necessarily radiated to every political and ideological relation embedded in the system, the Left should have been aggressively making advances on multiple fronts. The Left should have been taking territory and hostages, leaving opponents reeling. But this is not what happened, barring the few flare-ups which I mentioned. And then there is the case of the Lindsey oil refinery in north-east England, where strikers demanded that employers stop hiring overseas workers and assign "British jobs for British workers." This had the dispiriting result of thousands of workers marching for "foreigners out!", and showed that such struggles as did take off did not have to benefit the Left.

This is the point at which, traditionally, one warns against "vulgar economism" and "workerism." And indeed, any temptation to see industrial struggles as the "real" base where everything will be settled is mistaken. As Stathis Kouvelakis points out, it is at the level of politics that "that the contradictions of the economy are concentrated and that their ultimate resolution is decided." And 'economism' does continue to have some impact on those influenced by traditional Labourist and social democratic politics, (recall that Gramsci's critique of "economism" was aimed at the reformist trade union leadership), as demonstrated by the calls to return to "bread and butter" class politics, as if the cultural and political struggles of the Left have had nothing to do with class. Yet, a more prevalent error today is that of the "new social movements," the illusion that leftist politics can be conducted without any orientation

toward class. This has been accentuated where trade union bureaucracies have cooperated with social democratic governments engaging in cuts. The Spanish revolt, concentrated in the occupation of Puerta del Sol, saw youths and non-aligned leftists refuse early serenades from the trade union movement precisely because of the latter's links to the ruling Socialists and their acquiescence in cuts.

Still, it's hard to see how the Left, considering its currently depleted, scattered state, could have done much about the level of class struggle. It was forced into a positional struggle, an ideological battle, in which the "common sense" of neoliberalism initially prevailed over the competing "common sense" of social democracy.

## III. The War of Position

While we anticipate major social struggles continuing over the next few years, with no certainty of avoiding catastrophe much less of attaining victory, the "war of position" will continue to be as important as outright combat. Indeed, ideological, parliamentary and cultural struggles do a great deal to prepare the preconditions for more militant forms of combat such as the withdrawal of labor, factory and university occupations, and other disruptive actions. Here, the Right has long understood something that the Left will do well to remember. Whatever the plane of crisis, whatever the axis of struggle, the issue can always be put another way.

The crisis of capitalism became a crisis of over-spending, just as the crisis of poverty became a crisis of social dysfunction, and a crisis of authority in the British state became a crisis of "multiculturalism." The Right didn't win all the arguments in 2008-9 - far from it. If the washout of the recent right-wing "Rally Against Debt" is any guide, and it was plugged in the media far more than it deserved to be, there is hardly any enthusiasm for the latest assault on welfare and public services. But the Right doesn't have to win all the arguments, or generate enthusiasm. Its near monopoly of the popular and broadsheet press, along with the complicity of the center-left, allowed it to operate on genuinely popular assumptions, absorb elements of popular discontent and polarize them to the Right.

The majority do want to keep some sort of well-funded public sector, don't favor privatization in the NHS, support state education, and blame the bankers for the recession. But distrust of the state (for some good reasons - the Tories

focused a lot of their fire on New Labour authoritarianism and centralisation) is also widespread, as is discontent with how money is spent (again, for some good reasons - think of the PFI boondoggles). Anti-immigrant sentiment is at an all-time high, disdain for beggars and benefit recipients is widespread, and support for redistributive politics after thirteen years of New Labour in office is now a minority pursuit. Meanwhile, local councils are often encountered as some of the most inept, obstinate, and coldly indifferent bureaucracies in the country. So, with a near *Pravda*-esque capitalist realism propagated through the state and capitalist media — one is struck by how often it is still taken as “obvious” that some cuts have to be made somewhere — it only remained for the Tories and their allies to furnish the popular imagination with endless examples of alleged “waste,” incompetence, and fraud. Local councils spending your money on Muslim-only toilets, benefit fraud, illegal immigration, “health tourism,” etc. But things don’t have to be this way.

#### IV. Winning

A minimum precondition for the Left to win is that it can provide a plausible explanation for the crisis and, on the basis of that, a persuasive set of solutions that are neither captive to the logic of neoliberalism — as are the solutions offered by the center-left, focused on modified austerity and a slightly tougher regulatory regime to curtail financial “excesses” — nor improbably maximalist. Kouvelakis describes the impotence of “propagandistic attitudes” simply denouncing capitalism, in contrast to the careful “mediations through which the dominant classes are responding to the crisis.” But the Left requires its own “mediations,” a set of reasonable demands which act on popular attitudes, provide a creditable response to the crisis, and attack weak links in the ideological articulations of the ruling class.

While the Left, and particularly the Marxist Left, is better placed to explain the capitalist crisis than its opponents, its answers have left something to be desired on this front. Left-wing campaigns have focused on reminding people that they hate the rich, really resent them and their power and arrogance; that they don’t trust the Tories; that they like having free healthcare and schools; that the despised bankers caused the crisis, and not ordinary people; that mass unemployment is a social ill for which they will suffer; that

they’re against the wars for which there is endless government money; and that if they think the state is inefficient, they have already tried the private capitalism of Enron, Worldcom and Lehman Brothers.

**“The Left requires its own ‘mediations,’ a set of reasonable demands which act on popular attitudes...”**

This is all very good, but there a deeper set of ideological articulations that need to be shifted. For example, popular support for public services is weakened if it is tied to an ideology of “prosperity” and “wealth creation,” which denies the public sector any role in value creation. For the Tories, public spending is purely derivative of the “real” economy. This conception underlies their constant mantra that if there is to be a recovery it must be led by the private sector. Moreover, since the 1970s, when public spending seemed to do little but fuel inflation while unemployment continued to rise, the Right has waged a resourceful ideological war to popularize such ideas. They attacked state spending as a burden on the “sovereign taxpayer,” and a drain on private sector initiative. Their greatest success was in compelling parties of the center-left to accept their arguments, by defeating the social forces capable of resisting such capitulation. In the past, governments had more faith in the ability of the state to maintain growth through spending; they had a productive rather than merely parasitic conception of the state. But bipartisan orthodoxy for almost a generation now has held that “wealth creation” is something that is carried out solely by dynamic private sector entrepreneurs who must be progressively liberated from the shackles of regulation and taxation — a state of affairs that contributed significantly to our present crisis. If the Right continues to win this argument, they’ll find it much easier to launch even their most unpopular policies such as cuts and privatization in the NHS and schools.

Now we can state, in slightly more

abstract terms, what the strategic aims of the Left ought to be. First, since it is normal for people to entertain conflicting ideas and ambitions, we should aim to shift the weight of emphasis along the continuum away from reactionary resentment and toward popular and class-based anger. Secondly, we should destabilize the austerity alliance by attacking their weak links, and shaking free some loose elements ripe for re-appropriation. For all that we repeat that the ruling coalition is a Thatcherite one, we also have to constantly bear in mind its historical specificity. It is an unstable government, binding Whigs, Peelites, and High Tories, Thatcherite mods and rockers, Eureophiles and Atlanticists, social liberals and reactionaries, have-a-go-heroes and hoodie-huggers, finance capital, producers, the petite-bourgeoisie and the progressive middle class. Attacking the unity of this coalition and dispersing its constituents is a precondition for any meaningful advance. Thirdly, the aim is to re-articulate many of the same elements operated on by the Right into a new majoritarian leftist political mobilization.

UK Uncut is an interesting political intervention in this respect. It can never fulfill the latter two remits, but look at its contribution to the former. There’s been an awful lot of focus on its method of organizing, which may be facing a crisis as it comes under the steamroller of police repression, but far more important is what it has said, the way it has interceded in the ideological field, drawing attention to the underfunding of the state by the rich, the state’s leniency toward the rich, and the fact that cuts are not inevitable or necessary but rather a class-loaded “ideological” project. From a peevish, sectarian perspective, one could write it off as a sort of middle class “people power” movement that will change nothing. But that would be to miss the point entirely. It already has changed what it set out to change: the field of signification. This advance is highly circumscribed, was not achieved by UK Uncut alone, and leaves much work to be accomplished by other forces — but it’s still not to be sniffed at.

The second goal, of shattering the coalition, which the Tories depend on to impose their version of austerity, is not something that one could just assume would happen as a result of the “contradictions” of the coalition. It is something that has to be worked on. The student protests rightly targeted Nick Clegg and the Lib Dems as much as the Tories, turning the renegade Liberal leader (“wolf-eyed replicant...”) into a national hate figure, running

the Liberals down in the polls, and ultimately making it difficult for them even to show their faces in public. I cannot understand the approach of those who say that the Tories are the real enemy and that therefore the venom toward the Liberal leadership is a waste of good spleen. It's because the Tories are the "real enemy" that they have to be isolated, and this coalition broken. As of now, the Tories still don't have enough support to win an election by themselves. They briefly commanded an electorally viable plurality in the period from 2007 to 2009, but have since 2010 been back to their normal range votes, tending to be somewhere between the low to mid-thirties - this despite the astonishing ineptitude of a Labour leadership that never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity. Every time the Tories come out with some right-wing poison about immigration or "integration," it places the coalition in danger. The harder they push for the deepest cuts, for privatization, the more the Liberal leadership has to placate its shrivelled "social liberal" conscience. When the Tories hammered the disastrous AV campaign, it consistently put the Liberals on the back foot. Now they have nothing to show for their gambit, a sort of queen's sacrifice - bar the cuts, and the steadily accumulating ranks of knights, bishops and pawns on the Tories' side. The only rational thing for the Left to do in such circumstances is to keep hammering away, by every available means, until the coalition splits, or enough Liberals defect to trigger an early election.

## "It isn't just about merging the vessels of the extant Left into a single flotilla"

The third goal, that of re-articulating the elements of popular discontent into a majoritarian leftist response to austerity, has proved more difficult. Let's not deny what has been achieved. The turnout for the big TUC rally was amazing, as deep as it was broad, truly represen-

tative of the British labor movement and its periphery - and what a powerful movement that could be if it decided to move all as one. There are real pressures for mass, coordinated strike action coming from below in every trade union. This hasn't turned into independent, rank and file initiative in most cases. Largely, the direction remains in the hands of the bureaucracy. But the pressure is there, and is contributing to the build-up for a mass strike on 30th June.

However, the attempt to build a national political campaign against cuts with similar social depth is taking time. Actually, there are several competing vehicles, and not one of them is adequate on its own; not one capable of extending beyond its party basis and periphery. While each broadly has the same analysis of the cuts, they all operate in different ways, relate to different constituencies, and address a different aspect of the same problem. Such fragmentation almost guarantees that these vehicles will remain confined to the extant left, and probably the far left at that, unable to harness wider forces. This isn't to play the sad old finger-wagging game of simply denouncing "divisions on the Left," wryly referencing *Life of Brian* for the boreteenth time, as if anyone is actually in favor of such divisions. Sometimes, these divisions are necessary, or have a legitimate basis, or are unavoidable; sometimes they aren't. There's no way, at any rate, to simply override these. So, somehow, the different groups have to find the appropriate level at which they can engage in unified action, in order to coordinate publicity and solidarity campaigns, locally and nationally. One could envision, for example, a multiplicity of possible structures (more or less centralised, or federal, depending on the degree of agreement between the factions involved, and the degree of democracy each mode of organising permits) to which different campaign groups could agree to affiliate for a fee, and which would seek the funding and support of the trade unions, etc.. The alternative is to allow the political direction of the anti-cuts movement to be fixed somewhere between a Labour leadership that actually argues for (slower, less savage) cuts, and a trade union leadership some of whose big battalions have resigned themselves to doing the bare minimum to oppose cuts.

Of course, it isn't just about merging the vessels of the extant Left into a single flotilla, at least not for its own sake. It is only worth doing if it increases the combined efficacy of the forces involved. But the point is to coordinate ideological and

cultural counterpoints to the politics of austerity, a task which seems to require a pooling of resources and combination of forces. As and when struggles emerge, unpredictably as they will, the aim is that they will not emerge in a socio-symbolic field cultivated exclusively by the Right, so that they merely appear as law and order problem, but in one where their actions are intelligible as logical and worthy responses to a widely apprehended injustice. This will be particularly important as, increasingly, we're forced to operate in the space between purely impotent civil society protest and illegal and potentially dangerous adventurism. The state hasn't been able to operate through cooptation and consent since the 1960s, and has thus tended increasingly toward the authoritarian end of the spectrum of rule. The criminalization and suppression of protest, however peaceful and formally within the law, is consonant with that. The police will need to continually justify their mode of highly repressive policing without being seen as the armed wing of a particular government, which would be a threat to their legitimacy. Thus, they have to turn a growing number of protests into heavily fortified battlegrounds, with their opponents pre-designated as violent criminals.

**T**he propaganda battle is, of course, partly dependent on class struggles taking off. That is why some of the propaganda stunts are themselves miniature "actions," forms of deliberate disruption. But there can always be simultaneous work going on to reinforce the principles of articulation, the political logics by which diverse contestations are brought into a coherent whole. Opportunities for parliamentary mobilization may come into this, although recent election results in the UK seem to have indicated that in most cases it's close to useless for left-of-Labour forces to stand their own candidates. But there will be other elections, where it is more plausible to stand: student and trade union bodies, local councils, etc. Certainly, legal battles will be important, as the recent verdict over the G20 protests, supporting demonstrators' claims of unjust police treatment, demonstrates. Anti-fascist and anti-racist work will be important, as a desperate Tory party is apt to shore up support by attacking minorities. All of this can be done best if it is done with a constant focus on shifting the balance of common sense away from the neoliberal pole, and in the process transforming the contents of mainstream social democratic thinking in a leftist direction. ¶



# The Jacobin Spirit

on violence and democracy

BY SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Marx's key insight remains valid, perhaps more than ever: for Marx, the question of freedom should not be located primarily in the political sphere proper (Does a country have free elections? Are its judges independent? Is its press free from hidden pressures? Does it respect human rights?). Rather, the key to actual freedom resides in the "apolitical" network of social relations, from the market to the family. Here the change required is not political reform but a transformation of the social relations of production—which entails precisely revolutionary class struggle rather than democratic elections or any other "political" measure in the narrow sense of the term. We do not vote on who owns what, or about relations in the factory, and so on — such matters remain outside the sphere of the political, and it is illusory to expect that one will effectively change things by "extending" democracy into the economic sphere (by, say, reorganizing the banks to place them under popular control). Radical changes in this domain need to be made outside the sphere of legal "rights." In "democratic" procedures (which, of course, can have a positive role to play), no matter how radical our anti-capitalism, solutions are sought solely through those democratic mechanisms which themselves form part of the apparatuses of the "bourgeois" state that guarantees the undisturbed reproduction of capital. In this precise sense, Badiou was right to claim that today the name of the ultimate enemy is not capitalism, empire, exploitation, or anything similar, but democracy itself. It is the "democratic illusion," the acceptance of democratic mechanisms as providing the only framework for all possible change, which prevents any radical transformation of capitalist relations.

Closely linked to this need to defetishize democracy is the need to defetishize its negative counterpart, namely violence. Badiou has recently proposed the formula of "defensive violence": renounce violence as the principal modus operandi, and focus instead on creating free spaces at a distance from state power (like the early Solidarno in Poland); resort to violence only when the state itself

uses violence to crush and subdue these "liberated zones." The trouble with this formula is that it relies on a deeply problematic distinction between the "normal" functioning of the state apparatuses and the "excessive" exercise of state violence. In contrast, the Marxist notion of class struggle — more precisely, of the priority of class struggle over classes conceived as positive social entities — proposes the thesis that "peaceful" social life is itself sustained by (state) violence, i.e., that it is an expression or effect of the predominance of one class over another. In other words, one cannot separate violence from the state conceived as an apparatus of class domination: from the standpoint of the oppressed, the very existence of a state is a violent fact (in the same sense in which Robespierre claimed there was no need to prove that the king had committed any crime, since the very existence of the king was a crime in itself, an offense against the freedom of the people). In this sense, every act of violence against the state on the part of the oppressed is ultimately "defensive." Not to concede this point is, nolens volens, to "normalize" the state and accept that its own acts of violence are merely contingent excesses to be dealt with through democratic reforms. This is why the standard liberal motto — that violence is never legitimate, even though it may sometimes be necessary to resort to it — is insufficient. From a radical emancipatory perspective, this formula should be reversed: for the oppressed, violence is always legitimate (since their very status is the result of the violence they are exposed to), but never necessary (it will always be a matter of strategy whether or not use violence against the enemy).\*

In short, the topic of violence should be demystified: the problem with twentieth-century Communism was not its resort to violence per se, but the mode of functioning which made that recourse to violence inevitable (the Party as instrument of historical necessity, etc.). Advising the CIA on how to undermine the democratically elected Chilean government of Salvador Allende, Henry Kissinger put it succinctly: "Make the

economy scream." Senior US representatives openly admit that today the same strategy is being pursued in Venezuela. As former US Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger said on Fox News:

"[Chávez's appeal] only works so long as the population of Venezuela sees some ability for a better standard of living. If at some point the economy really gets bad, Chávez's popularity within the country will certainly decrease and it's the one weapon we have against him to begin with and which we should be using, namely the economic tools of trying to make the economy even worse so that his appeal in the country and the region goes down [...] Anything we can do to make their economy more difficult for them at this moment is a good thing, but let's do it in ways that do not get us into direct conflict with Venezuela if we can get away with it."

The least one can say is that such statements give credibility to the suspicion that the economic difficulties faced by the Chávez government are not simply the result of its own inept policy making. This brings us to the key political point, difficult to swallow for some liberals: we are clearly dealing here not with blind market processes and reactions, but with an elaborate and well-planned strategy — under such conditions, is not the exercise of a kind of "terror" (police raids on warehouses, detention of speculators, etc.) fully justified as a defensive counter-measure? Even Badiou's formula of "subtraction from the state" plus "only reactive violence" seems insufficient in these new conditions. The problem today is that the state is becoming more and more chaotic, failing even in its proper function of "servicing the goods." Are we still required to remain at a distance from state power when that power is itself disintegrating, and in the process resorting to obscene exercises of violence in order to mask its own impotence?

A more fundamental question might also be raised here: why does the revolutionary Truth-Event entail violence? Because it is enacted from the symptomatic point (or torsion) of the social body, from the point of impossibility of the social totality—its subject is the "part of no-part" of society, those who, although

\* I owe this idea to Udi Aloni.

they are formally part of society, are denied a proper place within it. This is society's "point of truth," and to assert it, the whole structure whose point of impossibility this point is must be annihilated, suspended. For exactly the same reason, as Lenin correctly perceived, the truth is revolutionary—the only way to assert it is to bring about a revolutionary upheaval in the existing hierarchic order. Thus one should oppose the old (pseudo-)Machiavellian idea that truth is impotent and that power, if it is to be effective, has to lie and to cheat: as Lenin claimed, Marxism is strong insofar as it is true. (This holds especially against the postmodern dismissal of universal truth as oppressive, according to which, as Gianni Vattimo put it, if the truth sets us free, it also sets us free from itself.)

## "Robespierre's answer was that the truth is irreducible to numbers..."

In the history of radical politics, violence is usually associated with the so-called Jacobin legacy, and, for that reason, dismissed as something that should be abandoned if we are truly to begin again. Even many contemporary (post-)Marxists are embarrassed by the so-called Jacobin legacy of centralized state terror, from which they want to distance Marx himself, proposing an authentic "liberal" Marx whose thought was later obfuscated by Lenin. It was Lenin, so the story goes, who (re)introduced the Jacobin legacy, thus falsifying Marx's libertarian spirit. But is this really the case? Let us take a closer look at

how the Jacobins rejected the recourse to a majority vote, on behalf of those who speak for an eternal Truth. How could the Jacobins, the partisans of unity and of the struggle against factions, justify this rejection? "The entire difficulty resides in how to distinguish between the voice of truth, even if it is minoritarian, and the factional voice which seeks only to divide artificially to conceal the truth."<sup>\*</sup>

Robespierre's answer was that the truth is irreducible to numbers (to counting); it can be experienced also in solitude: those who proclaim a truth they have experienced should not be treated as factionists, but as sensible and courageous people. Addressing the Assemblée nationale on December 28, 1792, Robespierre claimed that, in attesting to the truth, any invocation of a majority or minority is nothing but a means of reducing "to silence those whom one designated by this term [minority]"; "[The] minority has everywhere an eternal right: to render audible the voice of truth." It is deeply significant that Robespierre made this statement in the Assemblée apropos the trial of the king. The Girondins had proposed a "democratic" solution: in such a difficult case, it was necessary to make an "appeal to the people," to convoke local assemblies across France and ask them to vote on how to deal with the king—only such a move could give legitimacy to the trial. Robespierre's response was that such an appeal to the people would effectively cancel the people's sovereign will which, through the Revolution, had already made itself known and changed the very nature of the French state, bringing the Republic into being. What the Girondins effectively insinuate, he claims, is that the revolutionary insurrection was "only an act of a part of the people, even of a minority, and that one should solicit the speech of a kind of silent majority." In short, the Revolution has already decided the matter, the very fact of the Revolution means that the king is guilty, hence to put his guilt to the vote would mean casting doubt on the Revolution itself. When we are dealing with "strong truths" (*les vérités fortes*), asserting them

necessarily entails symbolic violence.

When *la patrie est en danger*, Robespierre said, one should fearlessly state the fact that "the nation is betrayed. This truth is now known to all Frenchmen"; "Lawgivers, the danger is imminent; the reign of truth has to begin: we are courageous enough to tell you this; be courageous enough to hear it." In such a situation, there can be no room for those taking a neutral third position. In his speech celebrating the dead of August 10, 1792, abbé Grégoire declared: "there are people who are so good that they are worthless; and in a revolution which engages in the struggle of freedom against despotism, a neutral man is a pervert who, without any doubt, waits for how the battle will turn out to decide which side to take." Before we dismiss these lines as "totalitarian," let us recall a later time when the French patrie was again *en danger*, in 1940, when none other than General de Gaulle, in his famous radio address from London, announced to the French people the "strong truth": France is defeated, but the war is not over; against the Pétainist collaborators, the struggle goes on. The exact conditions of this statement are worth recalling: even Jacques Duclos, second in command of the French Communist Party, admitted in a private conversation that, had free elections been held at the time, Marshal Pétain would have won with 90 percent of the votes. When de Gaulle, in his historic address, refused to capitulate and pledged his continued resistance, he claimed that only he, not the Vichy regime, could speak on behalf of the true France (that is: on behalf of France as such, not only on behalf of the "majority of the French"!). What he asserted was deeply true, even if, "democratically speaking," it not only lacked legitimacy, but was clearly opposed to the opinion of the majority of the French people. (The same goes for Germany: those who stood for Germany were the tiny minority who actively resisted Hitler, not the Nazis or the undecided opportunists).<sup>†</sup>

\* Sophie Wahnich, "Faire entendre la voix de la vérité, un droit révolutionnaire éternel" (manuscript, June 2010). All further non-attributed quotes are from this outstanding text.

† The preceding piece was adapted from the afterword to the new paperback edition of *Living in the End Times*, out now from Verso.

# The Power of Nonsense

Slavoj Žižek's left-fascist farce

BY ALAN JOHNSON

"The only "realistic" prospect is to ground a new political universality by opting for the impossible, fully assuming the place of the exception, with no taboos, no a priori norms ("human rights", "democracy"), respect for which would prevent us from "resignifying" terror, the ruthless exercise of power, the spirit of sacrifice ... if this radical choice is decried by some bleeding-heart liberals as *Linksfaschismus*, so be it!"

— Slavoj Žižek

Slavoj Žižek's diagnosis of late capitalism is of genuine interest. His prescription is a disgrace.

Žižek is a spirited critic of the maladies of a form of life that has swept the globe since Thatcher and Reagan. He indicts its "excesses of individualism" and promotion of "social disintegration," its ruinous combination of "(selective) private affluence" with 'global (ecological, infrastructural) degradation,' and its hollowing-out of representative democracy. By treating these maladies as indicators of 'what is wrong in the very structure' of the system Žižek has put back on the agenda of the Left the question of a global alternative to capitalism, warning that we are living through "the self-annihilation of humanity itself." And as a cultural critic he can be brilliant in forcing us to adopt strange angles of vision on a vast array of familiar objects and mind-sets, high and low, so that we see them afresh as forms of meaning in the service of this system-in-crisis.

Žižek's remedy however – his call for Terror and Dictatorship set out in the extract from the paperback edition of *Living in the End Times* reproduced in this issue of Jacobin – is another matter entirely.

Mark Lilla in his book *The Reckless Mind* predicted that the "extraordinary displays of intellectual philotyranny" that disfigured the twentieth century left would not simply disappear just because the wall had fallen. So it has proved. Since 2000, Žižek has established his "New Communism" on two foundations. First, a system of concepts – Egalitarian Terror, the Absolute Act, Absolute Negativity, Divine Violence, the Messianic Moment, the Revolutionary Truth-Event, the Future Antérieur, and so on. Second, a human type and an associated sensibility – that ideologized and cruel fanatic, contemptuous of morality and trained to enormity that Žižek calls the "freedom fighter with an inhuman face." In his passive-aggressive way, Žižek has even admitted what this so-called New Communism amounts to: "[Peter] Sloter-

dijk even mentions the "re-emerging Left-Fascist whispering at the borders of academia,' where, I guess, I belong."

Žižek's philosophy is, to be blunt, a species of *linksfaschismus*. This is true of its murderous hostility to democracy, its utter disdain for the 'stupid' pleasures of bourgeois life, its valorization of will, ruthlessness, terror and dictatorship, and its belief in the salvific nature of self-sacrificial death.

**"What is at stake  
is the possibility  
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corpses"**

When Žižek says he wants to "repeat Lenin" he is often misunderstood. He means he wants to do the kind of thing Lenin did to Marxism, for good or ill, in 1914-1918: utterly recast it. Žižek is busy utterly recasting Marxism as a kind of *linksfaschismus* – an anti-capitalist radicalism that has been unmoored from self-emancipation, democracy, and reason and re-attached to Terror, Dictatorship and an eternal, absolute and universal "Truth" capable of being known only by an elite, and understood, he tells us, following Badiou, never as *Istina* (truth as adequacy to the facts) but always as *Pravda* – "the absolute Truth also designating the ethically committed ideal Order of the Good."

## Getting Marx Wrong

In "The Jacobin Spirit" Žižek "Marxified" his argument for terror and dictatorship by radically misconstruing what "Marx's key insight" was. He claimed

Marx understood political democracy to be a mere "democratic illusion" because without economic equality political democracy can only be a tool of the ruling class, a part of the state apparatus and therefore our "main enemy." This gets Marx totally wrong. And getting Marx *right* is not merely an academic exercise. Looking back, what is at stake are those 100 million Communist corpses memorialized by Vasily Grossman in *Forever Flowing*, with their "crazed eyes; smashed kidneys; skull[s] pierced by a bullet; rotting infected, gangrenous toes; and scurvy racked corpses in log-cabin, dugout morgues." Looking forward, what is at stake is the possibility of the Left creating more corpses.

Marx's key insight did indeed concern the relation between the social question and political democracy, but rather than counterpoise the two as Žižek does, Marx's revolution in thought was, precisely, to *integrate them on the social ground of popular self-emancipation*. Žižek denies the very possibility of self-emancipation, so can see only a clash between the social question and political democracy. He seeks to resolve that clash by using terror and dictatorship to impose "Communism." That is what he means by "The Jacobin Spirit."

From 1970 to 1990 the revolutionary socialist Hal Draper devoted himself almost exclusively to Marx scholarship. The main result was the four-volume *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, two thousand pages of meticulous textual exegesis and analysis. Draper's central argument: Marx did not abandon liberty and democracy to become a communist but became a communist in order to make real the promise of liberty and democracy. There was continuity from "his democratic views of 1842 [to] the revolutionary communism of his mature years." Marx started out a "democratic extremist" unambiguously committed to freedom of expression and organization, the rule of law and democratic institutions, and viscerally opposed to the

unaccountable power of the state and its core, the bureaucracy. What then forced a deepening (not an abandonment) of his democratic extremism was his insistence on treating the promise of freedom and democracy not in abstraction, as free-floating discourses, but in their external social relations here down on earth. Žižek's claim that Marx saw democracy as "the ultimate enemy" inverts Marx's actual insight – that the full promise of political democracy could only be fulfilled by the extension of democracy into the social and economic. This is how Hal Draper frames Marx's journey:

"Marx was the first socialist figure to come to an acceptance of the socialist idea through the battle for the consistent expression of democratic control from below. He was the first figure in the socialist movement who, in a personal sense, came through the bourgeois-democratic movement: through it to its farthest bounds, and then out by its farthest end. In this sense, he was the first to fuse the struggle for consistent political democracy with the struggle for a socialist transformation. But it might be asked, wasn't it the case that, in his course from bourgeois democracy to communism, Marx relinquished his early naive notions about political democracy? Not in Marx's view."

Contra Žižek, Marx's "key insight" was that it had become possible for the first time in human history to pose the relation between political democracy and the social question in a radically new way. Rejecting the Jacobin educational dictatorship that Žižek would have us rehabilitate, Marx grasped, as Draper argues, "the social dynamics of the situation under which the apparent contradiction between the two [i.e. political democracy and the social question]...is resolved." Global capitalism, he understood, had created not just exploitation but also the material ground on which the relationship of the social question to political freedom might be resolved through a *political process of popular self-emancipation*.

The core or essential structure of any putative democratic Marxism is this theoretical and practical integration of socialism and democracy. The core of Žižek's Marxism-as-*Linksfaschismus* is the theoretical and practical counterposition of socialism and democracy. Whatever the "Jacobin spirit" was for the Jacobins, for Žižek it is shorthand for the rehabilitation of Terror and educational dictatorship.

## Žižek and Terror

**Z**ižek's "Jacobin Spirit" is the latest in a long (and, lest we forget, sometimes genocidal) line of "socialisms from above." The useful term was coined by Hal Draper to describe the tendency of socialists to think of

socialism not as the act of the immense majority in the interests of the immense majority (popular self-emancipation), but as "a societal rearrangement to be handed down to the grateful masses ... by a ruling elite which is not in fact subjected to the masses' control ... or indeed, to be imposed upon the people from above, whether they are grateful or not."

At the heart of self-emancipatory socialism is that long and open-ended social process that Norman Geras has called "interiority" – a practical process of maturation, or learning through doing. (It was in this sense that Eduard Bernstein was absolutely right to say "the movement is everything.") This conception of socialism led Marx and Engels directly to a serious engagement with bourgeois democracy, a refusal of the anarchist rejection of politics, a loathing of terrorism, and a turn to political and industrial struggle to realize the promise of bourgeois democracy through a fight for the *extension of equality* from the civil to the social and economic spheres. In 1848-9 Marx looked to a dynamic process of popular political struggle in which the demand for *liberalization* would stimulate a drive for constitutionalism, a democratic political life and a government of laws, until this struggle in turn spilled over uninterruptedly to a *revolutionary* drive for *democratization* of social and economic life as such, popular control from below.

By contrast, Žižek's "Jacobin Spirit," by bluntly dismissing both political democracy as "the main enemy" and self-emancipation as a pipe-dream (and, we can note only in passing, by his bracketing of the centuries-long history of working-class struggle to "win the battle of democracy"!) leaves his 'Revolutionary Truth-Event' completely dependent on the *transformative power of violence*.

**E**dward Bernstein was the first to spot this danger. He saw that the marriage of a speculative Hegelianism and a putschist Blanquism *within* the Marxist movement would transform Marxism, by tempting social democrats to give up the "solid ground of empirically verifiable facts" and embrace instead "derived concepts" and "arbitrary construction." He foresaw that "all moderation of judgment [would be] lost from view" as "inherently improbable deductions" were embraced regarding "potential transformations." And – here's the rub – he grasped that this "almost incredible neglect of the most palpable facts" *had to be* partnered by "a truly miraculous belief in the creative power of force." Oft dismissed as a superficial thinker, in fact it was Bernstein who most fully understood that beneath the externals of Blanquism (the absurd secret societies, the tragi-comic putsches) was a serious underlying political theory concern-

ing "the immeasurably creative power of revolutionary political force and its manifestation, revolutionary expropriation." Bernstein predicted that if this theory were allowed to spread it would become a "treacherous element" within Marxism itself, bending it into dictatorial shapes. Prescient indeed. And things on this score only got worse in the twentieth century. Reading Žižek's impatient and violence-soaked "Jacobin Spirit" one is reminded of Alain Finkielkraut's observation that "the 20th century [fell] firmly into the clutches of [a] Hegelianism ... that was no longer contemplative, inspired by the glow of twilight, but by the light of the morning, unrestrained and militant."

So: Hegelianism as a philosophical Blanquism; unrestrained, militant, possessed of Truth, willing to force the pace of History, and eager to crack heads to impose it: that is Žižekianism. And, ironically, for all his displays of fealty, Žižek seems not even to know that back in 1920 Lenin attacked this very thing as an "infantile disorder" certain to lead to bloody defeats for the workers movement.

**L**enin flatly rejected the ultra-leftist idea of "imposing" the revolution without popular support and participation. The "theory of the offensive" he considered to be "phrase-mongering and clowning" and he called its rejection of all compromises "childish." Lenin warned against mistaking subjective desires for objective reality. (Žižek's entire theory of revolution is premised on doing exactly that, knowingly, hoping that all will come out clean in the wash, as, in Žižek's jargon, "An act proper...retroactively creates its own conditions.") Warning against the use of "Left" slogans that only fence the revolutionaries off from the people, Lenin pointed out that the Russian experience in 1917 was very often "not applicable to present-day European conditions." He pleaded that tactics be based strictly on "a sober and strictly objective appraisal of all the class forces in a particular state" and expressed a particular scorn for those who "want to create a new society, yet...fear the difficulties involved in forming a good parliamentary group" advising that "in Western Europe and in America, the Communists must learn to create a new uncustomary, non-opportunist, and non-careerist parliamentarism" in order to "help the majority of the working class to be convinced by their own experience that we are right." And, note, Lenin wrote all of this in 1920 when it was still possible to believe that "the proletarian vanguard has been won over ideologically. That is the main thing." Perhaps this Lenin, not Žižek's cardboard Man of Action from 1917, is the one that bears repeating today.

## Žižek and Educational Dictatorship

"When we are dealing with "strong truths" (les vérités fortes), asserting them necessarily entails symbolic violence."

— Slavoj Žižek, "The Jacobin Spirit"

"There is no more Vendée... According to the orders that you gave me, I crushed the children under the feet of the horses, massacred the women who, at least for these, will not give birth to any more brigands. I do not have a prisoner to reproach me. I have exterminated all."

— Francois Joseph Westermann writing in 1794 to the Committee of Public Safety about the massacres in Vendée.

I'll give Žižek this. It was indeed Lenin who consummated the marriage of Hegelianism and Blanquism within the Marxist movement and who gave us a firstborn – an anti-democratic conception of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" that he substituted for Marx's democratic original. It was indeed Lenin who began the work of "Marxifying" arbitrary construction and the cult of force and who did the most to turn Marxism into an organized Blanquism.

When Hal Draper reconstructed the text and context of each and every use by Marx of the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" he was able to establish that the ill-starred term was actually invented by Marx as a way to re-educate Blanquists away from Blanquism. Marx was trying to confront the Blanquist notion of *revolution as elite putsch* with his own theory of *revolution as an open-ended process of popular self-emancipation*. He did not have in mind a special dictatorial governmental *form* at all, but was only referring only to the class content of the state. Generally speaking, for Marx the "rule of the proletariat" meant the working class leadership of an "immense majority block," while the governmental form of that rule was the democratic republic: popular control over the sovereign body of the state, universal suffrage, representative democracy, a democratic constitution, and truly mass involvement in political decision-making. Engels, in his 1895 critique of the *Erfurt Program*, linked (social) form and (political) content thus: "the working class can come to power only under the form of the democratic republic. This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat."

Marx's democratic conception was replaced by the Leninist doppelganger and "dictatorship of the proletariat" came to mean specially dictatorial governmental forms and policies. Plekhanov wrote it into the program

of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1903 and Lenin adopted Plekhanov's conception, albeit not as an emergency measure but in principle, as a mark of revolutionary virtue. It must be said, Lenin can sound very like Žižek: "The scientific term 'dictatorship' means nothing more nor less than authority untrammeled by any laws, absolutely unrestricted by any rules whatever, and based directly on force. The term 'dictatorship' has no other meaning than this." But as Draper mournfully pointed out, Lenin's formulation was "a theoretical disaster, first class [with] nothing in common... with any conception of the workers state" held by Marx.

**"There is a milieu out there in which red has met brown, Left has met Right"**

Žižek looks on this theoretical disaster and says, so to speak, "Upon this rock I will build my Church." "In a proletarian revolution, democracy has to be replaced by the dictatorship of the proletariat," he writes. He thus rehabilitates what Marx called "the old crap" – Terror, Putsch and Educational Dictatorship to impose "Communism." He treats us to much of what I think of as Higher Leftist Thuggery. He tells us that "just and severe punishment of the enemies is the highest form of clemency," that 'rigor and charity coincide in terror,' and so on and so forth. He thinks Saint-Just's view, "That which produces the general good is always terrible", is a good guide for us today. "These words should not be interpreted as a warning against the temptation to violently impose the general good on a society but on the contrary, as a bitter truth to be fully endorsed." Like the Jacobins, Žižek also refuses "recourse to a majority vote." Like Mao, Žižek also treats people as "a clean sheet of paper with no blotches" on which he will write his "beautiful words."

Understood as an open-ended process of popular self-emancipation, our understanding of the contours of a post-revolutionary polity would be radically different. For a start, it can't be just anti-capitalist, but must also

be pro-freedom. (We have *done* anti-capitalist plus anti-freedom and we got camps – has Žižek learnt nothing?) Nor can it be an organicism that abolishes the individual's moral status in the name of the "General Interest," carried in trust by an educational dictatorship, in the name of Truth conceived as "the ideal ... Order of the Good."

Sneering at Marx's trust in "some authentic working-class movement" as a silly pipe-dream, and influenced by the Maoist philosopher Alain Badiou, Žižek urges on his readers a very odd kind of commitment. We are to have fidelity to the Eternal Idea of Communism understood as "a Kantian regulative idea, lacking any mediation with historical reality." Žižek instructs us to "reconceive the idea of Communism as an Idea in the Hegelian sense, that is, as an Idea which is in the process of its own actualization." Žižek claims that "The Idea that 'makes itself what it is' is thus no longer a concept opposed to reality as its lifeless shadow, but one which gives reality and existence to itself." Sebastiano Timpanaro used to call this sort of thing a "spiritualist voluntarism." And he noted that it was usually partnered by a "brutal ethics of force." So it is with Žižek. In the name of fidelity to this Eternal Idea, Žižek would license much enormity. In "The Jacobin Spirit," for example, he writes that anyone so much as "casting doubt" on the Eternal Idea must be dealt with brutally or else "the reign of Truth" (what a stupid phrase!) will never be secured. How many barbarities were committed in just that spirit during the 20th century? How much shameful apologia, denial and intellectual corruption?

Back in the 1840s Marx saw the danger. He tried (and failed) to reorient socialism by linking it to the Interest and democracy and not the Idea and dictatorship. He argued, against Bruno Bauer, that the "Idea" would always disgrace itself insofar as it was different from the Interest. Marx wanted nothing to do with an elitist conception of politics "in which *the Spirit*, or *the Criticism*, represents the organizing labor, the mass the *raw material*, and history the *product*." Žižek's theory of revolution is exactly that: the Idea disgracing itself because it has become detached from the Interest and from democracy, from self-emancipation and from ethics, from reason and from historical reality, until it is left resting on nothing but will and violence.

## Conclusion

In the 20th century – aside from this little sect, that little journal – Marxism became unmoored from democracy and self-emancipation but refused to relinquish its goal of "Communism."

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It became an organized Blanquism before the revolution, a bureaucratic collectivism after the revolution, and, at all times, a vehicle through which the “anonymous intentionality” of the totalitarian regime of thought and language was expressed (the term is taken from the indispensable French antitotalitarian social theorist Claude Lefort). Anonymous intentionality because while it could not reasonably be said of Marxists that the name of their desire was to create Kolyma, create it they did, again and again, across many continents. For Lefort, part of the explanation for this unintended consequence on such a spectacular scale was the power of the regime of thought and language common to fascism and communism to exert a tremendously powerful pull, an anonymous intentionality, on every individual who became its bearer.

“As Bertrand Russell once said, never underestimate the power of nonsense.”

Žižek is inviting us to become its bearer again: that is the meaning of his rehabilitation of Terror and Dictatorship. He wants us to pick up the ring of power. That is why he says, in a calumny against Trotsky, “I am ready to assert the Trotsky of the universal militarization of life...That is the good Trotsky for me.” It is why he gushes in admiration for Lenin’s firing squads, and for the

“steely fourth Teacher,” Stalin. It is why he praises Mao, the architect of “the last big instalment in the life of this Idea.”

When Ernesto Laclau wrote back in 2000 that Žižek’s anti-democratic ideas would put the left back half a century he was too generous. The ‘revolution’ Žižek seeks – whatever fancy new language is deployed to camouflage this – is a Blanquist putsch to prepare an Educational Dictatorship. Engels dismissed that as “Crude Communism” 168 years ago.

Of course, some will say Žižek is a jester and should not be taken seriously. That would be a mistake. As Bertrand Russell once said, never underestimate the power of nonsense. There is a milieu out there in which red has met brown, left has met right, a conversation has started up, and the interlocutors are discovering they have more in common than they thought. This hybridity is not without precedent. From the 1920s to the 1940s Fascism in France was, in Zeev Sternhell’s words, “neither left nor right” but both. Left and right were united in their hatred of what they called “the established disorder” of materialism, parliamentary democracy and bourgeois society, as well as in their mutual “distaste for the lukewarm,” and fascination with “the idea of a violent relief from mediocrity.” Žižek’s own fascination with the idea of violent relief – the call for offensive violence against the “bourgeois state” (“the whole structure ... must be annihilated”) was explicit in “The Jacobin Spirit” as was his yearning to then wield “centralized state terror” for “an Eternal Truth” – is gradually acclimatizing the Left to enormity. His spiritualist voluntarism and brutal ethics of force, his commitment to Terror and Dictatorship for Absolute Truth, not to mention his metaphysics (and creepy aesthetics) of violence, pain and self-sacrificial death, are similarly “neither Left nor Right.” Žižek senses this, but he does not care – “if this be *linksfaschismus*, so be it!” Nor it seems, does the Left. It should. ¶

# Zombie Marx

## the arrogance of Marxist economists

BY MIKE BEGGS

In 2009, UC Berkeley Economics Professor and former Clinton adviser Brad DeLong took a potshot at David Harvey on his blog. Headlined “Department of ‘Huh?’,” and beginning “Why neoclassical economics is an absolutely wonderful thing,” the post quotes eleven straight paragraphs from a Harvey essay, which DeLong proceeds to ridicule.

For DeLong, the essay is contentless waffle. It strings together economic concepts without making an economic argument. He would call it “intellectual masturbation,” except it “does not feel good at all.” Only in the eleventh paragraph does he find “the suggestion of a shadow of an argument.” Here Harvey argues that the U.S. stimulus package is bound to fail because the deficit needs to be financed by foreign powers, and the amount of Treasury bonds it will be able to sell to the likes of the Chinese central bank will not fund a big enough stimulus. DeLong responds that this is a question that requires a theory of the bond market and interest rates, which Harvey does not provide: “The question is thus not can government deficit spending be financed … the question is *at what interest rate* will financial markets finance that deficit spending.”

Harvey responded with anger at “the arrogance of neoclassical economists.”

“I would have thought that in a profession dominated by neoclassical and increasingly neoliberal theory these last thirty years, that there might have appeared at least some sliver of humility. They have collectively provided us with no guidance on how to avoid the current mess and now, when faced with a crisis, they can only say, as Marx long ago presciently noted, that things would not be so if the economy only performed according to their textbooks. Maybe it is time to revise if not change the textbooks.”

He goes on to bring up Sraffa and the “Cambridge capital controversies” of the 1960s, which, he argues, showed that “all of neoclassical theory is based on a tautology”. DeLong’s argument was “a bit of casual empiricism about the current low and seemingly stable rate of return on long-term treasuries”. “Why bother” with neoclassical economics at all, he asks.

Many will already be laughing and

mocking along with Harvey. And perhaps DeLong deserves no better. Yet on the point at issue, he was right – it is a question of interest rates, not of the number of bonds that can be sold. When Harvey went on to clarify his argument, it was only with some casual empiricism of his own. He noted that he was hardly the only one to be making the argument that East Asian central banks could stop collecting US Treasuries, so that “the track of long-term treasury interest rates may go the way of the housing market data in just a couple of years (if not months).” This was an argument you could read in mainstream business pages; there was nothing particularly Marxist about it. Now that we are more than a couple of years down the track, DeLong still looks right: the yields on long-term Treasury bonds are, as I write in July 2011, about the same as they were in February 2009, when the exchange took place. The limits to stimulus have been political, not financial.

Many Marxists see mainstream economics as a degenerate mirror-image of what they think *Capital* provides for them: a systematic model of capitalism built up from first principles. The main difference is that mainstream economics is ideological and apologetic, hopelessly inadequate for understanding the true nature of capitalism. So for Harvey the ultimate charge he can throw is that it is “based on a tautology”: a logical flaw was discovered in the 1960s that should have spelled its end; everything since is “casual empiricism.”

There really are neoclassical economists who insist on building a system from axioms, who believe, among other things, that no macroeconomics is worthwhile until it has been grounded in the “micro-foundations” of formally modeled rational individual action. But this is a minority, academic pursuit that has little to do with the pragmatic economics involved, for example, in analyzing the relationship between the US federal government’s deficit and long term interest rates. Criticism of the incoherence or unrealistic assumptions of neoclassical economics can be easily deflected – most economists will freely admit they are simply heuristics and would be quite happy to be considered pragmatic “casu-

al empiricists.” Textbook epigraphs and departmental websites quote Keynes:

“The Theory of Economics does not furnish a body of settled conclusions immediately applicable to policy. It is a method rather than a doctrine, an apparatus of the mind, a technique of thinking, which helps its possessor to draw correct conclusions.”

There are generations of economists who would call themselves Marxists, or admit Marx as a major influence, who have taken a similar approach. They have engaged with other strands of economic thought and folded them into their worldview, have worried little about dropping from their analyses those aspects of Marx’s argument they believed to be wrong or unhelpful, and have felt no need to pepper their writing with appeals to authority in the form of biblical quotations.

But in each generation, there are others who have defended an “orthodox” Marxian economics as a separate and superior paradigm, which can only be contaminated by absorbing ideas from elsewhere. The pugnacious Andrew Kliman, for example, opens his *Reclaiming Marx’s Capital* with the line “The economists have changed Marx, in various ways; the point is to interpret him – correctly.” Accordingly, he unabashedly spends a chapter on hermeneutic method, and the book is devoted to proving the internal logical consistency of a method for transforming the values of Volume I into the production prices of Volume III. This, at least, is more sophisticated than what we might call Frankenstein Marx – the stitching together of an argument from authority by stringing together famous quotations torn out of context.

Criticizing Frankenstein Marxism is like campaigning for motherhood and apple pie – no one will disagree. What I call Zombie Marx is different – the reanimation of a corpse which still holds organically together in some way. This is the reconstruction of Marxist economics as a coherent body of thought, not a collection of quotations. That this work is dogmatic is not my complaint. As Thomas Kuhn suggested in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,

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a little dogmatism is important to most science, maintaining the coherence of a community of researchers and organizing its research agenda. Mainstream academic economics is very dogmatic about its theoretical core – methodological individualism and the general equilibrium apparatus. It is unfair to single out Marxists. Rather, it is scholasticism that is the problem – the need to ground everything in a 140-year-old text. It would be wrong to say that the likes of Kliman are dogmatic in the sense that they demand unthinking acceptance of everything in *Capital* – it is obviously a lot of intellectual hard work to “interpret Marx correctly.” It cannot be taken for granted that Marx was right; it must be proven anew with each generation, against both rival interpretations and the revisions the previous generation had found necessary to make.

## “Thirty years on, that intellectual confidence has receded”

Reanimating Marx can be very fruitful at times, and who has shown this better than David Harvey? *His Limits to Capital* is a masterpiece of social theory drawing on nothing but *Capital* and the secondary literature around it. This groundbreaking work is original mainly in the way it reorganizes Marx’s work, but in his analysis of the geography of capitalism Harvey proved that *Capital* had still not finished giving. However, *Limits* is a book written at the high tide of Marxian intellectual confidence, in the wake of a flowering of radical political economy. It could admit frankly in its first chapter that the “critics of value theory have mounted a quite successful campaign against traditional interpretations” of the “labor theory of value”, and the rest of the book was a testament to how little that mattered.

Thirty years on, that intellectual confidence has receded. The fundamentalist “back to the text” movement is the downswing of a familiar cycle in the history of Marxian economics. It is a pattern, I think, that has more to do with the social conditions of its reproduction than anything inherent in its content. Modern neoclassical economics is the overwhelmingly dominant paradigm in a mature, prestigious academic discipline.

Students are introduced into a system of thought as a physics student might, proceeding through textbooks, with exercises at the end of each chapter, with each section building on the ones before, and with each year’s textbooks adding complications and refinements to what was learned the previous year. The history of the received wisdom leaves traces only in the names attached to various concepts: “Pareto optimality,” “the Slutsky equation,” “Okun’s law.” In contrast, Marxian economics is united mainly through shared adherence to a political tradition – a very fractious political tradition. It is academically marginal, with few institutional supports – its theorists tend to lead isolated scholarly existences, in a pocket of like-minded thinkers at best. Instead, its history shows a succession of writers, occasionally coalescing for a time into schools, who have developed in one direction or another, only to be ignored or rejected by those who came after. There is a tendency for productive debates, which drive analysis forward, to peter out and be forgotten as the tradition repeatedly circles back to its founding text, its only common ground. Interpretation of a text has trumped interpretation of the world.

### Back to the 1860s

But there is a problem in taking *Capital* as a fully-formed alternative to modern economics – the dominant political economy Marx engaged with in his critique was a very different beast. *Capital* is a work of the 1860s, through and through. No matter how fundamental the critique, both form and content are shaped by the object of criticism. Classical political economy leaves its traces in *Capital* both in the questions Marx believed needed answers and his approach to answering them. More than 140 years later, reading *Capital* without much knowledge of its intellectual context, it is easy to misidentify what exactly its novelties were. Holding a fundamentalist reading of *Capital* against modern economics often involves anachronistically defending the concerns and framing of mid-Victorian political economy rather than any particularly radical criticism of economics past or present.

One example is Marx’s critique of “supply-and-demand” analysis. It is easy to find passages in his writing where he dismisses such theories of value, on the grounds that imbalances in supply and demand may explain fluctuations of market price around prices-of-production, but cannot explain the point at which supply and demand balance. For example:

“If two forces act in opposing directions and cancel one another out, they have no external impact whatsoever, and phenomena that appear under these condi-

tions must be explained otherwise than by the operation of these two forces. If demand and supply cancel one another out, they cease to explain anything, have no effect on market value and leave us completely in the dark as to why this market value is expressed in precisely such a sum of money and no other.” [Capital, Vol. III: p. 291 of the 1981 Penguin edition]

This seems very clear-cut, and is quoted in many places as Marx’s knock-down argument against neoclassical theories of value. (See, for example, Harvey [2006: 9-10].) But it is not, because the marginalists who inaugurated today’s neoclassical analysis meant something quite different by “supply and demand.” They thought in terms of supply and demand schedules or curves – this is precisely what constitutes the marginalist revolution and separates the neoclassicals from the classics of Marx’s day. In neoclassical analysis, supply and demand were no longer conceived as “forces,” as Marx puts it, but as complexes of counterfactuals stating what quantity of a commodity would be offered or purchased at different prices, given certain other factors like income and the prices of other related goods.

By “supply and demand” most classics referred simply to quantities supplied or demanded, and in this context it makes perfect sense for Marx to complain that “supply and demand” settled nothing, and that the real question was what determined the levels of supply and demand. But the marginalists’ apparatus of supply and demand schedules was a framework for answering this question. Marx could not be expected to have engaged with this literature in the 1860s, for the simple reason that it did not appear widely until the 1870s (the inevitable isolated forerunners aside).

Ironically, though, for those who quote the above passage from *Capital* against marginalist analysis, it appears in the middle of a section of Volume III in which Marx develops the beginnings of an argument that looks distinctly like the neoclassical concept of the elasticity of demand with respect to income and price. For example:

“It appears, therefore, that there is a certain quantitatively defined social need on the demand side, which requires for its fulfilment a definite quantity of an article on the market. In fact, however, the quantitative determination of this need is completely elastic and fluctuating. Its fixed character is mere illusion. If means of subsistence were cheaper or money wages higher, the workers would buy more of them, and a greater ‘social need’ for these kinds of commodity would appear...” [Marx, 1981: 290]

Elsewhere in the same volume, he writes:

“It is evident ... that the expansion and contraction of the market depends on the price

of the individual commodity and stands in inverse relationship to the rise or fall in this price. It happens in fact, therefore, that a rise in the price of raw material does not lead the price of the manufactured product to rise in the same proportion, or to fall in the same proportion when the price of the raw material falls.” [ibid: 203]

I could go on. My point here is not to say “Aha! – Marx anticipated Alfred Marshall.” These are scattered fragments not developed into a coherent statement. Neoclassical concepts could actually be a tool to deal more systematically with this kind of problem, which Marx evidently felt was worth engaging with. But more broadly, my argument is that there is perhaps not such a gulf between Marx and certain aspects of neoclassical analysis as is often implied. Marx believed Ricardo’s labor theory of value was a great advance over Adam Smith’s eclectic “adding-up” theory of value, which neglected the interdependence of wages, profits and rent. Ricardo’s critique was, in a sense, a primitive general equilibrium critique of Smith’s partial equilibria. But the labour theory of value had problems of its own, most prominently the awkwardness involved in modifying labor values to take account of differences in capital intensity. Both Ricardo and Marx were well aware of the problem, but it is hard to avoid seeing Marx’s “transformation” solution as *ad hoc* in the manner of Ptolemy’s epicycles, even if put in a logically coherent form.

## “The pursuit of a separate system of economics as something wholly other from mainstream economics isolates us...”

I have suggested that there are elements in *Capital* that point beyond the labour theory of value and towards supply-and-demand analysis, and I believe that any adequate theory of value needs to do this. It is not such a challenge to the basic results of the labor-value analysis as it may seem, either. Alfred Marshall himself argued in an appendix to his *Principles of Economics* that his

marginalist analysis did not undermine Ricardo’s theory of long-run value, because in the long run producers shift between sectors chasing abnormally high and fleeing abnormally low returns to their investments, so that supply conditions determine price. Demand matters in the long run only to the extent that the quantity produced and sold affects the cost of production, due to economies of scale, inputs whose supply can be increased only at increasing cost, etc. That demand or “social need” could influence socially-necessary labour time and therefore value, Marx was fully aware.

There is little for Marxists to fear from importing the concepts of supply and demand schedules. The critical importance of labor time does not disappear, but can actually be put on a firmer footing, because it makes possible (1) a more elegant treatment of relative prices than the classical multi-stage analysis in which the impact of labour, capital and land are dealt with sequentially; and (2) a framework for dealing with relative prices in both the short and long run, and the relationship between them, whereas the classical analysis generally neglects or leaves the short run indeterminate.

Another example, which I will not go into in so much detail, is Marx’s criticism of the quantity theory of money, which held that the quantity of money in circulation determined the price level. Marx reversed the direction of causation, arguing that the price level determines the quantity of money in circulation. Much of his criticism of the classical quantity theory remains valid. But as a positive theory of the price level, it is bound to the historical conditions of the gold standard, in which convertibility anchored the price level in the long run.

Marx was well ahead of his time in developing a theory of monetary income-expenditure flows with his reproduction schema, and even a monetary theory of interest rates and the business cycle. But these monetary dynamics were completely divorced from his theory of prices. They are separate questions in Marx’s system: when he comes to discuss flows, he takes value for granted, and vice versa. Inflation was simply not seen as an independent phenomenon worthy of analysis, as it would become in the 20th century when the gold anchor loosened and dropped away. It was enough to know that the anchor would assert itself eventually. The problem for the state or central bank was not the value of money *per se*, but the convertibility of particular monies. But in our world of chronic, if low-level, inflation and floating exchange rates, we need different things from our monetary theory. We have no choice but to engage with new questions Marx could not have imagined – and here the reference point should

be Keynes and the post-Keynesians.

## The Spirit and the Corpse

If we are to engage in these ways with modern economics, what, if anything, makes our analysis distinctively Marxist? It is the two-fold project behind *Capital* as a critique of political economy: first to demonstrate the social preconditions that lie beneath the concepts of political economy, and especially their dependence on class relationships; and second, to demonstrate these social relations as historical, not eternal.

These two strands of Marx’s thought are as valid as ever. The way to apply them today is not to maintain the form and content of *Capital* as a complete, separate way to approach economics, as if we are superior because we begin from superior principles. Instead, I think it is to approach modern economics as we find it and ask the same kinds of critical questions: what are the social conditions that make economic phenomena appear the way they do? It is to deal not only, not even mainly, with economic high theory, but also with the applied economics produced every day in the reports and statements of central banks, Treasuries, the IMF, etc., and ask, what are the implicit class relations here? Why are these the driving issues at this point in history? What are the deeper social contradictions lying behind them? The pursuit of a separate system of economics as something wholly other from mainstream economics isolates us from the political and ideological space where these things take place: better, instead, to fight from the inside, to make clear the social and political content of the categories.

A side effect is that we learn to think for ourselves again about how capitalism works, to be able to answer the kinds of question DeLong raised against Harvey, no longer lost without the appropriate quotation. We come to meet the challenge Joan Robinson posed to a Marxist friend in her 1953 “Open Letter from a Keynesian to a Marxist”:

“What I mean is that I have Marx in my bones and you have him in your mouth... Again, suppose we each want to recall some tricky point in Capital, for instance the schema at the end of Volume II. What do you do? You take down the volume and look it up. What do I do? I take the back of an old envelope and work it out...”

As undead Marxes go, I would rather have the kind of Marx in Joan Robinson’s bones than either a Frankenstein Marx pieced together from scraps of quotations, or a Zombie Marx, embalmed in the 1860s and reanimated whole. That is a spirit that might haunt again. ¶

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EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CHEAP,

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# Extremely Loud and Incredibly Cheap

## Hollywood and its discontents

BY GAVIN MUELLER

About once an hour during the summer I spent working at Video Spectrum – a rental house in Bowling Green, Ohio – someone would burst through the door and demand a film that had been released in theaters the day before. Staggered release dates, a business technique as simple as it is well established, continually confounded our citizenry, much to my surprise. Worse, this seemed to result less from ignorance than from contempt: People were actually offended to find the shiny new thing on TV unavailable at the store. For all the ink spilled on the magic of the cinema, on how it creates mass spectacles, and on the overweening awe of the giant screen and its attendant bombast, the truth is that most people would rather just watch that shit at home. Yeah, they'll miss elements of the mise-en-scene of *Citizen Kane*, and that pan-and-scan transfer of *Ghostbusters* is notoriously sloppy, but your average customer doesn't really care. Theaters are places for mooching A/C and getting hickeys; movies are for forgetting your bills and getting your kids to shut the fuck up.

I confess I was sad when I learned of the Spectrum's demise. Not for the authentic shopping experience, as in "Future generations will never know the ecstasy of serendipitously discovering *The Howling IV*—instead they shall merely 'Google' it!" but for Bowling Green itself. Nestled in a small homogenous town in a state locked in protracted decline, Video Spectrum was a refuge for all the queers, pinkos, artists, stoners, and mentally ill of Wood County. This bizarre assemblage of VHS detritus was a space to engage briefly with the public between private viewings of vampire erotica, serial killer documentaries, and the late, lesser work of *Godzilla*. One guy's entire rental history was *Clean and Sober* starring Michael Keaton, and I like to think that the store was as responsible for his sobriety as it was for my intoxication. The Spectrum paid me just enough to cover the requisite PBR and schwag to secure my master's. It lent me my documentaries for free.

I've seen two summer "blockbusters" this year, two more than usual and two more than I plan on watching ever again. Neither cineaste nor cinema buff — indie video store job notwithstanding — I

find most movies scab-pickingly boring, especially those most desperate to be otherwise. This is probably why I found J.J. Abrams' patently inoffensive *Super 8* so execrable. It's a blockbuster about the magic of blockbusters. More precisely, it's a Spielberg production about the magic of Spielberg, father of the modern blockbuster and living instantiation of the ultimate fanboy mythos: geek out, do it your own way, and, eventually, you will rule the world. Abrams, an entertainment industry brat who grew up in L.A., inserts the Spielbergian ideology directly into the time period of his own childhood, opening his film with an irritatingly plucky group of youngsters who make science fiction shorts in a surprisingly mountainous Dayton of 1979. Even amid alien shenanigans, Abrams pasting his own face onto the master's biography is the most interesting part of the whole convoluted presentation, the sort of thing that would be creepy even if Spielberg hadn't produced it, which, of course, he did.

"... it's a  
Spielberg  
production  
about the  
magic of  
Spielberg"

Once this incestuous backstory wraps up, the rest of the film spills out like a low-fat smoothie of Daddy's greatest hits: Menacing off-screen monster hinted at via reaction shots (*Jaws*); telepathic connection with aliens threatened by scientific-military intervention (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*); abused alien wants to go home but his ship is broken (*E.T.*); monster attacks a bus, trapping kids inside (*Jurassic*

*Park*). The ragtag bunch of would-be Goonies is only missing a one-man Asian minstrel show and Corey Feldman. Abrams even manages to squeeze in a gratuitous concentration camp scene. But it's not Abrams' pastiche that grates — that battle was lost decades ago — it's his hamfisted execution. It's almost as though he actually believes that the trite, white love story between the bland one and the blonde one — the only female character Abrams doesn't preemptively kill off or mercilessly belittle — is enough to compensate for the total absence of memorable action sequences, music, or visuals. Charles, the chubby, aspiring director, voices Abrams' screenwriting M.O.: saturate your monster movie with a romance subplot. "You feel something. You don't want them to die because they love each other." Color me unconvinced. Not only is chaste schoolboy romance the only thing more boring than rote CGI explosions, but by placing it center-stage Abrams actively misinterprets what exactly Spielberg did to break all those box office records. There was, in other words, always a certain cynical reason at work in the man who invented the PG-13 rating. In his movies, schoolboys get eaten by sharks.

*Super 8*, once it abandons its over-stretched meta-filmmaking frame, boils down to a simple allegory: The military-industrial complex destroyed small town America right around Reagan's election. Steel mill accidents and references to Three Mile Island build into a set piece wherein U.S. tanks blow each other up while incinerating quaint bungalows. There's a shade of the hypnagogic effluvia of *Time Bandits* in the shower of vinyl siding, but with the edges smoothed off. Unlike Gilliam, mainstream hacks like Abrams never indulge in the weird pleasures of the surreal fantasies they construct, hustling us quickly past like cops at a car crash. He's got to contain our enjoyment of suburban destruction with liberal platitudes about "bad apples" and "strong families." In another reactionary break with Spielberg, Abrams pits Air Force bullies ripped from the Cobra Kai dojo against the virtuous cop-dad, forgoing his mentor's insistence on

Videos Spectra

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the perpetual menace and ineptitude of authority figures. Somewhere amid the final expressions of pained endurance that constitute acting in post-9-11 Hollywood, a moral emerges: "Bad things happen, but you can still live," a philosophy just a hair away from "Eat shit and like it."

**B**ut this is a bit off: what Abrams wants to say is that bad things happen, but we can still make

movies which nurture social bonds and plow the furrows for future nostalgia. Or maybe, we could have made such movies once. Today, his industry can barely muster the recalcitrant faithful to prop up the latest knockoff and convince themselves they liked it. The box office is down almost 10 percent this year and ticket sales have plateaued. I was in a theater with maybe 20 other people, most of them older than I am. For the price

of my ticket, I can get either a month of Netflix or a bootleg DVD and a six pack (which is how I took in the turgid *X-Men* reboot), plus infinite free Tumblrrs, YouTubes, and porn. We're not going to the theater, and the video store doesn't exist. We're weathering war and recession at home in our underwear, eating Chinese takeout and getting wasted, the distractions of the entertainment industry still somehow not cheap enough. ¶

## An Unauthenticated Avant-Garde

BY JEFFREY KIRKWOOD

The paintings in the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art's winter exhibition, *Orphan Paintings: Unauthenticated Art of the Russian Avant-Garde* were found, as if in a time capsule filled with Adorno's fantasies of late capitalism, in an "unclaimed shipping container in German customs." Subsequently, Ron Pollard, an architectural photographer in Denver, came across the inventory of unsigned paintings on, yes, eBay. Recruiting his brother Roger and a friend, Brad Gessner, the three set about purchasing the paintings in increments from the insurance administrator in Aachen, Germany who had originally bought the contents of the jettisoned freight (a more complete account of the story is available on the MCA's website). Since then, the ad hoc group of enthusiastic collectors has hired forensic writing specialists and conservators whose expertise has given them optimism about the authenticity of their acquisitions, though their provenance remains impossible to definitively establish. And herein lies the official curatorial impetus for the show: "Can an art experience be authentic even if the status of the work of art remains questionable?"

What the press release belies in its appeal to a naïve phenomenology, unencumbered by any prior art historical knowledge—an approach reproduced in the story of the collection's acquisition by art world outsiders—is that both the conceptual apparatus of the show and our interest in its objects derives from a strong nuclear force internal to the collection, as opposed to the weak nuclear force of its story. These are not anonymous personal artifacts or wayward antique photographs in a flea market rummage bin, and

thus, as the owners' persistent attempts to legitimize the paintings suggests, they are more lost than found objects. They are paintings "in the style of" Malevich, Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, and Tatlin (among many others) which, together, suggest a formal coherence that is anything but naïve. On the contrary, the revolutionary historical moment of which they are supposed exemplars was a maelstrom of manifestos, formal dispute, ideological loud-mouthing, calculated outlandishness, pseudo-scientific speculation, and high decibel debate. This was a period when artists were very deliberate about what art was supposed to do and for whom. The modes of abstraction showcased here have very different valences depending on which work one is considering, and it is safe to assume that no matter who among the possible artists one selects, the colorful shapes are not mere objects for delectation (the press release calls it "appreciation"), or they wouldn't be, if this was in fact a show about the Russian avant-garde. Indeed, even without assuming these works are authentic, there is an expectation that they stage a conversation (or a screaming match) about the purpose and stakes of art at the time of their alleged creation; about the artistic object, organization versus production, or the purpose of line. Yet when one enters the main room, where a painting "in the style of" Malevich's suprematist work neighbors one "in the style of" a Rodchenko, near one "in the style of" El Lissitzky, the paintings stand in a sepulchral silence; their shabby, neglected edges diminishing rather than amplifying the auratic effect implied by the museum's "agnos-

tic" position towards their authenticity. And perhaps that's the show's virtue.

One of the approximately twenty works in the main room is a mixed media piece that seems a lot like a Malevich. The figural silhouette looks like the head of a sculptural armature assembled from fluted shapes. The coloring conjures a techno-fetishistic vision of the new (but now antiquated) man, one built from the burnished metal bits of an older machine. The monocular eye of the figure is split and displaced as if painted on oppositely moving tectonic plates, underscoring the simultaneous contingency and sovereignty of vision. This recalls not only the more general debates about positivism and scientific approaches to art and perception among Russian avant-gardes but also Malevich's own theoretical writings. What is even more apparent, however, is the newspaper cutout of the *Mona Lisa* composing one of the shapes just right of the silhouettes' center. Complete with its caption, and crossed out with red pencil, the not yet groan-worthy gesture of prankishness cannot fail to produce an association with Malevich's 1914 cubist style collage, *Composition with Mona Lisa*, which also included a captioned picture of the *Mona Lisa* crossed out in red. Yet by presenting a temporally circumscribed set of works that are severed from their historical situation the show simultaneously beckons and categorically denies even these types of superficial comparisons. The result is an impossible latticework of counter-factual suppositions about the formal operations on display and a question about what, besides "experience," the viewers are warranted to do when looking at such a collection.

If you believe, along with someone like Peter Bürger, in the historicity of aesthetic categories, particularly with respect to avant-garde movements, then didactics do little to illuminate the original conditions of these paintings' production or, for that matter, that of the paintings they look like. The premises of the exhibit do not exceed a novel collision between the possibility of the collection's authenticity and the curious circumstances of its discovery (circumstances that make its authentication unlikely). But while the "experience" of the works, which are mostly abstract, frequently insists on a theoretical scaffolding that the museum refuses to provide — and which the paintings themselves can only hint at — this moment of frustration serves as a kind of instructive aporia. When, in the early 1920s, artists like Rodchenko pursued a machine aesthetic, employing industrial materials in order to "build" artworks with a meaningful social-utopian function, the artwork was intentionally forced into a direct confrontation with the fundamental, material means for its creation—industrial materials, technologies, and techniques, representing the speed, efficiency, and automation of new forms of production. Deploying these productive forces in the work was thought not only crucial to art's participation-in and representation-of the ideological aspirations of the artists, but also instrumental in the transformation of the sensorium. Modes of perception and consciousness were the products rather than the sources of the material conditions they observed, and therefore, art that engaged those conditions could reformulate the terms of its own reception. In the case of the *Orphan Paintings*, however, the artworks are submitted to a sensorial regime instructed or even governed by economic conditions posterior to the paintings' own utopian visions. Instead of making something of the viewer, the viewer is asked to make something of the artworks; a herculean task that ultimately seems to prove the dependence of "experience" on its material-historical situation. It is fitting that these paintings should arrive at their future in an abandoned metal freight to be sold on eBay—a future in which economic speed and efficiency have themselves become abstract and yet

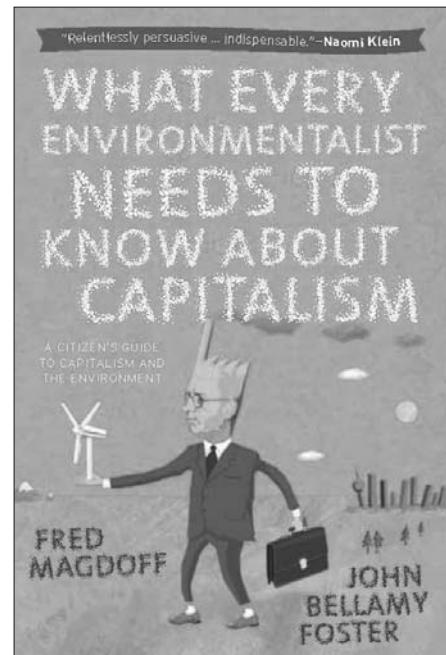
can no longer be represented abstractly.

"Modes of perception and consciousness were the products rather than the sources of the material conditions they observed..."

As a kind of forgotten remainder of a material dialectic, these works can be viewed as a pure surplus without a surplus value (think of Malevich's 1916 *Suprematist Composition* fetching \$60 million at Sotheby's in 2008). They are no longer really art according to the market (as they were turned down by auction houses), nor do they participate in any existing social or political discourse. In the moment when the craving for material verification becomes most aggravated—the point at which we most desire some physical documentation linking these paintings to their ostensible origin—these paintings become apt tools for instructing us on the contemporary, immaterial conditions required for the production of artwork. The viewer's inability to securely situate the apocryphal works historically, coupled with the paintings' apparent preoccupation (as potential works of the avant-garde) with the historical and material conditions of their reception, prompts a meditation on the current conjecture preventing us from making much of these images. In this way, the show serves as a grim, if useful, epilogue to avant-garde utopianism. While, at the same time, precisely by dismantling bourgeois notions of authorship, the anonymous circumstances for the reception of these paintings successfully realizes certain aspirations of the avant-garde, albeit through a glitch in a particularly dystopian form of advanced capitalism. ¶

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# Rosa's Mail

Book Review: *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*

BY KAYE CAIN-NIELSEN

**R**eading *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* one sometimes feels like a voyeur. Tender love notes are mixed in with daily triumphs and tragedies, accounts of visits with friends, what was had for breakfast, nervous missives to one lover written while hiding from another, romantic longings, and multiple self-deprecating jokes about her small stature and ungainly looks. At five hundred and twelve pages, this collection, the most complete available in English, returns the personal struggles of Rosa – often omitted by earlier editors – to the life of Luxemburg. And somewhere in between hearing of an invigorating walk and watching her curate male affection to assure her writing’s publication, it becomes clear why Verso begins its fourteen-volume complete works of the Polish-born, German revolutionary on such an intimate note: here is a radical portrait for the internet generation. Let’s hope they pay close attention.

The last letter in the collection is dated January 11, 1919, Berlin – four days before the 47-year-old Luxemburg’s assassination. Born in Poland in 1871 to a middle-class, Jewish family, Luxemburg left to study economics and earn a doctorate in political theory in Switzerland. The first letter in the collection – dated July 1891 – comes just as she is finishing her studies. Among activists, Luxemburg is most renowned for *Reform or Revolution*, a blistering riposte to the theory of evolutionary socialism advanced by Eduard Bernstein. For scholars of Marxist political economy, it is *The Accumulation of Capital* that is remembered, sometimes as simply a serious contribution to the emerging theory of imperialism, and sometimes as one of the two or three works of political economy deserving mention in the same breath as Marx himself. Luxemburg was instrumental in the rise of German Social Democrats, and, upon their betrayal at the outset of the Great War, founded, with Karl Liebknecht, the Spartacus League, which was to become the German Communist party. It was Liebknecht who, without her knowledge, ordered the ill-advised uprising against the Weimar republic that provided the pretext for their combined murder at the hands of the paramilitary *freikorps* under orders from the Social Democratic government. Beyond this, she was a powerful speaker, a natural theorist and editor, a peer, a friend, and occasional lover to many of the lead-

ers of the international labor and socialist movements: including Leo Jogiches, Karl Kautsky, Liebknecht, and Clara Zetkin. For all this, though, it is perhaps her letters for which she is most beloved. Even after several years on the CIA payroll, a figure as compromised as Sidney Hook still had to admit that they were “among the small literary treasures of the century.”

The one hundred ninety letters included in Verso’s volume are drawn almost entirely from the German collection *Herzlichst Ihre Rosa*, first published in 1990 under the editorial guidance of Luxemburg scholars Annelies Laschitzka and Georg Adler. The vast majority of these are addressed to Luxemburg’s long-term lover and political partner, Leo Jogiches and the same is true of the Verso edition. Two decades later, translator George Shriver has consulted some of the Polish and German-language originals to get a better handle on Luxemburg’s multilingual style. Shriver’s previous English translations are notable, including Roy Medvedev’s *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism*, and Mikhail Gorbachev’s *Gorbachev: On My Country and the World*. Luxemburg wrote in Polish, German, Russian, and French, often in combination, while sprinkling in English or Latin. Shriver occasionally leaves certain lines in their original form to illustrate the erudite timbre of the prose.

Accompanying an extensive glossary of personal names, abbreviations, and publications, the Verso edition also boasts more letters and footnotes than the German version, these being the only thing remotely dull or academic about the text. In a collection that reproduces, translates, and combines hundreds of handwritten and couriered documents from all across Europe, the editors account for the movement, handling, archiving and storage of the physical pages themselves, which makes for a compelling glimpse into history at work. These letters will give those unfamiliar with their author’s importance valuable insight into her brilliant and unfashionable way of thinking.

For the un-initiated, the Letters, with all their exquisite details, read as well as any novel: we learn how Luxemburg’s Persian cat, Mimi, behaved in the presence of Lenin; how much money she borrowed to keep her numerous publications in the hands of intellectuals and workers; which volumes of German literature she craved; and we hear her pleading with friends to take care of her

rent while she was in prison for inciting crowds to riot. Even when some of the details threaten to drag, Luxemburg’s sudden, lyrical moments and proverbial winks at her intended audience suggest thrilling secrets. We feel her grinning, her wrist undulating furiously as her hands fight to keep pace with her thoughts.

Tracking Luxemburg’s relationships with men is fascinating. For Leo Jogiches, initial admiration and respect slowly transforms into frustration at an overly paternal figure. Growing bolder, she chastises him, both for not paying her enough affection and for not giving her enough information about his personal life (she clearly valued telling others about hers). Before things are even over with Jogiches, we find love letters of a more patronizing tone, addressed to Kostya Zetkin. Luxemburg’s terms of endearment switch from “precious gold” for Jogiches to “little boy,” for Zetkin. She wonders if the latter will ever understand economics, and more freely lets her literary tastes dictate his.

One reason why reading hundreds of pages of personal correspondence is so invigorating is because Luxemburg’s mind never had a chance to slow with age. Even when complaining of exhaustion, she writes with such energy as to suggest that she never stopped thinking. Her multiple stays in prison became needed respite – quality time spent in cells with other radicals, or alone focusing on her work. Luxemburg’s most celebrated text – *The Accumulation of Capital* – was written in one season-long sitting, and never saw a second draft. Moreover, she claims to a trusted friend that she wrote it for an audience of one. As Luxemburg said of her revelatory economic treatise while imprisoned in 1917:

“I know very well, Hånschen [Hans Diefenbach], that my economic works are written as though ‘for six persons only.’ But actually, you know, I write them for only one person: for myself. The time when I was writing the [first] *Accumulation of Capital* belongs to the happiest of my life. Really I was living as though in euphoria,...Do you know, at that time I wrote the whole 20 signatures [Bogen] all at one go in four months’ time – an unprecedented event! – and without rereading the *brouillon* [the rough draft], not even once, I sent it off to be printed.”

But with *Accumulation*, as with her letters, there was never an audience of one.



Imagining each set of hands that physically received each of these pages during their century of existence is dizzying. There is first the recipient of Rosa's warm musings and chilling observations; the jilted lover, say, scouring for terms of endearment; then the bereaved friend seeking comfort and memory after learning of Rosa's murder; then a committed archivist who would soon find a similar fate in the hands of paramilitary troops; and finally, the scholars, translators, and editors who have provided dates and cities to every party meeting mentioned. And every so often, when Luxemburg references one of her own published works in a letter, we get this footnote: "see full text in the following volume of this series": a wonderful reminder of how much more there is to come.

Personal or political, Rosa Luxemburg's letters are beautiful, powerful, and succinct. There is also a certain lingering sadness as Rosa could never quite master the exchange of love – the proportions are always off – and her slightly more than occasional longings for a bobo [child] remained unfulfilled.

The editors claim that something of Luxemburg's role in the intellectual legacy of Marxism can be gleaned from a careful reading: "Our aim is for this volume," Hudis states,

"to provide a new vantage point for getting to better know and appreciate Rosa Luxemburg's distinctive contribution to Marxism. We hope that it will enable us to grasp what she herself consciously struggled to give expression to throughout her life: 'I want to affect people like a clap of thunder, to inflame their minds not by speechifying but with the breadth of my vision, the strength of my conviction, and the power of my expression'"

Yet from this text alone the specificity of Luxemburg's unique contribution to Marxism remains ambiguous. She often encourages her friends to read Marx and when she speaks of writing Reform or Revolution, she appears a staunch-enough Marxist. Yet in her introduction to J.P. Nettl's seminal biography, Hannah Arendt questions whether Luxemburg was a really a Marxist at all: "Mr. Nettl rightly states that to [Luxemburg], Marx was no more than 'the best interpreter of reality of them all... (and) what mattered most in her view was reality, in all its wonderful and all its frightful aspects, even more than revolution itself."

This seems accurate. Regardless, whatever role Luxemburg actually plays in the history of Marxist thought cannot be discerned from her *Letters*. Her view

on the role of the intellectual, however, can be. A public intellectual, Luxemburg participated directly in two revolutions, and offered timely, widely publicized commentary on others. She stood at the forefront of political action, siding with the working class, but never abandoning her role as a publisher, editor, writer, and speaker. These were the positions, after all, that might allow Luxemburg to affect people like a clap of thunder.

## "Personal or political, Rosa Luxemburg's letters are beautiful, powerful, and succinct."

In an introduction for the German edition, Laschitzka emphasizes Luxemburg's womanhood, claiming that, "at the same time, through all kinds of difficult situations she remained a woman, with the human strengths and weaknesses and the same problems as any other woman" This is an asinine and offensive statement, meaningless past the point of being patronizing. Even in a mere twenty-one years, it has aged poorly. One need only substitute any male historical figure to see as much:

"At the same time, through all kinds of difficult situations, [Abraham Lincoln/Vladimir Lenin/Fredrick Douglass] remained a man, with the human strengths and weakness and the same problems as any other man."

Whatever may be said of Rosa Luxemburg, (Or Lincoln, or Douglass...) it is certainly not the case that she had the same problems, strengths or weaknesses as any other woman, or any other anyone, for that matter. That she didn't is precisely what makes her so remarkable.

And if editors make perhaps too much of her gender, they do the same for her position as a Polish Jew. These un-

changeable facts about Luxemburg—her youth, her expatriate status in Germany, her gender, and her ethnic background certainly make her achievements even more impressive but the implication here comes dangerously close to the kind of "pretty smart for a polish chick," paternalism that's best left in 1990. She rarely stresses her identity or complains about hostility towards her as an independently minded woman, as a Jew, or as a foreigner in Berlin. Instead, she focuses on ideas and celebrates life. Let us remember Luxemburg for rising above the pig-headedness of her fellow radicals, certainly, but if we read her own, candid words carefully, we find plenty to celebrate strictly in what she had to say and how she said it.

All that aside, I wholeheartedly agree with the editors that this collection will intensify the reader's appreciation of Luxemburg as a writer and as a historical figure. This volume does not lend any landmark insight into Luxemburg's political thought, nor does it stand alone as a triumph of feminism. What it does instead is provide an essential portrait of a committed intellectual.

This year, revolutionary action dominates world news. American media overwhelming characterize demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Morocco (the list will undoubtedly expand in coming days), as youth revolts. The most attractive point of comparison between recent demonstrations to oust dictatorial leaders and/or spark political reforms may be the youth of the protesting masses. However, members of the working class – not just "young people" in general – are spearheading the current political motion. The revolutions we are witnessing today have thus far been leaderless—something Rosa, wary at the turn of the 20th century of the rise totalitarian power, would have likely approved of.

Thus far, we have not witnessed Luxemburg's rhetoric surfacing in protest literature, but perhaps that will change with Verso's massive release of Luxemburgism in the coming years. In 1966, Hannah Arendt mused, "[o]ne would like to believe that there is still hope for a belated recognition of who she was and what she did, as one would like to hope that she will finally find her place in the education of political scientists in the countries of the West. For Mr. Nettl is right: 'Her ideas belong wherever the history of political ideas is seriously taught.'"

Arendt would be overjoyed with the news of Verso's undertaking to reintroduce Rosa Luxemburg to the canon of radical thought — as should we all. ¶

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# The Frick Collection at 75

requiem for a capitalist

BY GABRIEL HAINER EVANSOHN

The Frick Collection is celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary this year. To commemorate opening its doors in 1935 the Collection is showing a few elevation sketches of the building's transformation from the home of Henry Clay Frick into the museum we see today. The only other addition is a new orientation film, which "tells the story of Mr. Frick, his home, and his art collection." Here we learn of this "man of the highest quality" and his remarkable journey from humble origins and a sickly childhood, a man who pulled himself up by his bootstraps to become a millionaire at 30, and one of the great industrialists of the gilded age. We hear of his success as a coke magnate (the raw material used to make steel), his partnership with Joseph Carnegie, his leadership of U.S. Steel and his building of this grand and historic 5th avenue mansion. We hear how his love of art led him on a "chase for the old masters," and of how he "went shopping" at the Metropolitan for the highlights of J.P. Morgan's collection after Morgan died. We hear how it "wasn't enough to have a great collection of old master paintings so he began to buy great pieces of furniture and decorative art." We learn how the press avidly covered his art collecting and purchases with as much panache as they covered his feats of industry. We learn that he stipulated the creation of this museum upon his wife's death so "the entire public should forever have access." We learn that much of the museum is how Frick left it, when he lived there, and, in addition to viewing his art we "can also inhale the Gilded Age, the sense of the aesthetic, the beautiful" contained in these rooms.

What we don't hear is how Frick was once "the most hated man in America." We don't hear how he stood out among the ignoble plutocrats of his day for his violent assaults on organized labor. We don't hear the story of the 1892 Homestead Strike, wherein Frick, despite soaring profits, offered the skilled workers of the Amalgamated Association of Steel and Iron Workers a 22% wage decrease, then summarily locked them out of his factory by building high walls replete with guard towers, barbed wire, and high pressure cannons capable of shoot-

ing scalding liquid at every entrance. We don't hear how when the workers struck and shut down the factory, Frick hired the notorious Pinkerton Detective agency to invade Homestead by river, shooting into the strikers and the supporting townspeople in order to clear the way for scab labor. We don't hear of how the National Guard was summoned to break up the strike and eventually the union, which Frick steadfastly refused to negotiate with throughout.

We don't hear that Portfolio.com named Frick one of the "worst CEOs of all time." We don't hear how his construction of a dam to create a private lake for a fishing and hunting club failed, due to poor maintenance and heavy rainfall, and caused the Johnstown flood of 1889 which killed over 2000 people and coincidentally knocked out his competitor's factory (Cambria Iron and Steel) for a year and a half. Or of the legal battles Frick and his compatriots fought to insure they would not be held responsible and the conspiracy they hatched to keep the club's existence a secret.

We don't hear of how Frick's relentless use of violence fractured his relationship with his partner Joseph Carnegie, a notorious robber baron in his own right. We don't hear how his subsequent feud with Carnegie pushed him to build his mansion on Fifth Avenue "to make Carnegie's place look like a miner's shack." Or of how he moved his art collection to New York because he was worried that the soot from his own steel mills in Pittsburgh would damage his paintings.

The orientation film provides nothing beyond a clear vision of the way the Frick Collection wants to be seen. Its ostensible subject, the works of art that Frick collected to share with the public, are given scant attention. There is no historical background on the work. We hear nothing about where these pieces are situated in the oeuvres of their respective creators, their influences or artistic heirs. We hear no insight on the importance of the work at all; or even why Frick chose what he did. If we want to know more about a piece than its title we must purchase a guidebook as an added cost to the already hefty admission fee. In truth, the only thing the film orients us toward is

the life of Frick himself. This is a thinly veiled attempt to cast the institution as a historical museum, as one of the few mansions restored to show what life was like in the Gilded Age. Yet there is no information on everyday life at the turn of the century, no details on the workings of a house that once employed 27 servants. This is not The Tenement Museum, where every object reveals a story about the activities and dreams of the people who once lived there. Had this information been available, I might have learned of the styles and daily habits common in the early 20th century. Instead, the objects are left to float in their opulence, with no connection to the lives they furnished or acknowledgment of the vast discrepancy in income between their owners and those whose labor paid for them.

What is being presented at the Frick Collection is a revisionist biography of Henry Clay Frick. It is where we go to learn how the great man, this American noble, lived and gathered these objects. We are asked to bask in his reflected glory, in awe of the refinement of a "man of the highest taste." In truth, Frick bought chiefly for names. So yes, there are impressive Rembrandts, a gorgeous El Greco, and a Vermeer. But none of these works have matured into the significant masterpieces one would expect from a "man of the highest taste." He bought pictures he found pretty and of images of powerful men; men he would like to be compared with or with whom he might like to be friends. The art was an avenue to fame, and a way to cement his status. Tired of being second to Carnegie, embarrassed by his humble origins, we see a man desperate to prove his aristocratic legitimacy, displaying that all-too-American desire for the old European pedigrees of class, power and title. For all his wealth and influence, the American plutocrat has no noble lineage, no royal lines winding back through the centuries, his remains the clichéd ostentation of new money; the flaunting of power and opulence in a desperate grab for legitimacy and sophistication. Acquiring the Old Masters is a well-worn method of manufacturing the culture sanction that is the legacy of old Europe. It is difficult

to imagine a more perfect testament to this process than The Collection; from the portraits of Thomas More and Cromwell, to Bronzino's portrait of the renaissance noble Lodovico Capponi, down to the collection of English poets (Tennyson, Shakespeare, Shelley...) displayed in complete and untouched collections filling the bookshelves of an entire room. None of this, in and of itself, is surprising

What is surprising is that, 75 years after its opening, and a mere two years after the heirs to Frick's unrestrained greed nearly demolished the economy, the museum that bears his name is still possessed by his insecurity. Ensconced safely in the most expensive real estate in the richest city in the most powerful empire in history, the Frick Collection, by way of an insipid video tribute, still presents the same pitiable adolescent churlishness and hapless desire for approval evinced by the man himself. Decades later, Frick's wealth remains as opulent as ever, but it has yet to afford him or his legacy the comfort and belonging common to the poorest worker awaiting his bullets in Homestead.

## "The Frick Collection is less a museum of art than a mausoleum to the man."

The tragedy of The Collection's design, with its emphasis on Frick and his taste, is the obfuscation of the art itself. What separates art from ordinary objects

is that it lives in the interaction between the work and the spectator. It persists long after its creator, continuing to speak to us, to interact. The art work is unique, and gains this uniqueness, as Benjamin points out, by virtue of the "here and now of the work of art." But this uniqueness "bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject." In short, the work is conditioned by its location, its context, its historicity. The insidiousness of the Frick is that Henry Clay inserts himself into the relationship between art and spectator. The gilded rooms frame the art in a veneration of capital and privilege. Our relationship to the work is qualified by the ongoing glorification of its former owner. We see the figures in these paintings as men like Frick. We see beauty as the property of wealth. The artwork is denigrated to an object whose value is limited to representing the triumph of exchange. The public does not get the full benefit of the art after all.

**T**he ever-diminishing line between art and commodity is not a new problem; it pervades the history of western art since the renaissance. One thinks of the Medicis' use of frescoes and other commissions for political gain. However, unlike the Medicis, Frick did not support the most adventurous artists of his day. He was not a patron of new and radical work. He simply bought what was already considered masterful, by artists long dead. All of our great institutions of art walk this line. The Metropolitan and the MoMA were founded and are funded by businessmen not unlike Frick, but at least they had the decency to build a legitimate museum in the public trust, and not a temple to themselves.

Indeed, The Frick Collection is less a museum of art than a mausoleum to the man. Instead of a ruthless industrialist who littered his road to riches with plebeian carcasses, Frick is reborn as an art lover and a philanthropist. By gathering the trappings of class and nobility, surrounding himself with beauty and art, he hastened to help us forget his crimes.

We are supposed to be in awe of his taste, his exceptionalism, and to be humbly thankful to the great man for bestowing his culture and class to the unwashed public. *The New York Times* writes that The Frick Collection is "an oasis, a haven and a lighthouse... as noon draws near we catch ourselves wondering whether we shall be invited upstairs for a glass of dry sherry and a biscuit." But the truth is that Frick would have never allowed us into his home, much less deigned to share a drink. We will never be allowed upstairs; a velvet rope prevents us, just as it prevents us from sitting in his chairs. It is literally over his dead body that we are allowed inside at all.

The Frick represents the legacy of America's favorite fantasy: that the cupidity of the few somehow happens separately from the misery of the many, implying that this lifestyle is somehow available to all. That we are still told to revere these "great" men is all the more galling having just watched a new generation of Fricks make fortunes even without generating useful infrastructure or industry in the process. The names, companies, and industries may have changed, but the game remains the same. Even with all of the anger at Wall Street, Main Street still comes to the Frick, smiling, full of awe, and wishing that someday, they too could live like this. Maybe in another 75 years, we can all tour the homes and art collections of Lloyd Blankfein and Tony Hayward to better appreciate their dedication to the common good. Ideological in the most specific sense of the word, institutions like the Frick naturalize the divine right of wealth and the means used to obtain it. They allow us to tour the beauty of the home, to gaze on the riches amassed and continue in the pacifying delusion that the wealthy and connected are the caretakers of America, the essence of freedom, instead of those keeping the poor in poverty and the starving hungry. No effort at orientation can make this Collection, the crimes that created it, or its naked veneration of greed make sense. ¶



# Questioning October

## was the Russian Revolution a mistake?

BY LARS T. LIH

The Russian Revolution of 1917 has long since become an object lesson suitable for drawing edifying morals. Everyone looks at it in order to discover the great mistake — moral, political, ideological — that led to disaster. Having discovered the mistake, we can feel secure that we would have avoided disaster and we therefore can feel superior to all those who have not yet seen the error of their ways. The human reality of the revolution — the overpowering sense of being caught up in a whirlwind of events — is lost as we hurry to draw lessons and point fingers.

For some, the mistake behind the revolution is primarily moral. Lenin, for example, is painted as a fiend incarnate whose bottomless depravity is directly responsible for Russia's downfall. We can call this the Boris Karloff Lenin, who rubs his hands in murderous glee: "Today, I'll think I'll oppress the peasants!" I have the impression that something very close to the Boris Karloff Lenin has become the dominant image of the Russian revolution for the wide public, especially, perhaps, in America.

Others make a target of "Bolshevism," defined as a species of recurring moral error. Bolsheviks are those who live by the corrupt code of "the end justifies the means"—something, of course, we would never do. We would never countenance using unacceptable means such as firebombing civilian populations or using torture, no matter how noble our political goal. Only uncouth fanatics do that.

There is also a certain sort of bien-pensant liberalism that uses Bolshevism to point up the dangers of having exalted political goals. You wish to create the workers' paradise?—watch out that the very nobility of the goal does not lead to terrible crimes. During the Russian Civil War people were fighting over the most elementary, most unavoidable questions: who will rule the country? How can we put the country back together? Will Russia survive as a state? Our liberal looks at all this turmoil and sermonizes: now, now, don't get carried away with dreams of a perfect society! Be like us, with our safe, sane and sober politics. Moderation, moderation in all things!

The Left is just as addicted to search-

ing out the revolution's fatal errors—only the Left prefers to put the blame on mistakes in ideological doctrine. A great many on the Left agree with the liberal/conservative view that the original sin of Bolshevism was Lenin's revisionism in *What Is To be Done?*. According to this view, Lenin didn't trust the workers, so he turned Marx on his head, and created an elite conspiratorial party based on intellectuals. No wonder he hijacked the democratic program of the Russian revolution.

An approach less obsessed with identifying and condemning error will see that the significance of *What Is To be Done?* does not arise from any alleged ideological innovations. Lenin's 1902 book is a summation of an idealized version of the logic of underground organization, a logic that had been worked out through empirical trial and error by a generation of anonymous activists during the 1890s. As such, Lenin's basic model was accepted as a guide by the entire socialist underground in Russia. Coming into 1917, Bolshevism's distinctiveness did not arise from party organization but rather from its reading of class forces in Russia.

The creation of the socialist underground was not Lenin's doing—or rather, he made a contribution that was not insignificant but also not crucial. When the Russian state collapsed in 1917—an event whose titanic consequences were not foreseen by any ideology—the socialist underground provided one of the very few candidates for the role of creating a new sovereign authority and a new state structure. The legal institutions of tsarist Russia were mortally wounded by the collapse of tsarism; in contrast, the illegal underground survived intact, possessed of a nation-wide scope and plausible claims to mass support and legitimacy. The socialist underground was much more a product of Russian history than of ideological excogitations.

So far I have looked at errors that purport to explain the failures of the revolution, but latter-day partisans of the October Revolution are also engaged in heresy-hunting. For them, the success of the revolution is explained by the rejection of ideological errors. The mainstream Trotskyist interpreta-

tion is built around a story of this type.

Back in 1905-6 (the story goes), Lev Trotsky came up with his theory of permanent revolution and pronounced socialist revolution to be possible in backward Russia. Since his theory attacked the unimaginative dogmas of "Second International Marxism," Trotsky was greeted with universal incomprehension. (In a recently published and extremely useful collection of documents entitled *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, Richard Day and Daniel Gaido argue—unconvincingly, in my view—that leading Marxists such as Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg shared Trotsky's outlook.) Fortunately, just in time, Lenin saw the light and caught up with Trotsky in April 1917. Together the two great leaders rearmed the Bolshevik Party, thus making the glorious October Revolution possible.

There are a number of difficulties with this canonical story, but here I will just point to one odd feature of this pro-October story: it has a pronounced anti-Bolshevik tinge. According to many writers in the Trotskyist tradition, the doctrine of Old Bolshevism was pernicious error that had to be rejected before revolutionary victory was possible. We are constantly reminded by writers in this tradition that the Bolsheviks themselves, taken as a whole, were a dull lot who stubbornly remained loyal to what they had been told yesterday, even when their brilliant and visionary leaders had moved on. So pronounced is this anti-Bolshevik mood that some writers still have not forgiven me for saying something nice about Bolshevik underground activists. Don't I realize that these activists were stodgy, hidebound *komitetchiki* who mistakenly refused to listen to the wisdom of émigré leaders such as Lenin and Trotsky? In my view, however, this whole approach smacks too much of a "cult of personality" of certain revolutionary heroes. Even the pro-October Trotskyists are far from happy with the ultimate outcome of the revolution, and, as usual, look to doctrinal errors to explain the outcome. The European revolution that was supposed to act as a *deus ex machina* to save the Russian revolution didn't happen,

in large part because of the “fatalist,” “mechanical,” “determinist” and just generally “pre-dialectical” Marxism of Karl Kautsky and other leaders of the Second International. In Russia, the outward and visible sign of the inward degeneration of the revolution was the doctrinal heresy of “socialism in one country.”

Of course, many shrewd and essential insights into the Russian revolution come from the Trotskyist tradition. Yet I cannot help feeling that writers in this tradition are often more interested in their doctrinal abstractions than in the human reality of the Russian revolution as experienced by those who lived through it.

One key debate about the Russian revolution has always been: was Russia ready for socialist revolution, or for only a “bourgeois revolution”? The Bolsheviks maintained the former, the Mensheviks the latter position. Who was right, and who was wrong in the debate? If the Mensheviks were right, then the October revolution was a mistake. If the Bolsheviks were right, then Menshevism must be rejected as counter-revolutionary error.

This approach is correct about one thing: the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks did resort to Marxist concepts such as these in their 1917 polemics. Yet doctrinal arguments of this kind were far from the heart of the matter. Indeed, they were essentially add-ons, attempts to give doctrinal legitimacy to positions based on empirical readings of Russia in 1917. The real question facing the socialist parties was this: could the crisis engulfing Russian society be solved by cooperation with educated society, or did a solution require a new sovereign authority based exclusively on the narod, the workers and peasants?

Translated into the Russian terms that were central to debates in 1917, the question was: could and should a new *vlast* be based on *soglashenie*? *Vlast* means “sovereign authority” or “power,” as in “Soviet power.” *Soglashenie* is often translated “compromise” or “conciliation,” but the word implies something stronger: working together on the basis of some sort of pact or agreement. In my view, the essential clash in 1917 between Menshevik and Bolshevik on questions like this was not doctrinal, but empirical. Furthermore, we cannot say that one side was wrong and the other right. Each side combined insight and wishful thinking. Let me set out the Menshevik/Bolshevik clash in 1917, using the terms *vlast* and *soglashenie* to remind us that we are dealing with Russian empirical realities, and also trying to put the doctrinal dis-

pute in its proper subordinate position.

Menshevik: Some sort of *soglashenie* with educated society is necessary, and therefore a suitable “bourgeois” partner for this *soglashenie* can be found (and besides, Russia faces a “bourgeois revolution” and therefore we must tolerate the “bourgeois” Provisional Government).

Bolshevik: *Soglashenie* with educated society is impossible, and therefore the Russian proletariat is ready to take on the responsibilities of the revolutionary *vlast* (and besides, Russia is ready to take “steps toward socialism”).

## “Each side was a compound of error and insight.”

In either case, we start, not with doctrinal insight or error, but with a strongly felt and essentially correct empirical view of Russian society in 1917. The Mensheviks realized that, on the one hand, a modern society could not do without educated specialists and professionals, and, on the other hand, the Russian proletariat was not organized or “purposive” enough to exercise the *vlast* in isolation nor was the Russian peasantry a secure base for a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The Bolsheviks realized that, despite appearances, elite educated society would never work enthusiastically to accomplish “the goals of the revolution” (even when defined in strictly “democratic” terms) and that in fact educated society would eventually turn against the revolution and work for some sort of “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie”—that is, some kind of alliance of liberal politicians and soldiers, or, in Russian terms, Kadets (the liberal Constitutional Democrats) and Kornilov (the general who led an abortive coup attempt in 1917).

For both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, a correct empirical view leads to a factual assertion that is based more on wishful thinking than on the realities. The Mensheviks have to insist that a suit-

able partner can be found in bourgeois society for carrying out the revolution’s goals (or, at least, that educated society can be bullied into cooperation by “pressure from below”). The situation is too horrible to contemplate if this is not the case.

The Bolsheviks have to insist that vast complicated policies of social transformation and crisis management can be carried out almost painlessly if only the proletariat asserts its class power. The situation is too horrible to contemplate if this is not the case.

In each case, there is a parenthetical add-on that tries to give the legitimacy of Marxist doctrine to an empirically chosen strategy. But in fact, the Mensheviks did not choose their strategy because of doctrinal labels such as “bourgeois revolution,” but rather the reverse: they insisted Russia faced a bourgeois revolution because they didn’t want to dispense with the “bourgeoisie”—that is, with educated and trained specialists (or *spetsy*, as the Bolsheviks later called them when they realized how much they needed them). And the Bolsheviks did not choose their strategy because they first convinced themselves for doctrinal reasons that a socialist revolution was possible in Russia, but rather the reverse: they claimed that immediate “steps toward socialism” were possible because they felt the proletariat had to take power.

Later observers have tended to make these rhetorical gestures toward doctrinal legitimacy the heart of the matter. In fact, in 1917, the attitude toward *soglashenie* with educated society was the heart of the matter. Essentially, there were only two choices for the socialists: for or against *soglashenie*. Menshevik and Bolshevik are just the names for these two choices. But the tragedy of Russia in 1917 was that *soglashenie* was both necessary and impossible. The situation was in fact horrible—too horrible to look straight in the face, too horrible to contemplate.

In this reading, the Russian revolution is not a matter of making or avoiding mistakes, but a tragedy without an acceptable solution (that’s what tragedy is). But one more thing needs to be said about the clash between Menshevik and Bolshevik. Each side was a compound of error and insight. But in the case of the Mensheviks, this combination resulted in paralysis. In the case of the Bolsheviks, the combination led them to be up and doing. Just for this reason, the future, for good or ill, belonged to the Bolsheviks. ¶





# Ulyanovsk

Book Review: *Lenin* by Lars T. Lih

BY PAUL LE BLANC

Lars Lih's remarkable, reliable, deliciously readable new biography – *Lenin* – is part of a larger phenomenon. Lenin, the founder of modern Communism, seems to be coming back: his name and ideas are seeping in from the cracks and crevices of academe; his concepts and insights are echoing in the left-corners of our intellectual life; the sly fox is insinuating himself via the subversive tendrils of avant-garde culture. Such things never happen in a vacuum. What masses of people are experiencing, feeling, and thinking today gives recent Lenin-influenced works a growing resonance, and so they may find a greater “market” than previously has been the case. We are beset by a modest yet growing Lenin revival. Who knows where it will lead?

## Biography

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov is presented in this succinct yet substantial work of scholarship as a genuine revolutionary, not the cold-blooded totalitarian monster that has become all-too-common in accounts from both the Cold War and post-Cold War eras.

Lih is rather odd – an independent scholar who migrated from Washington State to Princeton to Montreal, who sometimes sings and performs in amateur Gilbert and Sullivan productions and iconoclastically labors to turn the old field of “Soviet studies” upside-down. A student of the honest and craftsman-like “Sovietologist” Robert C. Tucker (whose two-volume unfinished biography on Stalin has yet to be surpassed), he shattered myths about Lenin in his massive earlier volume, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? In Context*, and he continues that good work in this informative biography.

The “textbook” themes in anti-Lenin scholarship (ranging from Adam Ulam and Alfred Meyer to Richard Pipes and Robert Service) go like this: Lenin distrusted the capacity of the working class to be truly revolutionary; he consequently veered away from Marxist orthodoxy in order to develop a “vanguard party” dominated by intellectuals such as himself in order to accomplish the revolutionary task; he was so utterly fanatical

that he refused to tolerate any and all disagreement, and even turned away from music because he feared it would make him too “soft.” Lenin’s inhumanity, according to such accounts, was manifest from his early callous rejection of efforts to help starving peasants during the famine of 1891-92 down through to his unrelentingly authoritarian violence utilized to force the intractable Russian masses to live up to his utopian ideals after the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Lih’s well-documented account demonstrates the mythological character of these and other well-worn assertions. Steeped in Marxist thought, in fact “in love” with Marx’s writings, as Lih puts it, Lenin maintained a belief in a “heroic working class” that would inevitably prove itself capable of leading – in alliance with Russia’s peasant majority – both a democratic revolution to overthrow the absolute monarchy of Tsar Nicholas II and a subsequent socialist revolution (linking up with workers of other lands) that would bring to birth a society in which, to use Marx’s words, the working class would “win the battle of democracy,” leading to a socialist or communist future that would be “an association in which the free development of each would be the condition for the free development of all.”

The revolutionary party that Lenin helped create (the Bolsheviks) was fundamentally democratic, evolving through sharp debates and disagreements, splits and reunifications, a collectivity of activists in which Lenin was more than once over-ruled but within which he earned considerable authority. Far from developing a blueprint for an authoritarian order, Lenin’s “blueprints” (such as they were) projected a workers’ and peasants’ republic of democratic councils (soviets) which would, increasingly, replace what he and other Marxists perceived as the economic dictatorship of capitalism with the economic democracy of socialism. Of course, things did not turn out that way.

In this fine and richly-textured book, graced with a number of splendid and appropriate illustrations, Lenin is placed securely in context: the context of European and Russian history, the context of the broader socialist movement (a truly

mass phenomenon before World War I), the context of truly heroic workers’ struggles and of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (and later the Communist Party) that contained a number of other experienced and strong-minded individuals. We are given a sense of the qualities that enabled this human being to have the impact that he did in such contexts. An iron will is combined with a brilliant intellect, with a profoundly realistic and practical theoretical and organizational bent, yet also with a desire to learn from others and – by no means inconsequentially – a capacity for charm and humor, and for genuine kindness.

At the same time, there definitely was a quality akin to arrogance, if we are to believe Lih’s account, and at times an inclination to see a highly complex reality through the distorting lens of his revolutionary assumptions and his faith that the “heroic working class” could and would overcome all obstacles. Lih shows us that this perspective could not survive the escalation of problems and horrific crises that beset the revolutionary regime after 1917. A brutalizing civil war, combined with foreign invasions and economic blockades, and exacerbated by terrible mistakes of the revolutionaries themselves, swept away the autonomy of revolutionary soviets and quickly evaporated the once-potent energy of “workers’ democracy.” In order to survive and create order amid the chaos, Lenin and his comrades implemented emergency policies and improvisations that closed down civil liberties, gave a political monopoly to the Communist Party, and generated the hot-house development of a bureaucratic order. The rescue from this dilemma, Lenin and the Bolsheviks believed, would be workers’ revolutions in other countries, to be facilitated by member parties of the new Communist International, but the revolutions failed to materialize. Modifying his expectations while engaging in initial problem-solving efforts, Lenin never abandoned the fundamental ideas and ideals that had animated him. But he was soon devastated by a series of catastrophic strokes, which ended his political activity by 1922-23 and brought death soon after.

Perhaps the biggest problem that

Lenin himself would have with this biography is that it is written not by a revolutionary, but by someone who is sympathetic to revolutionaries such as Lenin but can end the book with the conclusion that Lenin's revolutionary scenario was "far from realistic." Lenin is likened to the Biblical Noah, confidently building his revolutionary ark as the flood waters of political, social and economic catastrophe rose higher and higher. "As it turned out, the ark was leaky because it was built on unsound assumptions, the voyage involved more suffering than anyone had bargained for, and the ark ended up far from where its builder planned."

## Ideas

**D**espite the author's disinclination to revolution, Lih's biography of Lenin is a substantial contribution for those who would like to understand important aspects of recent history, and perhaps to gain some understanding as well of current and future possibilities. It would make sense, while engaging with Lenin's life and times, to engage also with some of his writings, a comprehensive survey of which can be found in a recent volume published in the "Get Political" series of Pluto Press, entitled *Revolution, Democracy, Socialism* (complete with an introductory essay by the present author which complements Lih's findings).

In Lenin's writings one sees the breadth and coherence of his thinking in his emphasis on the need for socialist and working-class support to struggles of all who suffer oppression, and in his way of integrating reform struggles with revolutionary strategy. His insistence on working-class political independence, and on the need for working-class supremacy (or hegemony), if democratic and reform struggles are to triumph, is matched by his approach to social alliances (such as the worker-peasant alliance) as a key aspect of the revolutionary struggle. We also find his development of the united front tactic, in which diverse political forces can work together for common goals, without revolutionary organizations undermining their ability to pose effective alternatives to the capitalist status quo.

Lenin's profound analyses of capitalist development, and of imperialism and of nationalism utilize and expand upon Marx's own studies. His vibrantly revolutionary internationalist orientation embraces the laborers and oppressed peoples of the entire world. Especially dramatic is his understanding of the manner in which democratic struggles flow into socialist revolution. Challenging commonplace perspectives in the socialist movement of his time, Lenin analyzes the nature of the state in history, with a conceptualization of triumphant

working-class struggles generating a deepening and expanding democracy that would ultimately cause the state (as a repressive institution separate from and above the people) to wither away.

What one finds in Lenin's writings, Lih appropriately explains, is the best that one can find in the Marxism of the Second International, the Socialist International to which socialist parties around the world, including Lenin's own, were affiliated before World War I tore it apart. This embraces the rich contributions of Karl Kautsky up to 1910, as well as those of Rosa Luxemburg, Franz Mehring, David Riazanov, Leon Trotsky, and others. One might add that Lenin's representing the "best of Second International Marxism" actually adds up to a close correspondence between Lenin's thought and that of Karl Marx.

Unlike Lenin, however, the other outstanding representatives of Second International Marxism mentioned above favored, from 1904 until World War I, organizational unity between the more militant Bolsheviks and the more moderate Mensheviks (along with the myriad of other currents in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party). By 1912, Lenin was splitting that organization in order to establish a coherent and consistent revolutionary party. "The organization question" is often what people think of when Lenin's name comes up. For example, according to James P. Cannon (an early founder of both U.S. Communism and U.S. Trotskyism): "The greatest contribution to the arsenal of Marxism since the death of Engels in 1895 was Lenin's conception of the vanguard party as the organizer and director of the proletarian revolution."

Yet this seems to be contradicted by the findings of *Lenin Rediscovered* and Lih's new biography, which place Lenin's political and organizational conceptualizations squarely within the "best of Second International Marxism" – which was also embraced by his Menshevik adversary, Julius Martov (who was once his best friend). If Lenin and the non-Bolsheviks of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party all were seeking to replicate the German Social Democracy within Russian conditions, however, how can we explain the fact that they were not able to achieve organizational unity? The German Social Democrats had certainly proved capable of containing revolutionary Marxists and non-revolutionary reformists.

## Building a Revolutionary Party

**I**n building a Russian party, Lenin followed not only what he believed (and what Kautsky claimed) was the revolutionary example of what pre-1914 German Social Democracy represented. He also followed Marx and Engels, who

emphasized in the Communist Manifesto that Communists are the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class movement seeking to push forward all the others – because they are the most theoretically clear element within the working class, with a definite understanding of "the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement."

**T**he question remains: what distinguished Lenin from Kautsky and the Mensheviks? Given what we know, it would seem that Lenin and the Bolsheviks, unlike their Menshevik comrades and ultimately unlike Kautsky, were prepared to follow the implications of the revolutionary Marxist orientation through to the end. It is not the case that Kautsky or the Mensheviks somehow "forgot" the Marxist ideas that Lenin and his comrades "remembered." But they compromised.\*

The Mensheviks adhered to the dogma that Russia could now only go through a democratic-capitalist transformation, that a working-class socialist revolution would not be on the agenda until many years later. They consequently became committed to a worker-capitalist alliance, which naturally created pressures forcing them to compromise the class-struggle elements of Marxism. For Kautsky, by 1910, it became clear that he would become marginalized within the increasingly bureaucratic-conservative German Social Democratic movement unless he subtly but increasingly diluted his seemingly unequivocal commitment to revolutionary Marxism. By 1914, when the German Social Democracy supported the imperialist war policies of the Kaiser's government, and in 1917 in the face of the Bolshevik Revolution, Kautsky became utterly compromised. What is distinctive about Lenin's Bolsheviks is that they did not compromise, they doggedly followed through to the end the implications of the revolutionary Marxist orientation – expressed in *What Is To Be Done?, The State and Revolution, Left-Wing Communism*, and so much else in Lenin's writings.

Lih refutes the view that Lenin broke from Marxism to create a "party of a new type," yet his actually was a different kind of party than the one Kautsky belonged to and that the Mensheviks sought to build. In a similar vein, Lih does not examine with sufficient seriousness important differences that arose within the Bolshevik current itself, in 1905 and even more in the period 1907-1910 when Bolsheviks around Lenin split from Bolsheviks around his one-time lieutenant Alexander Bogdanov.

\* This and the next paragraph are "borrowed" from my article "Lenin's Marxism," *Platypus Review*. It responds to an accusation in a "Symposium on Lars Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered*."

The writings of Lenin, and the accounts of several people on the scene in 1905 – including Lenin's comrade and companion, Nadezhda Krupskaya, and also Solomon Schwarz, a Bolshevik agitator (who later became a Menshevik), both of whom tell much the same story – indicate that Lenin and some of his comrades wanted to open up the Bolshevik organization to much more involvement by workers in practical functioning and decision-making. This is not a story that Lih chooses to tell in his Lenin biography, it being cut from the same cloth as the “textbook” distortions of *What Is To Be Done?* in his opinion, expressed in a recently-published polemic.\*

It is worth pursuing the matter further, because it sheds light on the actual dynamics of building a revolutionary party, which at key points remain unnecessarily vague in Lih’s account. Krupskaya offers a generalization about what is called in one of the translations of her memoirs the “committee-men” and in another the “Komitetchiks” and in Lih’s *Lenin Rediscovered* the “praktiki” – organizers and functionaries with some intellectual skills, operating in clandestine revolutionary committees, overseeing the practical work that was essential for the functioning of the Party, particularly in the labor movement, in the anti-Tsarist underground. Krupskaya puts it this way:

“The “Komitetchik” was usually a fairly self-assured person, who realized what great influence the work of the committees had over the masses; he generally did not recognize any inner-Party democracy whatever. “This democratism only leads us into falling into the hands of the authorities; we are already quite well enough connected with the movement,” the Komitetchiks would say. And inwardly, these committee members always rather despised “the people abroad,” who, they considered, just grew fat and organized intrigues. “They ought to be sent to work under Russian conditions” was their verdict. In period 1904-1905 these mem-

bers of the committees bore tremendous responsibilities on their shoulders, but many of them experienced the utmost difficulty in adapting themselves to the conditions of increasing opportunities for legal work, and to methods of open struggle.”†

Lenin and other Bolsheviks initiated a sharp debate with their “committee-man” comrades in favor of greater organizational openness, and especially in favor of a dramatic increase of insurgent workers in the Bolshevik committees. The committee-men, feeling that their routines were working just fine, were quite resistant. The issue was not whether or not the basic ideas in *What Is To Be Done?* were correct – both sides agreed on those ideas – but on how to understand and apply the ideas in the dramatically changed context of the 1905 upsurge.

## “Lenin is likened to the Biblical Noah...”

Lih’s polemic is mistaken in characterizing Krupskaya’s remarks as being “hostile” to the Bolshevik activists on the ground in Russia, the praktiki, nor does accepting what Lenin and Krupskaya thought in 1905 amount to adopting a variant of the hostile “textbook” critique of *What Is To Be Done?*. There is nothing anti-Bolshevik about raising and debating tactical and organizational differences, and Lenin is not the only Bolshevik to have taken the positions that he took in 1905 – although he and his co-thinkers were voted down at the Bolshevik conference where they did so. Bolshevism continued to evolve, however, and it evolved very much in the direction Lenin was arguing for. That happens in a healthy,

\* Lih mentions Schwarz but avoids serious engagement with what he writes. It is, nonetheless, an important source – Solomon M. Schwarz, *The Russian Revolution of 1905* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

† N. K. Krupskaya, *Memories of Lenin*, Volume 1, translated by Eric Verney (New York: International Publishers, 1930), 137-138.

democratic-activist organization. Debates culminate in decisions which are carried out, tested in practice, and then revised as necessary. It is possible to trace continuities between these internal tensions and debates of 1905 and a far more severe dispute three years later in which Bolsheviks aligned with Lenin ultimately broke from a “hard” Bolshevik current around Bogdanov. Krupskaya, a Lenin “loyalist” if ever there was one, saw Lenin’s position in this dispute as consistent with what he argued in 1905: “making good use of every legal possibility, of forging ahead and rallying the masses.”‡

For Lenin and his co-thinkers, there was a need for the creation of a revolutionary workers’ party, guided by a serious-minded utilization of socialist theory and scientific analysis, drawing increasing numbers of working people into a highly conscious struggle against all forms of oppression, and this could not be expected to arise easily or spontaneously. It had to be created through the most persistent, serious, consistent efforts of revolutionary socialists. The working class would not automatically become a force for socialist revolution, but it could develop into such a force with the assistance of a serious revolutionary workers’ party. Such a party – making past lessons, the most advanced social theory, and a broad social vision accessible to increasing numbers of workers – would be a vital component in the self-education and self-organization of the working class, helping to develop spontaneous working-class impulses toward democracy and socialism into a cohesive, well-organized, and powerful social force.

As “practical politics” sag in countries throughout the world, with the economic downturn teetering on the edge of a global depression, popular hopes are likely to give way to radical disappointments. The classical Leninist question “what is to be done?” is being asked with increasing urgency. Perhaps all of this Lenin stuff has a future as well as a past.¶

‡ Nadezhda Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, translated by Bernard Isaacs (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 167.

# Two Steps Back

a reply to Chris Maisano

BY PAM C. NOGALES C.

"No coarser insult, no baser defamation, can be thrown against the workers than the remark, 'Theoretical controversies are for the intellectuals'"

— Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution* (1900)

"Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement the only choice is — either bourgeois or socialist ideology... This does not mean, of course, that the workers have no part in creating such an ideology. They take part, however, not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians, as Proudhons and Weitlings; in other words, they take part only when they are able, and to the extent that they are able, more or less, to acquire the knowledge of their age and develop that knowledge."

— Vladimir Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (1905)

Imagine the composition of the more than twelve hundred member audience, on a March evening in 1950, packed into New York's Webster Hall to hear a public debate on the subject "Is Russia a socialist community?" The event, organized by the Eugene V. Debs Society, was chaired by the then thirty-three year old sociologist, C. Wright Mills, and pitted Earl Browder, deposed General Secretary of the Communist Party, still a staunch Stalinist, against the leader of the Trotskyist Workers' Party, Max Shachtman. This event is a fascinating relic of American radical politics and an exemplary one, considering how little interest there is on the Left today in engaging in public debate. Present throughout the transcript are ideological concerns that would provide the backdrop for the sixties and seventies "New" Left. Individually, each presentation provides a rough sketch of a party line for the CP-USA and the Trotskyist Workers' Party. But taken as a pair and in conversation they offer a composite image of how political practice of the day was rooted in questions regarding the nature of capitalism and the historical legacy of Marxism. Through contestation they probe what the Marxist Left at the time confronted with utmost difficulty. This inquiry into the theory and practice of leftist politics was a significant point of departure for Mills' intellectual endeavors.

Not unlike the late 1950s, students today find most compelling in Marx what among the existing Left is fraught with a great deal of ideological confusion: the possibility of historical transformation. And though we can write and rewrite about the centrality of the eleventh the-

sis of Feuerbach until pages are worn to a pulp, in truth, we insist on the relevance of this line precisely because society has proven so recalcitrant to change—from the Left. "Crises" are no longer opportunities for political mobilization but just reaffirm how powerless the Left is, even in the face of economic collapse. Presently, the Right is much more effective at organizing in times of social discontent and holds the monopoly on the rhetoric of freedom—once the battle cry of the Left. We have reached an historical impasse of great political consequence.

In the face of this degeneration, how do we assess whether or not any self-purported Left either by "carrying on" with the political "struggle" or by returning to "the legacy of socialist thought," is actually working towards social revolution? Writing amid the sound and fury of the Cold War, Mills was plagued by a sense that both the Right *and* the Left had become obstacles to transformative possibilities. As a critic of the Left, Mills leaves much to be admired. It is through this framework that his "Letter to the New Left" (1959) can speak to us today.

## The Collapse of Historical Agency

The substance of the Letter is in Mills' proclamation that both Stalinism and the end-of-ideology thesis were two sides of the same coin. The blind "optimism" of Stalinism had turned Marxist politics from a critical into an *affirmative* practice: "Pessimism is permitted," Mills notes, "but only episodically and only within the context of the

big optimism." On the other side of the political spectrum, the end-of-ideology thesis was a "mechanical reaction — not a creative response — to the ideology of Stalinism." Although at first glance this may have looked like a battle between the historical optimism of the Left (Stalinism) versus the historical pessimism of the Right (the end-of-ideology), both, he argued, were expressions of "the end of political reflection." It is this recognition that drives him to underline the role of the intelligentsia. And here one may add a caveat, because Mills's prescription, although originating from a nuanced assessment of his political moment, could lend itself to vulgar sociological empiricism: for Mills "the intelligentsia" could play a critical role insofar as it was able to push for political reflection and clarification, not because they were members of a particular social stratum. In other words, the intelligentsia was only potentially revolutionary; its role is "distinct and *historically specific*." Because both Stalinism and the end-of-ideology perpetuated a political response to the present in which "the real questions are not even raised," maybe the intelligentsia could provide a lens through which the Left could return to these pressing questions. Maybe.

According to Mills, the Left had become an obstacle to itself by losing its grip on the relationship between ideology and political practice. It is this assessment that leads him to the formulation that the working class had ceased to be a transformative historical force. He wrote, "[The clinging mightily to the working class as the historical agency] is a historically specific idea that has been turned into an ahistorical and unspecific hope,"

hence the label “labor metaphysics.” He characterized this problem as part of the legacy of “Victorian Marxism,” a perspective that held steadfast to the working class as the lever to revolution, long after the workers’ movement had ceased to work toward this goal. It’s important, however, that Mills recognizes this crisis as the result of the growing chasm between Marxism, as a radical political ideology, and the workers’ movement. For Mills, this crisis could only be addressed by making this rupture explicit as “the political problem of our time which we must turn into issue and trouble.”

In the Spring 2010 issue of the *Jacobin*, Chris Maisano’s response to the “Letter” warns that despite Mills’s assessment, the “Next Left” ought to keep in mind the “enduring centrality of the working class in the project of the Left.” Certainly, the organization of the working class is key to any politics that aims to overthrow capitalism. But presenting the problem in terms of support for the intelligentsia versus support for the proletariat winds up repeating the same problem that Mills is trying to address, the issue of an ahistorical prescription to practice. Ultimately, the subject of his essay is the Left and the problems plaguing the Left as he understood them and as they manifested in the late 1950s. Today, like in 1959, we can’t assume the radical character of the working class. Of course, this is not desirable, but it is part of what characterizes our historical moment, and we cannot neglect to address it without falling into a dogmatic response to the present.

Maisano couples his criticism with a report of labor struggles of the sixties and seventies to highlight the radically transformative potential of labor. He does this in order to disprove the thesis that the intelligentsia would replace the proletariat as the new “historical subject.” But Mills’ claim that the role of the intelligentsia is historically specific and adequate to its moment only insofar as it is able to grapple with and make palpable the problems plaguing the Left means that his proposition does not aim to substitute one

“subject” for another, but is an attempt, rather, to formulate how the Left could, again, become an “agent,” a subject, in the making of history. For Mills, the intelligentsia *may* have a role to play in this regard, but only if it can push for political reflection and historical consciousness.

### “Socialism or Barbarism”

**I**t is unclear what exactly remains of the Left today: it has lost the ability to reflect on the historical conditions in which it operates, leaving its political practice adrift. The labor struggles of the ‘60s and ‘70s Maisano includes in his response are among the historical relics of the Left that do not in themselves guarantee the now long-overturned objective gains. They are, rather, part of the *historical memory* of political possibility that “weighs like a nightmare upon the brains of the living.” Certainly, this is also true for the deep history of the Left, and perhaps in ways more important to recognize. Historical gains by the Left have either been undone or transfigured beyond recognition. This is all the more reason why, for us today, the history of the Marxist Left remains obscure. In his own time, Mills presents his diagnosis, but arrives at more questions than answers.

“I cannot avoid the view that …the historic agency (in the advanced capitalist countries) has either collapsed or become most ambiguous: so far as structural change is concerned, these don’t seem to be at once available and effective as our agency any more. I know this is a debatable point among us, and among many others as well; I am by no means certain about it.”

It is with this set of concerns that Mills urged the New Left to “read Lenin again (be careful) — Rosa Luxemburg, too.”

But if the words of these Second International radicals contain the battle slogans of an era when revolutionary politics were actually on the table, how do they speak to us today? What

do we make of this historical legacy?

**U**pon hearing the news of the fourth of August 1914, Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin, both in despair at the state of affairs, briefly considered suicide. Instead, in 1918, in order to rescue the historical mission of the German, and thus the international, Left, Luxemburg and Zetkin alongside Karl Liebknecht, Franz Mehring and others, founded the Spartacus League. This too is a relic of political possibility, once palpable and now far buried by proceeding decades of political degeneration. As terrifying as the thought may be, today, we live in the future that Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin imagined in horror. We do little justice to this history by treating it as a blueprint for political action. Perhaps old man Gus, the protagonist in Tony Kushner’s *The Intelligent Homosexual’s Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures*, put it best when he said that from the standpoint of the present, the history of the Left appears as if written in a language which no one speaks anymore. We may not know—certainly not any better than Mills—how the history of the Left speaks to us today. This is what constitutes the problem of *historical consciousness* that remains the task of our day.

Perhaps what is most tragic about the New Left is that while it recognized that leftist politics had reached a profound impasse, it yielded very little in terms of ideological clarification. In the American Left this problem often manifested as a vitriolic distaste for ideas and reflection on political action—a legacy that is all too present. At their worst, the proponents of these politics pushed blindly against barriers they did not seek to understand and in this way naturalized the old historical defeats of the early twentieth century.

This is the crisis in Marxism that we must make palpable. Mills’ “Letter” is a good reminder of why this is the political work that continues to be the central task of our age. ¶

# Responsible Imperialism

Victorian “humanitarianism”

BY JAMES HEARTFIELD

**B**etween 1836 and 1909, the British Empire grew to take in New Zealand, much of Australia, Fiji, New Guinea, Southern Africa (beyond the Cape), and much more – from 2,824,040 square miles to 12,700,000. As we now know, imperial rule tore the lives of millions of native peoples apart, uprooting them from the land, pushing them aside into reservations and turning them into wage slaves, sucking resources and wealth to feed Britain’s industrial expansion. Today, of course, we have much more enlightened views. The United Nations declared an International Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, after dedicating first 1993 and then the decade the 1994–2005 to their rights. The wrongs done to indigenous peoples in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand have been addressed in apologies, declarations, commissions, land and political reform.

It might come as a surprise, then, to discover that the duty to protect Aboriginal peoples is not a recent idea at all. In those years between 1836 and 1909, the Aborigines’ Protection Society, a powerful lobby of British parliamentarians, colonial officials, churchmen and the Great and the Good worked on behalf of native peoples. The Aborigines’ Protection Society played a key role in the development of imperial policy, writing special laws into the new colonies that enshrined the protection of native custom, leadership and land. Even more surprising, as you read over the parliamentary debates and the colonial office records, you will discover that as each of the new colonies was brought under the British Crown most of that territory was taken with the stated aim of protecting the native peoples there. The Members of Parliament pushing for colonization were all leading lights or friends of the Aborigines’ Protection Society – Alderman M’Arthur, William Forster, Lord Shaftesbury, Joseph Chamberlain.

They did not call them “indigenous” in those days – they were “aborigines” a word not just for the original people of Australia, but for all First Peoples, who they called “Caffres” in South Africa, Chippeway in Canada. The United Nations brought Guatemala activist Rigo-

Berta Menchu to London in 1993. More than a century earlier the Aborigines’ Protection Society brought the Zulu Cetshwayo and then the Maori Chiefs to the Lord Mayor of London’s Mansion House. (Bemused at the fashion for romanticizing the Iroquois, Karl Marx noted that “each century ... produces its own primitives.”)

In 1835, a Select Committee of the British Parliament sat to decide “what measures ought to be adopted with regard to the native inhabitants of countries where British settlements are made.” The Select Committee had been proposed by Thomas Fowell Buxton a leader of the anti-slavery movement who went on to found the Aborigines’ Protection Society. In the Committee Members of Parliament heard of the terrible persecution of the Xhosa in South Africa, of natives at the hands of the Hudson’s Bay Company, and of the coming extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines.

There were two strong influences that led to the Select Committee. The first was the great success of the evangelically-inspired anti-slavery campaign (slavery was abolished under the 1833 Act). Britain’s commercial elite embraced anti-slavery to show that they were about more than making money. Many of the activists and supporters of the church-based anti-slavery movement took up the Aborigines’ Protection Society as their new cause.

The second influence on the 1835 Select Committee was fierce metropolitan loathing for emigrants. More and more of the poor and displaced were trying to escape boom-and-bust Britain – they suffered miserable trips of many months in the holds of stinking ships to get away, some economic migrants, others in chains as “transportees.” The emigrants were called “scum,” or “human dregs” that had overflowed Britain to settle elsewhere – a strong image for people whose sewage collected in septic tanks. The British middle classes were most upset when these renegades made their fortunes overseas. Assertive colonists in the Canadian colonies, New Zealand and the Cape were calling for a greater say over their own government – and Westminster was still smarting over the American Revolution. The Aborigines’ Protection Society, and

the Select Committee that came before it, were full of sympathy for “the aboriginal populations of countries into which the white peoples of Europe were constantly pouring their surplus populations.” A greater concern for natives was one way of undermining the grasping settlers.

**T**he Select Committee Report, published in 1837 sent shockwaves around the Empire. In South Africa, the Governor Benjamin D’Urban was recalled for his role in a smash-and-grab seizure of the territory known as Queen Adelaide Province (one of few times that the colonial office disallowed the colonization – the territory was set free, at least until 1847). Under its new dispensation, the British Crown decided not to seize New Zealand, but instead negotiated a treaty at Waitangi in 1840, promising “Her Majesty the Queen of England confirms and guarantees to the Chiefs and Tribes of New Zealand ...the full exclusive and undisturbed possession of their Lands.” And as a check to the emigrants to Australia, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Glenelg appointed a Protector of Aborigines, and gave instructions to the governors to safeguard the natives.

To defend the ambitions of the Select Committee Buxton formed the Aborigines’ Protection Society. The Society gathered the most forward looking people to think about the colonies. Herbert Spencer and De Tocqueville were subscribers, and Secretary Thomas Hodgkin was a leading light in medicine as he was in anthropology. Against the trend of nineteenth century race theory the Society took as its slogan, “*ab uno sanguine*” – Latin for “of one blood.”

The framework set out in the Select Committee report saw Governors negotiate land titles with hand-picked native leaders, in an attempt to set limits on the rapid expansion of the European settlements. The theory that lay behind the proposals was that of “controlled emigration,” most clearly laid out by Edward Gibbon Wakefield, an advisor to the colonizer’s champion Lord Durham. Along with the Aborigines’ Protection Society Secretary Thomas Hodgkin Wakefield and the Colonial Office, Wakefield worked out a scheme that would

see the Crown reserve land for natives so as to withhold it from settlers. Pointedly, the goal of the policy was aimed as much at controlling the settlers as it was at controlling the natives. The Wakefield system of colonization, said another APS pamphleteer, the Reverend Montague Hawtrey would bring "into the new country not individuals alone, but ... a compact well-ordered society" that "gives labor to the capitalist and wages to the labor." Hawtrey's great fear was "uncontrolled emigration" that would let the settlers grab land to farm for themselves – and for that reason he wanted the Maoris honored as "the aristocracy of New Zealand." Later, New Zealand Governor Sir George Grey would use the Aborigines' Protection Society to lobby the Colonial Office in London to derail plans to give the settlers more control over their government. Once again the Maori were being wheeled on as a stage army in the struggle between the authorities and the grasping settlers. In South Africa, the Native Affairs Secretary Theophilus Shepstone brought Cetshwayo's Zulu warriors to the border in an attempt to scare the rebellious Boers into accepting British rule.

"As they saw it, the real danger to native peoples came not from the Empire, but from the unregulated white settlers."

Shepstone, and the Aborigines' Protection Society, were strongly of the view that native people ought to be ruled according to native customs, through their own chiefs, in reserved territories. At the Annual Conference of the Aborigines' Protection Society, delegates could tie themselves in knots trying to make the case for native customs. In 1867, William Craft tried to persuade the Society

that human sacrifice in Dahomey was "held not simply for the sake of shedding blood" but was instead "religious festivals performed with great ceremony." The Reverend Hawtrey thought that on balance "cannibalism, infanticide and the murder of another in cold blood ... cannot be tolerated." But slavery should not be abolished if that was "subversive of the unwritten but customary law" of the Maori Chiefs. Does the Society believe in the "divine right of kings?" asked one colonial undersecretary.

In truth, the policy of administering the Empire through customary authority was not meant to raise natives up, but to keep them in their place. This was the policy of divide and rule, and "Protection" was often worse than the alternative. Harriette Colenso, daughter of Bishop Colenso was a champion of the Zulu cause and one of the Aborigines' Protection Society's star speakers. She saw that Shepstone's native policy was a trap. But she shocked the Society in London when she told Sir Arthur Havelock that the Zulu's "might prefer to die fighting" than submit to British rule. The APS confidently put its own thoughts into the mouths of the Usuthu: "The Zulus are patiently waiting in the hope that Her Majesty's Government will, by the establishment of a protectorate relieve them." It became the Society's dogmatic belief that the duty to protect the natives could only be carried out by integrating their territories into the British Empire, first as protectorates, and then later as full-blown colonies.

This was the policy the Society called "responsible imperialism." As they saw it, the real danger to native peoples came not from the Empire, but from the unregulated white settlers. Of course, it was true that the settlers often brutalized and robbed natives of their land. But there were also cases where settlers cooperated with natives, renting land and trading. The policy of "native protection" was one of divide and rule that set the two races against each other, and its end result was to build up the power of the Colonial authorities over both.

Harriette Colenso was in the end convinced that she should tell the Zulu chief Dinizulu to submit for his own sake – only to see him jailed. "I told them to trust to English justice to protect them, I can never again urge that on anyone," she said. But that was a lesson that the Aborigines' Protection Society never learned. They campaigned to have Bechuanaland and finally the whole of South Africa incorporated into the British Empire – for the sake of the natives, of course. They called for the annexation of Fiji, New Guinea, Tonga, and advised on the administration of the Australian colonies. They promoted, too, the creation of the Confederation of

Canada, bringing Ojibwa Chief Henry Pahtahquahong Chase to address an audience at the Mansion House alongside its champion Sir Charles Tupper.

To these Victorian gentlemen there was no other remedy for a wrong than British justice – just as today it is usually taken as read that the proper answer to the problems of indigenous peoples are intervention by government programs or even the armed force of the "international community." They could see Aboriginal peoples as victims, but not as authors of their own destiny. Their policy was to protect, with all its hidden patrician intent.

The starker example of what the policy of protection meant for Aborigines was in Tasmania. There the Chief Protector of Aborigines George Robinson's "friendly policy" brought the Tasmanians in from the bush. Robinson was made commandant of a settlement on Flinders' Island for the surviving Tasmanians. He taught them hymns, gave them European names, and gathered a ramshackle compound of poorly built huts. But the Tasmanians quickly sickened, were demoralized and began to die. Robinson managed to keep the death toll under wraps until he was appointed to a new post as head of the Port Phillip Protectorate.

The policy of native protection was challenged by settlers, who were greedy for land, and by governors who had few resources. Protectorates failed not just in Port Phillip but across Australia. The Protectors had little to offer wandering people, and felt compelled to "civilize" them against their will. As Australia grew and its settled white population felt shamed by the treatment of the Aborigines, the policy of reserved areas was re-launched, but once again the results were generally worse for native peoples. Their situation was dramatized in the film *Rabbit Proof Fence*, and addressed in the government report "Bringing Them Home." The document is blunt:

"In the name of protection Indigenous peoples were subject to near-total control. Their entry and exit from reserves was regulated as was their everyday life on the reserves, their right to marry and their employment. With a view to encouraging the conversion of the children to Christianity and distancing them from their indigenous lifestyle, children were housed in dormitories and contact with their families strictly limited."

One of the first Aborigine adoptions was that of Edmund Warulan, brought back to England by Protector Edward Eyre, and made a ward of the Secretary of the Aborigines' Protection Society, Thomas Hodgkin. He was apprenticed as a saddler, but died of a pulmonary attack when he was seventeen. Another boy proved difficult, and was sent back home.

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# "...rights are not something that can be given from the outside."

The history of the Aborigines' Protection Society was of course closely tied up with the development of colonial policy. They gave the Colonial Office a way to rein in the settlers in the mid-nineteenth century. Later, as the settlers created their own legislative councils that policy was pushed back. To the Colonial Office both policies - that of honoring native land claims and of giving priority to white settlers - were correct at different times, depending on whether they felt the need to tighten or slacken the reins. Even in the heyday of colonial expansion in the late nineteenth century, the Society played its part. They were champions of the Union of South Africa, setting out the propaganda case against the Boers that served their old ally Joseph Chamberlain so well. In the end, of course, the Union's foundation was not native rights, but white supremacy.

The Aborigines' Protection Society's eventual end came not because of imperialism, but because of the challenge to it from native peoples themselves. Identifying with the patrician order, the Society felt challenged by natives' own self-assertion. In the Red River Colony, Louis Riel led the "Métis" Indians - racially-mixed offspring of European traders and Native Americans - in a rebellion to demand their own state (see his Provisional Council, right). It was a challenge to the Colonial Authorities and the Aborigines' Protection Society preferred the more obedient Ojibwa Chiefs, who were already sitting on government boards.

Riel's rebellion was put down once, and then re-launched in the North West. Eventually tried and hung, Riel might have expected the support of the Aborigines' Protection Society, but they were hostile to the "half-breed" and their rebellion.

In South Africa, the Society - having been merged with the Anti-Slavery Society - lent its support to the Native Land Act of 1913 that promised "reserved areas" for Africans. Opposition to the Land Act gathered among local native movements, and they put up a delegation to England to talk the government around. The Aborigines' Protection Society offered to help the native delegates, put them up, and get them an audience with the Secretary of State for the Colonies - but only on the condition that they drop their outright opposition and call instead for the Land Act to be reformed. One of the delegation, Sol Plaatje wrote about the Aborigines' Protection Society's betrayal in his memoirs which sold well, and became a founding document of the African National Congress. The ANC emerged out of the fight against the 1913 Land Act, which was the foundation of the policy of separate development, later known under its Dutch name of Apartheid.

**T**he Aborigines' Protection Society would have found it difficult to survive in the twentieth century, where native peoples were beginning to make their own case, through their own parties. Already the last Secretary of the Society argued with those local activists

in the Gold Coast, J. Casely Hayford and J. Brown, who wanted to start their own branches of the APS. He quarrelled too with H. Sylvester Williams who started an African Society in London (later the Pan African Society) saying it was not needed. When Fox Bourne died the APS as an independent body was wound up.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, native nationalist movements, often urban and modern in outlook, made the case for native peoples. It was the followers of Sol Plaatje in the African National Congress, of Casely Hayford in Ghana, that led the nascent nationalist movements. Aborigines' protection and "reserved areas" were for the most part a discredited policy. Only much later, with the decline of Third World nationalism, exhausted by its failures and its successes, has indigeneity been revived as a focus of liberal concern in the developed world. The Aborigines' Protection Society's brand was briefly revived in 1972 for a report on native people in Brazil - though campaigners later changed that to Survival International, launching the campaigns that would lead to the United Nations' Declaration on Indigenous Rights.

The lesson of the Aborigines' Protection Society is that rights are not something that can be given from the outside. Protection is not freedom. The desire to protect indigenous peoples, to keep them in reserved areas, shut off from the world, under "customary" rule did not enhance their freedom, but the domination of the British Empire over them. ¶

James Heartfield's history, *The Aborigines' Protection Society: Humanitarian Imperialism in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Canada, South Africa and the Congo, 1836-1909*, will be published by Columbia University Press in October, and by Hurst & Co. in Britain.

# An Imagined Community

regional identities and the Left

BY PETER FRASE

I grew up in Minnesota, but moved away in 1998; today my connection to the state is not much more profound than following the local news and avidly watching Minnesota Twins baseball games. And yet as I watched the Wisconsin protests against Governor Scott Walker's union-busting in early 2011, I felt a mixture of pride, shame and jealousy: the same emotions that many Egyptian activists described feeling as their Tunisian neighbors took the lead in making political change in the Middle East. Perhaps, in that intersection between an emotional connection to the Midwest and an intellectual commitment to Leftist politics, the events in Wisconsin hold a clue to solving the great riddle of the 21st century Left: the missing collective agent of anti-capitalist transformation.

The absence of the revolutionary agent is arguably the central problem of the Left since the 1960s. Since then, the diagnosis and critique of capitalism has been updated and rendered in ever-increasing sophistication, as the cycles and crises and ideologies of capital accumulation have been theorized by the likes of David Harvey and Fredric Jameson. Nor is there a shortage of models of how a better society might be constructed from elements that already exist in the present; these range from the detailed blueprints of Albert and Hahnel's *Parecon* to the open-ended framework of Erik Olin Wright's *Real Utopias*. What is lacking is the organized mass constituency capable of effecting the transition out of capitalism and into something better.

In earlier generations, the Marxist Left had a concept of such a collective revolutionary agent, which they called "the working class." But it is important to understand what this label signified in political terms. It did not simply mean class in the structural sense: workers who survive by selling their wage labor, confronting capitalists whose wealth comes from hiring that labor and producing for profit. The working class in that sense encompasses the vast majority even in the rich countries, but it has no sense of shared collective identity and hence is politically inert — it is a class "in itself" rather than "for itself," to use the old Marxist jargon. Hardt,

Negri, Virno, and other contemporary theorists of the "multitude" gesture at something like this all-encompassing version of the working class, but in their hands the category expresses a hope for a future politics more than it identifies a concrete and existing collective agent.

"To call working class politics a form of identity politics is not, however, to dismiss it."

The working class as it existed in old Left political discourse was a *sociological* category, and it often referred to a specific type of wage labor: the industrial proletariat, employed in large-scale factory work. Such workers were thought to be the leading edge of socialist politics not merely because they were exploited by capital, but because they occupied a specific environment that tended to forge a collective identity and to facilitate disruptive mass action: factories in which workers were employed for a long period of time, and where they were massed together each day performing similar, routinized work.

The working class in this specific sociological sense has lost its political centrality both because of structural changes in the economy, and due to the transformation of political consciousness on the Left. Capitalism has increasingly replaced industrial workers with machines, and as a result the economy is more-and-more dominated by culture industry and service employment that is not condu-

cive to fostering solidarity in the way the old factory model was. At the same time, the work of national liberation and feminist movements has forced an acknowledgment that the older conception of the working class implied the centrality of a particular white, male labor aristocracy, rendering invisible both unpaid labor in the household and the role of white supremacy in excluding non-whites from the most privileged sectors of the economy. However much the old Left liked to portray the "working class" as a universal identity that subsumed particular interests — and as much as contemporary Left nostalgics like Walter Benn Michaels might still like to portray it that way — the working class in its sociological sense was always a form of identity politics.

To call working class politics a form of identity politics is not, however, to dismiss it. Indeed, all successful political movements rely on the construction of what historian Benedict Anderson refers to as an "imagined community." Anderson coined the term in his book of the same name, where it referred to the concept of a "nation": the objective of the book was to explain why "since World War II every successful revolution has defined itself in national terms". But Anderson's definition applies not only to nationalism, but to any kind of collective political identity of the sort necessary for a successful political movement.

A nation, Anderson proposed, is an imagined community that is conceived as both limited and sovereign. It is imagined because even in the smallest country, we have no chance of knowing more than a tiny proportion of the people who make up "our" community. And yet we do think of it as our community, and experience feelings of commonality and solidarity with these people we will never know. But the community of the nation is also limited, rather than encompassing the whole of humanity. For it would be hard to sustain the sense of unity and purpose in an imaginary collective if it could not contrast itself with other communities from which it differed.

On the Left, unease with nationalism — and imaginary identities generally — has taken two forms. The first is a distrust

of any politics not explicitly based on the opposition between labor and capital, on the grounds that such movements merely facilitate the efforts of various national bourgeoisies as they seek to obscure class conflict. The second is a rejection of the idea of any “limited” community, based on the fear that such a notion of difference inevitably leads to violence and repression on the basis of group identity — a fear that is certainly not unfounded given the experience of the twentieth century. For leftists of a certain stripe, the only collectivity in which it is acceptable to claim membership is the whole of humanity.

As to the fear that identity politics is just a cover for bourgeois ideology, certainly it can be that. But so too can class politics, as in the distorted pro-corporate populism of the American “Tea Party” Right. And insofar as class identity is always the identity of a particular sociological class rather than the working class in general, it too can be a cover for preserving the privileges of a certain class stratum. Simply proclaiming that a movement is class-based does not resolve the question of constructing an imagined community but merely begs it: people must still come to see their class as encompassing others who differ from them by their race or gender or citizenship or position in the labor market.

Can we imagine our communities as limited, without imagining them as dominant over other communities? The history of nationalist movements in state power is discouraging on this score, but perhaps Americans can find a more promising example closer to home. When we think of nationalism in the United States, we generally think of its reactionary manifestation as American nationalism: flag-waving, jingoistic, pro-business, and all the rest. But for all that the residents of the country see themselves as Americans, the United States is also home to a robust collection of regional identities, which may be more promising avenues for progressive development. And the maintenance of these identities is not generally accompanied by a desire to dominate or destroy all others. Think, for example, of the most prominent way in which regional identity is expressed: supporting local sports franchises. Rivalries between cities and states are subjects of friendly competition, rather than visceral hatred.

That such regional identities can have political salience is the lesson of the protests in Wisconsin. These contests were generally discussed in terms of the opposition between Republicans and Democrats, or perhaps between capital and labor. But while the protests were about these things, they were also about what the culture of Wisconsin is and should be, and the politics of the protests were often represented as a manifestation of Wisconsin-ness itself.

Perhaps the most widely propagated symbol of the protests was the cheesehead hat, which is the distinctive accessory of Green Bay Packers football fans and which appeared at Wisconsin solidarity protests around the country. When members of the Packers came out in support of the protests, the importance of their comments derived not just from their celebrity status but from their position as figureheads of one of the most prestigious institutions in the state.

## “To root Left politics in the communal identity of states and regions may seem anachronistic...”

At a more sophisticated level, the historian Christopher Phelps argues that the protests drew strength and legitimacy from a particular set of shared norms unique to Wisconsin: the “Wisconsin idea,” a left-populist notion that both government and economy should be accountable to the common man. The Idea goes back to the early twentieth century politician Robert La Follette; it is taught in Wisconsin schools and is often invoked to describe the mission of the state University system. There is nothing inherently exclusionary or chauvinist about the Wisconsin Idea; its purpose is to provide a big tent in which all Wisconsinites can define themselves as part of an imagined community with shared progressive values.

To root Left politics in the communal identity of states and regions may seem anachronistic, and it cuts against a common socialist and Marxist preoccupation with rooting politics in the workplace. But just as the sociological working class of old Left imagination was only a particular idiosyncratic manifestation of the underlying structural opposition between capital and labor, so too the identification between class politics and action at the point of production is tied to a particular historical era. Struggles over urban development, environmental justice, or the welfare state are just as much class struggles as are strikes or other workplace actions. Hence it is necessary to imagine a political identity that encompasses the

entire dynamic of production and reproduction beyond the factory floor. In recognition of this fact, many activists today speak vaguely about “the community”. But better to give the community a name, a place, a history, and a set of symbols that can be drawn on as part of a political struggle — hence, the Wisconsin Idea.

Other states and regions will have to find their own usable past in order to forge a viable progressive identity. In the Mountain West, there is the radical labor tradition of Wobblies and coal miners. The contemporary culture of northern California and the Pacific Northwest, while often derided as mere hippie narcissism, can form the basis for a more substantive politics of progressive cosmopolitanism. In the Northeast, there is a Yankee radical tradition of labor-artisan republicanism, dating back to revolutionary times, alongside the proud history of abolitionism. Appalachia, today a hotbed of white racial resentment, has a storied history of labor struggle as well. There are even elements of a progressive identity in the South, which is dominated by a reactionary local political identity and is in many ways the well-spring of contemporary right-wing American nationalism: a Southern counter-history runs from the Maroon communities of escaped slaves and Indians all the way through the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Whatever identity we construct will be, as Benedict Anderson put it, imaginary; as post-modern, ironic subjects, we will be unable to avoid facing the artificiality of our identities. And this is just as well, because we will have to be self-conscious about *constructing* a new identity rather than finding one already made: to appropriate the past uncritically would be to exclude all those who were excluded in the past. A modern “Wisconsin Idea,” for example, must encompass the poorest neighborhoods of Milwaukee and the Hmong immigrants of western Wisconsin, just as much as the stout rural dairy farmer.

Fortunately, the power of nationalism does not actually depend on positing some primordial past or an authentic tie to the land; it is possible to feel an identity even after knowing that it is constructed and artificial. Certainly my own feelings about Minnesota feel no less real for all that I know that they are imaginary. Just as Egyptians in Tahrir Square spoke of their vision for change in the whole Middle East, I have my own dreams about change in the Middle West. And when Minnesotans rise up to overthrow their own corrupt and complacent elites, I will be on the first flight back to Minneapolis to join them. ¶

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