Socialist Studies / Études socialistes 7(1/2) Spring/Fall 2011: 1-36
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INTERVIEW

To Interpret the World and To Change It

Interview with David McNally[1]

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Keywords
David McNally; feminism; global justice movements; language; Marxism; radical political economy

Mots-clés
David McNally; économie politique radicale; féminisme; langage; marxisme; mouvements pour une justice globale

David McNally is a life-long Marxist activist and scholar. He is the author of six books, *Political Economy and the Rise of Capitalism: A Reinterpretation* (1988)*, Against the Market: Political Economy, Market Socialism and the Market Critique* (1993), *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor and Liberation* 2001), *Another World is Possible: Globalization and Anti-capitalism* (2002, 2nd revised edition in 2006) and *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance* (2010). His forthcoming book is *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* (2011). He is a frequent contributor to *Studies in Political Economy* and *Historical Materialism* and to progressive, left magazines, including *Against the Current, Canadian Dimension, International Socialist Review* and the *New Socialist.*

David McNally undertook his undergraduate studies at the Evergreen State College in Washington and at York University and graduate work at York University in the Social and Political Thought programme, completing his PhD in 1983. Since that year, he has been Professor in the political science department at York University. His contributions to political economy, include analyses of classical and radical political economy and materialist theories of language and culture. He has written about Marxism, socialist feminism and anti-racism and anti-capitalist struggles, as well as democratic theory. A frequently-invited speaker, his most recent scholarly engagements include invitations to

[1] Transcript and introduction by Elaine Coburn, CADIS-Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, France.

ISSN 1918-2821

lecture at the Global Studies Association, the Canadian Political Science Association, the Historical Materialism conferences, and the Li Ka Sing Knowledge Centre at the University of Toronto.

Alongside his academic work, David McNally has been an activist since he was a teenager, when he participated in anti-Vietnam war protests and formed a campus chapter of the Committee to Free Angela Davis. A long-time member of the International Socialists and later the New Socialist Group, he participates regularly in anti-capitalist struggles and movements. In Toronto, he supports the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, No One is Illegal, Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid/Faculty for Palestine, and the Greater Toronto Workers Assembly, among others. He regularly blogs about current events and his most recent scholarly and activist work on his website (http://davidmcnally.org).

This interview took place in March 30, 2011 at a downtown Toronto restaurant. The transcript has received only the very lightest editorial touches; David McNally speaks clearly and in full paragraphs.

Murray Cooke: Your website (http://davidmcnally.org) states that you've been active in progressive politics since high school, when you joined the movement against the Vietnam war. How did this politicization occur – did this come from your family, did you grow up in a 'left' household, or did the politicization occur because of the times, since you were an adolescent during the turbulent 1960s?

David McNally: I think it was very much a product of the times. I came from a very typical family of Irish Catholic descent, which is to say people voted Liberal, because that's what Irish Catholics did. And it was really more a product of being a young person growing up in the 1960s and being surrounded by music that was starting to express all kinds of social protest themes and being surrounded by the visual images of things like the civil rights and black power movements, the war in Vietnam and so on. And really starting to try to understand what it was about our society that could breed racism and war, for instance. And so I just found myself gravitating to protest politics.

And I think the most dramatic moment for me personally was in the spring of 1970 when antiwar students were shot at both Kent State and Jackson State universities in the US (United States). And the idea of seeing these young people shot for protesting the war was enough to make me sit up and pay attention. And the calls went out for demonstrations and so on. So I went to what I didn't know was the largest anti-Vietnam demonstration (in

Canada). This was in May of 1970, in front of the US consulate on University Avenue in Toronto.

So you were in high school in Toronto…

I was north of Toronto, a small town north of Toronto. And I was sixteen and I went down to see and participate in my first mass demonstration of ten thousand. It was charged by police on horseback, there were over one hundred arrests and so on…So it was a very politicizing moment and experience. And I think it really just… In that sense, I was a product of a particular historical moment.

And so then did you take that new political awareness back to your high school?

Absolutely. I was involved with a group of Toronto area, really GTA (Greater Toronto Area) high school activists, in something called the League for Student Democracy. We were doing anti-war agitation. But also organizing around student elections to demand greater student powers, trying to break some of the authoritarian codes that existed within the high schools and that sort of thing. So we had a network of radical high school activists and some of them are still around on the left today.

Your website jumps to say that you formed a campus chapter of the Committee to Free Angela Davis. So that was after high school, when you went to university, York University?

No, that was at the Evergreen State College in Washington, Olympia Washington, where… I was somebody who had to get out of high school and we had mandatory grade thirteen to go to Canadian universities at the time. I found a brand new university in the US that didn't have grades. And it was much more experimental and they looked at the application I wrote and admitted me. I was already at this point, as a high school student, reading Herbert Marcuse and this kind of radical literature. I was ready to do more intensive study and arrived there in Washington state, then in 1971, to start my undergrad studies.

And this was really a period where the movement to free Angela Davis, who had been arrested under Ronald Reagan in California and charged with very, very serious crimes for which she was ultimately acquitted (began). But

we had no campus chapter of that movement. And Seattle being the closest large city, when I went into Seattle I would go to the radical bookstores and pick up literature and buy left-wing newspapers and all that sort of thing and came across the literature of the Campaign and the Committee to Free Angela Davis. And so with one African-American student, he and I started a campus chapter.

So then from there, how did you end up at York University?

Largely it was financial and family pressures. Which is to say that foreign student fees were going up at the time and I didn't see how I could afford to continue to study in the US. And I had a parent who was ill at the time; I was the oldest child so I really felt family responsibilities also. So I came back to Toronto. And at that point it was so obvious to a sort-of politicized undergraduate like myself that York university was the place where I could find faculty and courses where I could really study these sorts of topics and themes that were consistent with my own radicalizing political interests…

Was it particular faculty that you were attracted to? Although I know later it wasn't your sole focus, as an undergrad were you in the political science programme?

I actually…I had this kind of combined Social and Political Thought slash Political Science major ultimately. Although I was as much or more in philosophy courses in the beginning as anything else.

But the attraction of York was multiple. On the one hand, some Canadian universities wouldn't even look at me without my grade thirteen. And York was still unconventional, which is to say that I met a faculty member, discussed my interests with her. She sent me to see someone in the Registrar's office with a message saying, "This kid's bright enough to go into second year. He shouldn't have to go back to first year. Read his work." They shopped some things I had written in my first year out to faculty members who said, "Absolutely, put him in the second year." And York was still unconventional and flexible enough at that point, in the early '70s, where the bureaucratic regimes which said, "He doesn't have grade 13 therefore he starts in first year" didn't apply. Partly it was that about the institution.

And then there was no question that York was already developing its reputation as a place for critical theory, widely defined, and this was really across the social sciences. It was simply a less conservative, tradition-bound

university. It was also at that point heavily committed to interdisciplinary approaches, and so my gravitation into Social and Political Thought, for instance, made a lot of sense in that context…

In terms of your political involvement at York, as an undergrad, you were involved in the Ontario Waffle after it was essentially expelled from the NDP (New Democratic Party). Soon after this initial split with the NDP, the debate over left nationalism caused the final split within the Waffle: the radical leftists, including yourself, rejected the nationalist line of the leadership. Ultimately, fairly quickly, this led to the formation of Independent Socialists, later the International Socialists, around '75-'76 .

How did you get involved in the Waffle initially and what was the process leading up to the split and the formation of IS? Not necessarily the details, the personalities, but the politics in the broader sense -- what political and theoretical influences were shaping you at that point?

Right.

Keep in mind with this that the story of the Waffle is a more complicated one than I think most people appreciate. My involvement happens after the Waffle was expelled from the NDP, so I don't have that prior history.

When the Waffle left the NDP, one of the things that it had to struggle with was what differentiated it from the NDP. And initially, many of the Waffle leaders decided that it was time to be more explicitly socialist, even Marxist, in character. The meeting at which I made the decision to join the Waffle, Jim Laxer, one of its key leaders, made the statement: "It is now time to bring Marx out of the closet." And I already considered myself a Marxist. That was really important for me. I had reservations about the Waffle's nationalist commitments, but the declaration that this was a Marxist organization trying to build a socialist movement, was really important for me.

The other thing about the Waffle that is often forgotten is that it had a real base among trade unionists: that was what really distinguished it. When I looked at the left groups in this city at that time, most of them were overwhelmingly student based. But when you went to a Waffle event, there were steel workers, auto workers, health care workers, nurses and so on, many of them very well rooted trade union activists, in its midst. And moreover, the Waffle, in the early stages of its independent existence outside of the NDP, was distinguished by doing strike support work. For instance, the York Waffle group that I joined was doing a lot of week-in week-out strike

support work with a slightly famous strike, at the time, the Artistic Woodwork strike up in North York, the Downsview-North York area. So several times a week we would join solidarity pickets and we would bring students from York. And we also brought strikers to campus forums. We had a forum of about two hundred students, for instance, in solidarity with the Artistic Woodwork strike. So my attraction to the Waffle was more towards those elements of more radical working class activism and the more explicitly socialist-Marxist elements. I had big qualms about the left-nationalism.

But the tension between these different elements really came to the fore in the 1973 federal election when Waffle candidates ran. Three ran in Ontario and in Toronto, we were campaigning for one candidate and the election literature came out saying that, "A vote for our candidate was a vote for Canadian independence." And a lot of us turned the literature over, upside down, to try to find references to socialism, which is what *we* thought we were out for.

And we were shocked. And this was really the beginning of a debate.

Now, arguably the tension was there from the beginning. But the Waffle was trying to navigate some balance between its socialist and left-nationalist commitments. And for whatever reason, sections of the leadership at this point, in the middle of '73, decided to make a hard turn away from the socialist emphasis and towards the emphasis on Canadian independence. And that's where the debate started.....

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And, ironically just because we were young activists reading a lot of left-literature, the critics of the nationalist turn within the Waffle, of which I was one, encountered much more internationalist literature coming from the British International Socialist (IS) group. But the other thing that we quickly twigged into was that this was a far left group, the British IS, which actually had a very serious working class orientation. They had perhaps a couple of thousand trade union members at that point, very active in building rank and file movements in the unions throughout Britain. And so the same thing that attracted me to the Waffle, the seriousness about grassroots trade union working class organizing, also seemed to apply to the British current, the IS. Except that it didn't seem to be compromised by the nationalism; they were very explicitly internationalist.

So even though to some people it looks like a very idiosyncratic development, once you realize how strong the trade union orientation of the Waffle was in 1973-74 then, in fact, the movement from the Waffle into arguably the most rooted, far-left organization in terms of working class roots

in the English speaking world, isn't quite as much of a jump as people might think.

Why the Waffle ultimately raised the ire of the leadership within the NDP, particularly Stephen Lewis, is often traced back to the Waffle involvement in the labour movement: to the sort of rank and file organizing that you are describing, and to the fact that the Waffle was critical of international unions and also of the conservatism, the bureaucratic nature of the labour union movement. Some of the history suggests that it was then the labour movement folks who pressured Lewis (to expel the Waffle)– and maybe it didn't take a whole lot of pressure -- but they were the driving force that got Lewis to finally act…

I think there is a lot of truth to that. The NDP establishment may not have been happy about the presence of a left opposition within its midst, but it was when the Waffle began to do its own independent organizing within the labour moment that the heat really rose. And this was in particular around the Autopact and organizing with UAW (United Auto Worker) activists, particularly in Windsor. As the Waffle began to stake out its own particular position and was attracting auto workers activists around it and also, in some sense, galvanizing their critical relationship to the leadership of the Auto Workers Union and others, a lot of pressure did built up, no question, in the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) leadership, to get rid of these guys: "They're troublemakers, they are making our life difficult in the OFL."

And I think you're right, Stephen Lewis more or less did the job.

And then the IS emerged from the York Waffle, so initially the IS was primarily undergrads from York.

There is no question that the core group that wrote the dissident, critical documents around the Waffle were based at York University, based around the York University Waffle group. But there was another layer of activists in Hamilton, Toronto and so on, that was labour-based. So that when the disintegration, really, of the Waffle occurred and the Independent Socialists were initially formed, later to becomes the International Socialists, although the core group clearly came for York undergrads, there were health care workers, municipal workers, nurses and so on who were also part of the mix. And that tells us something about the problems that the Waffle was grappling with.....

Related to that, throughout your career, you have challenged the left-nationalist tendency within Canada. Your academic work in the 1980s, including your articles in *Studies in Political Economy* (see McNally 1981, 1986) criticized the Innis-based approach of the new Canadian political economy. And by the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s you were engaged in a critique of the left-nationalist discourse that imbued so much of the anti-free trade movement in Canada (see McNally 1990). Along with other authors, such as William Carroll (1986), you critiqued the dependency approach by pointing to the strength of the Canadian capitalist class. And you and some of your students, including Jerome Klassen (2009) and Todd Gordon (2010), have gone so far as to describe Canada's role as imperialist.

What do you think is at stake in these debates about Canada's role in the world? Do you think that perception has been changing because Canada's role itself has changed? Or is it that there is a new cohort of academics and activists looking at things in new ways?

Well, in terms of what's at stake, I think that the debate in the Waffle threw up that question for us, since we saw an emphasis on a certain kind of Canadian nationalism as blunting the working class, socialist commitments of the organization. And to develop a critique of that trend within the Waffle required re-examining a lot of the theses upon which it had built its understanding of Canada and Canadian capitalism. And at the time, there was within the Waffle but far beyond its ranks really, a whole wave of literature and analyses which applied the dependency thesis to Canada. Which is to say, analyses that try to argue that Canada was either a direct colony of the US empire or a semi-colony or a neo-colony or a dependency. And different theorists used one or more of these categories to try to characterize it.

But what happened in that analysis in all its forms is that the external relationship of the Canadian economy to the American became the key analytical lens through which we understand the Canadian economy. And what this tended to do was to blunt both the national and colonial oppressions internal to the development of Canadian capitalism, that is to say, in particular the internal colonialism with respect to Indigenous peoples but also the semi-colonial status of Quebec within the Canadian formation. And this also blunted class analysis of Canadian society because the key thing was understood to be the national problem and so one made nationalism or anti-imperialism the forefront of everything according to that analysis. So that the political stakes looked quite real.

But, it also seemed to many of us that the analysis was faulty on multiple levels. To begin with, it just didn't seem convincing that Canada should be analysed in terms of its place within the world system in the same terms as Zimbabwe or India. It just didn't seem credible to us. People then improvised in an ad hoc way on the dependency theories, so we got theories of a 'rich dependency'. But all of these seemed to be theoretically extremely weak and unconvincing and so it became an important theoretical problem to rethink the formation of Canadian capitalism. And there it became clear to me that most left-nationalist or dependency-school analyses had really tried to build off of the quite important and pioneering work of Harold Innis.

And I was never interested in diminishing the significance of Innis' research for a whole variety of reasons, but I wanted to probe its theoretical foundations and in particular to illuminate the ways in which a market-centered or Smithian project informed Innis' work, all the way along, and how he tended to revert to a kind of commodity-based determinism: that each staple product involved a certain ensemble of labour processes and technologies and these determined the pattern of economic and social development. Not only was it highly deterministic but the class formations at the heart of Canadian capitalism, including the internal colonialism, really gets muted in that analysis.

And so far all those reasons it seemed important to develop an analysis which could put both the class formation and internal colonialism problematics to the fore but also could account for the fact that Canada was among the developed economies in the world system and played, if you will, a junior role within the camp of empire, of the imperial powers. And so that's really what I was trying to do in developing that analysis.

But, I think that you are right, in terms of the last part of your question, that there has been a very significant shift in analysis and I would say that has to do with the empirical failures of the dependency thesis. I mean the claims that were made in the 1970s were that an independent Canadian economy was disappearing, that it was going to become nothing but a branch plant extension of the US economy. And during the 1980s we began to see a whole series of empirical trends that defied this: most importantly, the fact that for a whole historical period now, for a quarter century, Canadian foreign direct investment has exceeded foreign direct investment inside the Canadian economy. That is to say that Canadian capital has been buying up more foreign assets and expanding more on the global stage than its own assets have been bought up by foreign investors. This was something completely unanticipated.

It went right against the grain of the dependency arguments that were everywhere in the 1970s, so there was a real empirical problem there.

Second, it seemed more and more transparent that the Canadian state was operating quite often to defend and promote Canadian-based multinationals, particularly in mining, but more broadly, in parts of Africa, Central and Latin American and the Caribbean. And that it was doing so not as a mere reflex of American interests, but that in fact it was very much defending and promoting the interests of Canadian based capital.

So some of the work that you've referred to, Jerome Klassen and Todd Gordon's work in these areas, for instance, really was designed to theorize those developments of a much more globally present Canadian capital within the world system. And so I do think there is a shift. I would also say that a younger generation of activists and scholars has been increasingly attentive to the colonial and racialized patterns of Canadian social formation and as they have highlighted those, it has forced them to treat Canada as involving a colonial project itself from the start. And so rather than poor old Canada getting kicked around by the US, the Canadian state starts to look like a state complicit in racism and colonialism…

And I think we've learned a lot from those analyses.

And that probably influences how we organize, how the left organizes around issues -- the rights of migrant workers, for example, or how we understand the Canadian state's negotiation of investment treaties with countries in the developing world.

Yes, definitely.

I think it's one of the things we see today with the younger generation of left activists in Canada. They are much more responsive to Indigenous struggles and claims for Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination. They are highly attentive to the behaviour of multinational corporations around the world, whether it's groups like Mining Watch or those sorts of organizations. And there has been much greater concern with migrant justice and with recognizing the highly racialized patterns of the Canadian labour market that have been promoted by governments at all levels in Canada.

So I think its true all of that has reframed a lot of these political discussions and frankly, been very influential in the development of my own thinking in recent years.

Switching back to your own academic development, you completed your PhD in Social and Political Thought (SPT) at York University in 1983. Your dissertation was later published as *Political Economy and the Rise of Capitalism* (1988), a book that examined the classical political economists of the 17th and 18th centuries, particularly Adam Smith, and their understanding of the rise of agrarian capitalism. How did the SPT programme influence your intellectual trajectory and what drew you to the debates on the origins of capitalism?

Well, in terms of Social and Political Thought, there is no question that I was drawn towards an interdisciplinary programme. My own interests really span political economy, philosophy, social history and the like. So a programme which allowed me to draw upon faculty from a variety of disciplines was incredibly appealing. My PhD supervisory committee had an economist, a political scientist and an historian on it, for instance, and that sort of configuration simply wasn't available in most programmes. So SPT made a lot of sense for me in that regard.

Then in terms of the problems that were posed, there was a raging discussion across the left in the 1970s and 1980s really about our understanding of capitalism in general and capitalism as a world system in particular. And consistent with the dependency theory approach that I was critical of in the Canadian case, a variety of dependency and world system approaches really saw capitalism in terms of a set of market-based relationships. That is to say, it was the spread of commerce and the spread of markets which became definitive of capitalism.

But in contrast to that was another line of argument, perhaps most famously associated with several key articles in the 1970s by Robert Brenner (for instance, Brenner 1977), which argued for the class specificity of capitalism, insisted that ultimately it was the forms of surplus production and appropriation which were key to understanding how any mode of production operates, and that dependency and world system's theories tend to displace those questions and focus simply on market transactions and the spread of markets. So that was really important for a lot of us, in terms of making sense of how we analyze and understand capitalism.

But then I was also drawn through that to wanting to have a better analysis and understanding of the whole history of political economy, since the critique of political economy had been Marx's project. But very few of us actually go back and read the people Marx read -- we take on board Marx's readings.

I don't know many Marxists who have written as much about Adam Smith as you do!

Yes, that's probably true. That may be some odd obsession (laughs).

One of things I discovered in looking at it was that actually Smith's theories fit much more nicely with a lot of the then-recent Marxist understandings of the rise of capitalism than people had appreciated. I came to see the degree to which Smith was focussed on the agrarian sector, for instance, and one of the things that a lot of us were really starting to appreciate was the key importance of what Marx in *Capital* calls primitive accumulation, that is to say, the dispossession of the direct producers from the land and how crucial that is to the formation of capitalism. Dispossession -- which of course now we often discuss in terms of David Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession (see Harvey 2004)-- that process was already becoming central to the way a lot of us thought about the emergence of capitalism. And I was struck by the degree to which Smith seemed to understand more of that than the market-centered analyses suggested.

So my own research was, at that time, moving on a couple of tracks: one was the social history of capital itself and the other was the intellectual history of political economy. And I started to bring those two themes together in my analysis, in terms of my PhD thesis, and I think in many respects that work still remains foundational to the way that I think about capitalism today.

You did your undergraduate career at York, then completed your PhD here, and you've been teaching at York for a number of years. All of us this adds up to quite a long experience at York. How do you think York has changed over the years? I think of changing political fashions and the larger ideological climate, the different pressures on undergraduate students today compared to when you were an undergraduate, structural changes in postsecondary institutions related to the rise of neoliberalism and the attack on the public sector…

In particular, how has political science but also SPT at York remained Marxist in a political and ideological climate that's become clearly hostile to these ideas? And in that, what is the significance of labour struggles -- the famous or infamous YUFA (York University Faculty Association) strike of 1997, but also the two CUPE 3903 strikes (CUPE 3093 represents contract faculty, and graduate, research and teaching assistants) in 2000 and 2008-2009-- in terms of ongoing efforts to defend the university against corporate visions of postsecondary education?

That's a huge question or set of questions. But, I'll try to at least give you a few loose thoughts on them.

I think the answer is that we have kept a core of critical thought at York. But not without a struggle. And I think we should never take it for granted. It would be very easy to lose the foothold for critical research and scholarship at York, or any university. But there is no question that the transformations have been massive. It is not simply the scale of the university, which has grown enormously-- but that is part of the story. There is the increased bureaucratization of York as an institution. Somebody simply could not get into second year the way I did, for instance, with a Registrar saying, "Yes, this seems like a bright young student. Let's get a couple of faculty to look at his work and decide what level he should be admitted to." That just could not happen.

Similarly, the interdisciplinary commitments have been under siege for quite some time. And that's got to do with a lot of the moves towards branding universities in terms of their marketable skills or the production of their marketable skills. Interdisciplinarity doesn't seem to sell in terms of the way that it has been perceived by neoliberals. I might argue that there, in fact, could be a distinctive market niche, quote unquote, for indisciplinarity. But that has not been the direction taken at York.

But most importantly, it's the transformations in the political and economic climate. York came into its own during a period of mass social protest in North America. It wasn't only in North America but that's what mattered ultimately in terms of the formation of the university. And so the young scholars who came into its faculties had been shaped by both the global protest movements, particularly in terms of the Vietnam war, but also the civil rights struggle, the emergence of feminism, the upsurge of radical trade union struggles in the late 60s and early 1970s. As a result, these were young intellectuals who were formed in this context and the theoretical traditions upon which they drew tended to go beyond the mainstream stuff that had been taught for a long time at North American universities. So you have a new university, with a young faculty, and a student body coming in that wants to engage the questions of the moment. All of that really produced a very unique university environment, where critical knowledge, dissenting and dissident theoretical traditions could really flourish. And it's not surprising that York became a site for a lot of the best critical scholarship on the left at that time.

But the key problem for anybody working inside the university is that what you do is so highly dependent upon struggles outside the university. And as working class and left movements receded from the late '70s onwards, it became much more difficult to maintain a toehold in those struggles and to let them inform what we do inside the academy. And this produced a series of effects. On the one hand, some faculty abandoned many of their earlier radical commitments. They decided that they had been duped by youthful enthusiasms and that they would now move to more mainstream sorts of theoretical traditions or to some of the newer ones that seemed trendy. And the so-called post-structuralism and post-modern turn often figured there: it -- too often -- provided an exit strategy for people who didn't want to identify themselves with the old discredited traditions that they'd rejected earlier on, but didn't want to maintain leftist and Marxist commitments anymore. It sounded radical, because we were criticizing governmentality and binaries…

…deconstructing…

..deconstructing… lots of stuff. So it sounded like it was critical even though many of the political commitments, particularly to emancipatory politics, were receding at the time. So you've got that larger cultural, intellectual environment.

And then you have the direct attempt by neoliberals to reshape higher education and to reshape the universities and in particular the assault that they launched on critical knowledge production. They were interested in labour market based education. Education that was not about critical knowledge but about the skills necessary for -- and then their slogans changed -- 'the new knowledge economy', whatever it might be. And so they wanted to re-shape the university. As a result, you had both the sort of internal transformations induced by a change in the broader political climate and the huge external pressures applied by neoliberal governments who wanted to reshape the university as a labour market based institution. And there is no question that the strikes that have taken place at York since 1997 have to be seen in significant measure in that context.

I don't want to say that they are the only issues. We've also got the rise of precarious labour inside the universities as the key part of the story of neoliberal restructuring, for instance, and that plays itself out through all of these strikes, as well. But that wider neoliberal context is part of the story of those strikes. Which is to say, there is a particular agenda that university

administrators want to implement consistent with that coming from governments, which is to reorient higher education, to tier higher education. In other words, they want to create a subclass of pure and simple teachers and then an elite group of researchers within the university. And that tiering of faculty is insidious in terms of solidarities of the various groups of teachers within the university. That that tiering will ultimately destroy solidarity between unions and within bargaining unit groups. But it's also a completely different vision of what the university is. And all of that has played itself out in the strikes you mentioned.

Fortunately, none of the strikes were completely defeated. Arguably the YUFA strike of 1997 was sufficiently successful to beat back some of the worst aspects of neoliberalism, one of the most important being that we defeated any requirement that faculty members must move towards digitally-based on-line delivery of course materials. Faculty had a choice in that regard. And we very quickly beat back the Berkeley-style scenario, in which the university owns all of your course materials which can then be put on line and commodified.

So you can see certain victories there.

There is no question that the first of the CUPE strikes (in 2000-2001) is really significant also in terms of beating back parts of the neoliberal agenda. I think the most recent strike (from 2008-2009) is a more mixed story. I think the university, the university administration, excuse me, was able to make bigger gains on its agenda. But it has to be said that feisty campus unions have managed to blunt the full implementation of the neoliberal agenda.

Now, that then takes me back to York political science, because…We need to be balanced here. The department does have a certain kind of Marxist reputation, even though it's very clear that Marxists are a distinct minority within the department. But one of the things that I think we have managed to do a better job of in recent years is to create a much more robust alliance among people teaching in a variety of critical traditions. And so I think for a period of time there were real tensions, for instance, between critical feminist scholarship within the department and people who would be more identified with Marxist research, people doing critical international political economy and people more identified with Marxist political economy. And I think that one of the things we have managed in recent years is to create a better understanding and sense of community across some of those critical, theoretical practices, where people recognize we need each other. We can

learn from each other in really quite interesting and challenging ways. And we need to work together to preserve critical spaces.

What is interesting about the York department is that a lot of the critical scholarship is very widely recognized outside of the University. And so we are often seen as a more left department than we might be. The degree to which we are a leftist department might sometimes be overstated. But I think what is true is that critical, leftist research in a variety of forms, has a space in which to operate. And that does make York political science distinctive. And it has an identity based on that and it would not be impossible to root it out, but it would be difficult. Somebody in the university administration would have to go after many of the best internationally recognized scholars and the work they do. And frankly that's sort of self-defeating because in many ways the university, in a lot of ways that senior administration may not appreciate, actually gains from this unique sort of intellectual culture that we build from within the department.

So the administration should be marketing their radicals in the political science department!

That's the irony, that's the irony, isn't it! There is a certain niche for critical left scholarship that the York department offers but it doesn't fit with the overall messaging that the neoliberal university likes.

It certainly attracts wonderful international scholars as graduate students.

Following some of those different trends in the political climate and relating them to your own work, in the early '90s, you returned to some of the classical questions and debates in political economy, including Adam Smith again, in *Against the Market* (1993). To some extent, I think this was your response to the fall of the Soviet Union and the resulting crisis in confidence of some sections of the left, that led to renewed interests in markets and ideas of market socialism. It's probably accurate to say that you held no particular illusions about the Soviet regime, but particularly with hindsight, some twenty years later, how did the collapse of these Soviet regimes have an impact on the left and in your own political practice and intellectual development? In particular, shortly after this, you split from the IS and took part in the formation of the New Socialist group. To what extent was this a response to the new political context and an increasing emphasis on anti-oppression politics, particularly feminism and anti-racist thought, too often overlooked by

Marxism? And how was this related to re-thinking political organization on the left, as well?

Let's start with the larger context and the fall of the Soviet Union that you began with. It was a complex and contradictory moment for people like myself because on the one hand, we hadn't had illusions about what we saw as the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe. We didn't believe they represented a kind of socialism. So in the first instance it was easy to be on the side of popular democratic uprisings that were expanding the spheres of freedoms and democratic rights. But having said that, I think we underestimated the overall impact that this would have on the left and for two reasons.

One was, the wider context in which it was happening, which is to say the rise of neoliberalism. In fact, the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellites, even if you had no illusions about what they represented, was largely seen as part of the political vindication of the radical turn to the market. And I think we underestimated the significance of that at that time, in part because we underestimated the strength and durability of the neoliberal project, which is something I will come back to in a moment. And so at first, I think a lot of us thought this would be an opening toward the more libertarian and emancipatory traditions of the left, now that bureaucratically organized so-called socialism were gone.

And we were naïve on that front too. In fact, it was hugely disillusioning for thousands upon thousands of people of the left who, for better or for worse, had taken some confidence in the fact that there were regimes in the world that they saw as anticapitalist. And in a period of defeats for working class movements, for social movements and for the left, it was experienced as yet another big defeat, another big setback. And so it, in fact, had an enormously demoralizing and depressing effect across the left, which I admit I did not see coming. Rather than opening up space for alternative left traditions, it just closed down space for all of us.

And I think that that is related to the issues to which you've alluded, which is to say my own movement outside of the International Socialists, the formation of the New Socialist Group and a questioning of a lot of the inherited practices and analyses of the left. Because it started to become clear across the 1990s that we couldn't just keep saying that, "Capitalism is in crisis, capitalism is in crisis! The big breakthroughs for the left are just around the corner… "But that was what was being said in the IS groupings. The leadership of the British group had declared that we were in the 1930s in slow motion. So

it was the Great Depression again, it was just all moving a little more slowly. And therefore, all the groups had to intensify their activism, become ever-more dedicated, vigilant and committed. And that now was not a time for intellectual debates -- these were a distraction from the task of trying to really develop greater, rooted socialist forces in a very short space of time because great crises like the 1930s were impending.

Well, I was among those who were developing severe doubts about this analysis. You only really see the full fruits of my rethinking in my most recent book *Global Slump* (2010) where I offer a very new appraisal of the whole neoliberal period. But that was the beginning, in the 1990s, when I was just having serious doubts about these claims that we were in a prolonged crisis of capitalism and that therefore big working class upsurges were around the corner.

Didn't look that way. Didn't feel that way.

But also, the hothouse atmosphere of the small group was becoming more and more debilitating. When we first joined the IS in the 1970s, it was an incredibly intellectually open group. It was open to a wide variety of critical Marxist perspectives and approaches. It embraced socialist feminisms, it embraced anti-racism and that was all shut down across the 80s and the 90s. In fact, I got into more and more conflict inside the IS groups, because I wouldn't accept the feminist bashing that was now the order of the day. That was also a growing point of friction. And all of this was coming to head then throughout the 1990s. And then a group of us we just felt that we couldn't function inside a group that thought we were living in the 1930s, albeit in slow motion, that everybody had to raise their activism and commitment, that there was no time for debate and discussion -- this was just wasteful energies of intellectuals -- and that feminism and anti-racism were essentially distractions from the real tasks. And so by the mid-'90s, a number of us had concluded that for whatever reason we couldn't continue to function in that environment.

But, we didn't want to give up the idea of having collectives of people who work together, analyse together, share experiences, try to develop a kind of socialist politics that fits some of the key demands of our historical moment. And at the same time, we were clear that we really wanted to radically break from all of this self-styled vanguardism that small left groups tend to fall into. Interestingly again, when we first got involved with the IS in the '70s it was the explicitly anti-vanguardist. It said that the formation of *real* mass working class parties of the left was a very complex process and that no small group could

claim to be the centre of gravity of such a thing. You just had to hope to make a contribution to a wider process that would be very complex and that would bring together diverse strands of the left into new political formations. We sort of returned to that commitment in the New Socialist Group.

But equally important I would say, we decided that it was time for the left or the Marxist left at least, to do more than pay lip service to socialist feminism, anti-racism, queer liberation, eco-socialism and so on. That there had to be a really serious and systematic re-thinking of fundamental Marxist concepts so that that they would be reshaped and rethought in and through their encounters with feminism, queer liberation and so on. I am not saying that we've totally accomplished that but at least we set it as an agenda that needed to be done. And you're right that this was part of what I would call a sort of radical re-thinking of certain quote unquote certainties of the Marxist left. And I continue to believe that the 1990s posed fundamental problems for the left that we too often evaded with quick and easy slogans. And in fact, it required us to go back and re-examine a lot of our inheritance in a much more critical and systematic way and the New Socialist Group was simply one expression of that.

On the one hand, in the 1990s, we've got the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, the crisis of Communism. Not unrelated to that is the emergence of some different intellectual currents and new forms of critical thought. There is some connection between that and what became your next major work, *Bodies of Meaning*, which came out in 2001,which followed upon an earlier article in *Monthly Review* (1995) on the issues of language, the body and meaning. There you present a materialistic theory of language, in contrast to postmodern positions. So you're dealing with the new intellectual currents. Among other accomplishments, you retrieved the workers of Walter Benjamin from the clutches of what might be called postmodern 'mis'-interpretations.

Is it fair to characterize this book as a significant departure from your previous work? I know that the review in *Historical Materialism* (Collins 2003) generated considerable debate, so not everyone was open to your new approach. In part, does this reflect the necessity, particularly in that time period, of defending but also actually advancing the historical materialist approach against the poststructuralist critique – and not just resorting to the old debates, the old language?

I think you are right to see *Bodies of Meaning* as a departure. But, of course, there are always interesting continuities as well in all of these things. As I

mentioned earlier, I had had an ongoing interests in philosophy as an undergraduate and had actually been very immersed in what we might sort of call the Hegelian Marxist or dialectical tradition. And much of my thinking on pretty much all of the questions we have been talking about had been very much informed by that tradition. And as a result, I think in some respects as I was entering into this sort of rethinking that I'm describing, one of the things that I became unhappy about was the way in which Marxists were responding to poststructural and postmodernist theories. Most of the time they were just saying, "That's idealism. End of story." And even if there was some truth to the fact that there was a certain kind of new idealism at work in poststructuralism and postmodernism, this seemed to me not to engage seriously with what it was that was attracting a lot of young intellectuals and young activists towards postmodernism. And that's one of the things that I should say something about.

I was quite active in the anti-Gulf War movement, the first Gulf War in the early 1990s, and I was struck by the number of students who came to those demonstrations who clearly identified themselves with some form of postmodernism rather than Marxism. So it wasn't true that they had no interest in changing the world, no interest in resistance. But their coordinates were completely different than mine had been as a young person radicalizing in the 1970s. And as I began to think seriously about the problems that these young activists and scholars were grappling with it became pretty clear to me that the agenda of problems they were posing was not nonsense, contrary to the way some Marxists were reacting. In other words, they were trying to probe issues of culture, language and identity in ways that were important, even if I found the theoretical resources that they were bringing to bear on these problems inadequate, in all sorts of ways.

But, it does seem to me that on the left we do have a tendency often to think in simply political and economic terms and to act as if issues of culture, identity and meaning are of no significance -- when clearly for all of us they are. And I was spurred as a result of this to take seriously the work that was being done, but to also want to offer up alternatives from within a sort of heterodox Marxism that I felt could offer much more promising directions for work in this area that didn't give up its connections to, if you will, the historical materialist domain of issues of political economy and class and so on, without reducing culture and identity to some kind of crude materialist coordinates. And so I found in particular the work of the so-called Bakhtin school and of Walter Benjamin, to be really quite significant.

So *Bodies of Meaning* was an attempt to engage people taken by the postmodern turn, to take seriously their agenda and their commitments but to challenge the kind of theoretical traditions to which they'd gravitated. And in particular, I was trying to push the argument that in detaching language from human bodies and the social, material, embodied practices of humans, they'd come up with a very impoverished account of what language and culture are. And that this kind of approach that I was trying to develop within the book could actually give them ways of engaging those problems without forfeiting the embodied, materialist commitments.

And I should say that it was very useful to me that a variety of works, within what was then was being called materialist feminism, were moving on a parallel track. In particular, materialist feminism was a term coined I think initially by Rosemary Hennessey and I found that work very useful. And I think it continues to be very useful because people like Hennessey, most recently in her book *Profit and Pleasure* (2000,) were taking up a lot of the key issues of the postmodern turn, in Hennessey's case, gender, sexuality, identity, but trying to relate them to the social, material transformations of late capitalism. So in many ways my book was both building off on and trying to contribute to that development as well. But I do, in retrospect, put it within a wider framework of part of my own process of rethinking the agenda of concerns for the left and the need for the Marxist left to engage in a much more open and constructive way with some of the new intellectual and cultural trends, rather than just to be dismissive of them and to assume that we've sorted it all out and therefore we can just reiterate certain certainties from the past.

We don't have a ready set of answers, that's for sure.

Exactly. If we are going to really renew the left and renew a kind of critical Marxism, that capacity to re-engage our own certainties critically has got to be central.

In what we have discussed thus far, it is clear that your own politicization is linked with broader periods of militancy. There is a labour upsurge from the late 1960s, but also the student movement and other social movements, that fizzled out by the late 1970s. Clearly through the 1980s and into the 1990s, there is a demobilization of progressive political forces. But then we do have renewed signs of hope and mobilization, by the late 1990s, with the rise of so-called antiglobalization movement, from Chiapas through to Seattle and on to Quebec City. At the same time, there are the mass mobilizations, including the

various Days of Action across the province against the Mike Harris regime, and here in Toronto, the militancy of groups like the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty.

This upsurge of activism, this re-emergence of an anti-capitalist discourse, was reflected in your book, *Another World is Possible* (2000; second edition 2006). That book sought to explain the roots of globalization in the dynamics of a capitalist system that is organically linked with imperialist politics and racist and sexist policies that are not outside of, but integral to, capitalism. So we have the emergence of an exciting movement, a new mobilization. But ultimately, the antiglobalization movement was weakened by the events of 9/11 (with the attacks by Al-Qaeda on the United States World Trade Centre and Pentagon) and the climate that emerged afterwards. But also perhaps by the organizational challenges of the alterglobalization movement itself. What is significant about this upsurge in activism and what limits does it face?

That's great.

I'll try and do some justice to a really complicated question, in part because we are still living through all of that and so we're trying to do a kind of assessment on the fly. But there is no doubt in my mind that there was, across the neoliberal period, a massive series of defeats for the left and the working class movement that really shifted the political climate. And that's part of what my own rethinking across the '90s had to come to terms with. It wasn't just that there was a sort of temporary lull in the fortunes of the left and the working class movement. There had been real defeats imposed and left movements generally were in retreat. As a result, the emergence of what I prefer to call the global justice movement, as opposed to the so-called antiglobalization movement, was highly significant.

And I see its symbolic emergence, at least, as being crystallized by the Zapatista rebellion in January of 1994, (timed to coincide with and protest) the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement. And so you get, from the Zapatista rebellion on, the re-emergence of movements, of mass-based, anti-neoliberal resistance…But, something we'll come back to, *not* driven by the forces of the traditional left. There is something new happening here. But they're anti-neoliberal and they are creating the space, as you've noted, for anti-capitalist discourses and movements to develop. And so I was drawn to understanding those movements.

I saw in them the first significant rupture in the neoliberal consensus. The posing of the very idea that "another world is possible", for instance,

seemed to me to be a really dramatic advance over where we had been across most of the '80s and '90s. But as I say, these weren't movements that were being galvanized by traditional labour movements or parties of the left. There was something new at work here. So I wanted to learn from these and engage with them, but also to suggest that there were certain critical resources that Marxist theory and practice could offer to these movements to inform their analysis, their strategic perspectives and so on. And so *Another World is Possible* is a reflection of my attempt to really try to engage with and learn from those movements, to become more appreciative of some of, not all, the new currents of anarchism that were part of those movements, and to develop a kind of dialogue from a kind of anti-dogmatic Marxist perspective with them.

At the same time, as you note, the political moment after 9/11 was one where throughout the global north, at least, the global justice movement was just rolled back. The space for dissent was shut down in the midst of a sort of patriotic, national security fervour. And groups, for instance, that I was working with in Toronto, like the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, fell on much more difficult times, in terms of the work that they were doing. I don't think it was the same pattern across a lot of the global south. For instance, if you take a case like Bolivia, from 2000 to 2005 you get the great wave of upsurges. So 9/11 doesn't really do much to dent it, for instance. And I would say the same for a number of other sites of struggle in the global south. But in the north, there is no question we were in retreat, again.

And to jump ahead a little bit, my analysis now is that a new period of mass protest has been opened up by the global economic crisis of 2008. But one of things that left is going to have to do is to assess what the weaknesses of the global justice movement were, because we don't want to repeat them. There is going to have to be also a very significant critical appraisal. Because we lost a lot of ground. And the loss of that ground after 9/11 does speak to some of the inherent limits. And I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that, by and large, the global justice movement wasn't able to build sustained and sustainable organizations in working class and oppressed communities that could continue to do on-the-ground activism even when some of the larger kind of mobilizations like Quebec city or Seattle were not going to be available for a period of time.

That brings us to the current economics crisis and your latest book, *Global Slump* (2010). In that book, you provide your own detailed analysis of the

crisis. Along the way, you analyze the general crisis tendencies of capitalism, the history of neoliberalism, the spatial reorganization of global capitalism in the neoliberal era. You go into great detail, but you try and pitch it at a level that will be accessible to activists. Why does an activist, who is not an academic, need to develop this understanding of the details of the crisis?

I think I would start by situating the book *Global Slump*, in that context, which is to say, in 2008 when the financial crisis hit, the Wall street banks start collapsing and so on. And there was a real opening up of the intellectual climate. People have talked about how all of sudden there was a rediscovery of Marx, for instance. And I found myself being invited to speak to community groups, trade union organizations, student groups and even in the mainstream media, much more than I had been before. All of a sudden a radical or leftist political economist was having his views solicited. So part of it was my own attempt to think about how to do popular non-academic presentations of basic Marxist ideas in popular education and mass media settings.

But the other side of it was that I had by 2008 developed an analysis that said this crisis was different from the recessions that had happened across the 80s and 90s. And this goes back to our earlier discussion about neoliberalism. I had become convinced by this point that rather than our being in a forty year long crisis of capitalism, which a lot of very eminent radical political economists have argued, that the crisis of the 1970s never went away…

…The 'long down-turn' thesis…

…the 'long down turn' thesis… Rather than that being the case, I was convinced that since the early 1980s, there had been a twenty year long expansionary wave, which I'm calling the neoliberal expansion, which really did restore corporate profitability, which massively restructured labour processes, which squeezed workers, very dramatically increased their level of exploitation, and also kickstarted a huge geographic expansion of capitalism, particularly in China and East Asia. As a result, when the crisis started to kick-in in 2008 I was, I think, already primed to see this as something different. If you have an analysis which says that we are in a forty year long downturn, then this is just the latest crisis of many. I was inclined to see it as something new, something quite unique, as signalling an end of a quarter century of expansion

and the opening up of a much more turbulent period. And as a result, I wanted to share that analysis, as well.

And I was suggesting in the talks I was doing in 2008 and 2009, once they finish bailing out the banks -- which they did to the tune of about twenty or twenty one trillion dollars -- they are going to have to pay for the bailout. And this is going to mean an intensification of neoliberal tactics: the age of austerity and the war on the public sector and public sector workers. But it's going to be neoliberalism on steroids, in that regard. But also without any of the ideological convictions that characterized the '80s and '90s where neoliberalism really did produce a massive economic expansion. You're going to have a very sluggish, even stagnant kind of period of capitalism, with a war against public services. And so the legitimacy of neoliberalism is going to be much more difficult to sustain.

And so I was suggesting that we're going to see a lot of fight backs. And so activists are going to have to navigate themselves in ways where we're thinking, not just about next week's demonstration and next month's rally, but, "What are we trying to accomplish across a decade or more?" And is it possible to imagine rebuilding much more substantial forces on an anti-capitalist left that both does the day to day work of resistance but also popularizes an analysis of why this is happening to our society and to our economy? And so in many ways, I was trying to write *Global Slump* as a resource for activists to help provide some of the foundation stones of an analysis of what I think is a different period in the history of capitalism and of neoliberalism, so that we think in larger terms and in more strategic terms.

The crisis of 2008 produced a crisis of confidence for neoliberalism. This is when you have the return of Keynes and maybe even of Marx -- or Marxists such as yourself. But, after that initial, understandable panic from the "rulers of the universe", they have switched to the strategy of denial. We're told that we are coming out of the crisis. We are told this in Canada: 'Through steady management, we're emerging from the crisis'. Has neoliberalism managed to re-establish its dominance and how successful has it been in reasserting itself? We're told the solution to the crisis is further cuts, as you've just described. Is that merely a reflection of the weakness of movements in the global north -- and has that space that opened up for anti-capitalist movements closed up that quickly on us again?

Yeah, you're right about the severity of that crisis of confidence in 2008 -2009. I was struck at the time, that you have the editors of the *Financial Times* of

London making the statement, "The world of the last three decades is gone." And then running a column for a number of weeks called, "The Future of Capitalism" where they're basically saying, "Capitalism as we've known it is gone. What's the next phase?" This stage is clearly gone, what's going to replace the neoliberal capitalism that we've known? And I think that this registered something real, which is to say, along the lines of what I was arguing earlier, that the neoliberal expansion is over. That doesn't mean, however, that neoliberal methods are done. And that makes it a very complex period.

But I also think that the ruling class is always uncomfortable about opening up questions about the future of its system. And they felt compelled to, with banks collapsing around the world. They didn't know what it would take to bail out the banks and to stabilize the financial system. And if you watch what they did across 2008- 2009, it was just one injection into the banking system followed by another, each one more massive than the one before, until they stopped the bank collapses. But it's not true that they had a fully designed programme. They were in panic mode and they just kept throwing funds, throwing wealth into the system, hoping that it would stop the bleeding. And twenty one trillion dollars, which is about one and half times everything the US economy produces in a year, did eventually stop the banking collapse.

But the difficulty is, that once they've done that, they have to pay off their creditors. Because the central banks raise money by selling their own bonds and they sell them to financial investors. Now you've got the problem that those investors are looking at the governments and the amount of debt they took on to bail out the banking system and more or less doing a risk assessment, trying to figure out who is good for paying back their debts and who might not be. And part of their calculation is not purely economic. Part of that calculation is which governments can impose the hardship on their populations and get away with it. So when they get cold feet about Greece, it's not just the size of Greek debt relative to gross domestic product. It's also the strength of Greek trade unions, the strength of the left within the society, the capacity to mobilize. It's all those calculations that they are making.

But what that tells us then, is that they know that this austerity regime is not a quick fix. They are talking about years and years. I mean the International Monetary Fund initially said a decade. Now that's shifted to decades, and I think that's right: we're looking at a long-term process. And that's where neoliberal methods are run amuck right now. They're going to try

and do what they do across the '70s and 80s, which is privatize, cut back services, lay off large numbers of public employees, and as we've seen, particularly in the US, take away their collective bargaining right or massively curtail them and so on. But because I don't believe they can produce any return -- or any quick return -- to robust, sustained economic growth, it's going to be, as I say, a period where they can't deliver on the basic promise of neoliberalism from the '70s and '80s, which is that, "Restoring markets, restores growth." That was the ideology. That's not going to happen.

I think we are seeing as a result, big bursts of protest, which on the one hand, create opportunities to rebuild mass-based social protests and resistance. Greece has had eight general strikes, now. There were over a million people in the streets of France in the fall. We've seen utterly unprecedented labour upsurge in Wisconsin. But none of those are capable of actually stopping the neoliberal agenda. And so I think we're into a difficult, dangerous, challenging period where we are going to see lots of resistance, that's a taken for granted. Across a lot of the neoliberal period it was like, "Show me some resistance, please!" Now the resistance is here and it's back in a repeated way. And obviously that's been most dramatically so in North Africa and the Middle East. And I think its really important not to lose sight of the fact that the return of the global economic crisis also kick-started much of the labour protests in the country of Tunisia, for instance, which then surged to the forefront in December of last year and through January. And all of this is connected to the global crisis and the ways the global crisis is driving up food prices, for instance.

But the scale of what our rulers are dealing with is so big that one-day general strikes won't do it. And so, I think we are into a much more complicated period where the left wing has to think much more long term. If we are only thinking about how to build next week's rally, rather than, "How are we going to rebuild at the grassroots level of neighbourhoods, communities, workplaces and schools, real organizations and movements?", if we are not thinking about the next decade in those terms, than I worry that we will not be able to produce the scale of resistance that is necessary.

And so part of what I'm trying to do in *Global Slump* is to say to people, what we're dealing with has systematic causes. We will need to think systemically, or if you will anti-systemically. And this is going to require that we get beyond just thinking about our short- term projects of resistance and start to think in longer-term horizons. Otherwise, the juggernaut of neoliberal austerity is just going to keep cutting through us.

Related to the issue of building resistance, a few year ago, in the post 9/11 context but before the current resurgence of activism related to the crisis, you wrote a very sober analysis in *New Socialist* magazine (McNally 2008) that pointed out that, "the revolutionary socialist left is today more marginal, more disconnected from the day to day experiences of working class people than at any time in the last one hundred and fifty years." A fairly harsh assessment -- not that I'm disputing it!

Looking forward, you then ask, "How do we rebuild?" You then say that the major task for revolutionary socialists is, "the development of an imaginative socialist vision that captures some of the tendencies of the future and crystallizes them theoretically and practically for the next wave of political radicalization". And this is what you just mentioned, the need to build a long-term movement and also vision.

But in the previous period, we failed to do this long-term building on the radical left, especially in the global north. And so what we are dealing with is our previous failures on the left to create a movement with a long term vision and strategy. And this raises concrete, practical questions about organizing on the left, in a period of economic crisis and renewed resistance.

Now, in addition to your participation in revolutionary socialist organizations, you were involved in the "Re-building the Left" efforts, that started around 2000, trying to create what Sam Gindin was calling, "a structured movement against capitalism" (Gindin 2001). At present, you are involved in the Greater Toronto Workers Assembly. How does your own activist experience influence your own ideas about how the left should organize, especially given prior failures to organize over the longer term? And specifically, what are some of the main possibilities and challenges represented by the Greater Toronto Workers Assembly?

Let me start with the larger challenge and then come to the more specific, local ones. The conundrum as I would pose it, is this: I continue to believe there are intellectual, political historical resources within a critical Marxism that are indispensable to building an effective left. I think there's an analysis of capitalism as a system, of the historical problems and challenges of the working class within capitalism as a system, and a legacy of organizational experience, if you will, a kind of practical knowledge, that any kind of new anti-capitalist left is going to need. But at the same time, as you note, I am very conscious of how marginal Marxist politics are or Marxist groupings are, in terms of the everyday life experience of working class people. And so part of

the problem I'm trying to raise is to pose things in those terms to socialists on the left and to say: "We've got to think about why we've become detached".

Now, for a whole historical period, most of the problem was that the ideas of working class self emancipation are not going to get very far when workers are being beaten back, day in and day out, losing ground, getting fragmented and demoralized, and left projects generally being in retreat. Those are just huge social, historical circumstances that we can't overcome. But now we need to think about how we make sure that that legacy of disconnection doesn't become an obstacle to re-connecting and renewing radical socialist politics in a period in which arguably they can become meaningful again and they could really contribute to rebuilding movements of the left. So that's the challenge I want to lay out.

I think one of things that you've probably picked up on across our conversation is that one aspect of that challenge is generational. That is to say, there was a generation like myself in the 1970s for whom as we radicalized, socialism and Marxism just become the obvious point of reference. And then there's a younger generation of radicals today for whom that's very often not the case. Quite often, they are being influenced, in terms of their reading, by people like Noam Chomsky, who identifies himself with very admirable anarchist traditions or Naomi Klein, who definitely situates herself as a critic of the left, but not a Marxist critic, and so on. And this is where they're picking up ideas. And then a lot of the practices have been developed particularly in North America and parts of Europe within certain new, anarchist traditions. And then you've got those working class people coming into activism, let's say in a place like Wisconsin, who just have never had any connection with the left.

And I think the marginality of the radical left over a whole historical period can pose huge problems. Either we can think, "Oh, it's our time again," and bring out all of the points of reference of an older generation and imagine that those are relevant to today's struggles instantly– and I don't think they are. Or we can simply charge in and try to be really good activists on the ground and hope that somehow, spontaneously people move towards radical socialist conclusions. And I just don't think it's that simple either. And what I see as the other alternative, is to really get into the more difficult long-term work of trying to re-activate and revitalize some key inheritances of the radical socialist movement in ways that can seem organically meaningful to the kinds of struggles that we find ourselves in today.

I'll just give one example, in passing. In my own writing on developments in North Africa and particularly Egypt and Tunisia but also in conversation with activists in Wisconsin, I have found Rosa Luxemburg's classic pamphlet, "The Mass Strike" to all of a sudden speak, in really lively ways, to movements which are dealing with actual mass strikes on the ground. And I think there are things that Luxemburg draws on in the early twentieth century that slightly more than a hundred years later can actually be reactivated as living resources for the movement. But we have to do that creatively.

And we also have to come to terms with the fact that the working class today is not the working class that I encountered in the 1970s. The working class in a city like Toronto is dramatically different. The majority of workers are people of colour in this city. As a result, anti-racist analysis and anti-racist practices will just have to be utterly central to any renewed working class politics and activism in this period. And so I guess what I am saying is that I am acutely aware that this new period creates openings for a kind of a radical or revolutionary socialism to maybe become less marginal than it was across the whole neoliberal period.

I've lived through periods where socialists actually *did* have a real presence in unions, *did* sometimes lead important working class movements, and so on. So, I've seen that and I know it's possible. But I also recognize that the context is very changed. The very make-up of the working class is changed today. But I think we can find resources both historically and in the here and now that we can mobilize for those purposes. But I think the challenges are really huge for the left. And so I find myself in the position of saying that we do have important resources, but if we just think we've got timeless truths, we're screwed.

We've got to figure out how we can bring those resources into a living conversation with activists on an ongoing basis, so that something new, a new kind of radical synthesis emerges in which other traditions…Some of the best practices of some of the young anarchists have to be part of what the next left will look like. But also some of the new working class traditions of organizing, whether it's workers' centres, worker of colour organizations and so on, will also have to be part of that. But I continue to believe that radical left Marxist politics are indispensable as well, one of the elements.

And do you want to talk specifically about the Workers Assembly in all of that?

The Workers Assembly, if I can put it in these terms, is the right project. And it's the right project in the sense that it's posed the need to create a broad-based anti-capitalist working class movement in this city. That it recognizes that the movement will be multi-racial. The opening statement of principles of the Workers' Assembly talks about building a multi-racial anti-capitalist working class project. And I think that's the right project. I think that once you've set it, a lot of difficult work has to begin.

And for all us there is as much un-learning as learning that has to be part of it. We're talking about having to create really healthy, non-sectarian, democratic and inclusive practices for the left that challenge our own social location. In other words, you know, if you go to Workers Assemble events, we're still too old, too white and too male. And that's not to criticize anyone who is old, white and male. Good lord, I'm getting there! (laughs). But it's to recognize that that poses really significant challenges to the way we operate, the assumptions we make about who needs to be in the room, who we need to bring together before something like the Workers Assembly is a *meaningful* movement. And I think it raises the generational challenges of being able to listen respectfully and to learn from the younger activists, who are in a city like this doing anti-poverty organizing, migrant justice work, mobilizing against Israeli apartheid and so on…and who need to be part of all of that.

So, yeah, I think the project of building a multi-racial anti-capitalist working class movement in this city is absolutely the correct one. And I think the next year or so will tell us whether the activists who have come together in the Workers Assembly are really ready and able to rise to the challenge.

Related to that but more directly, what is the relationship between your activism through the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, Workers Assembly, No One is Illegal, and the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid, among other activities, and your intellectual or academic activities? How does your activism inform your academic work and vice-versa? And more generally, what is the role of the intellectual or academic in social and political struggle?

You know, I'm in a funny position on some of this. And one of the reasons is because my biography is such that I was an activist before I was an academic. I became an activist as a high school student. And in some ways, I've always thought of myself as an activist first. And that doesn't mean that I'm not very aware of all of the very unique and privileged circumstances that being an academic entails. But just in terms of my own thinking, the activism has always been front and centre and really definitional in terms of who I am and the

projects I want to engage with. And I think what that meant is that, for better or for worse, my intellectual work has always been informed by thinking about what the challenges for an anti-capitalist left are. I mean, even to take something which is, in many respects, a very theoretical work, *Bodies of Meaning*, you can see from our conversation it's still informed by my encounters with activists in anti-war organizing and my thinking about where they're at and the problems which were provoking them. And I think it will always be the case for me that in many respects my intellectual agenda is shaped by my involvement in social movements and left activism.

Having said that, when you're located as I am, being an academic as well as an activist, it also produces its unique challenges. Activists are quite used to academics who think they know in advance what the activists ought to be doing, what the social movements ought to do and therefore want to come and tell them what to do. And that is deeply frustrating for a lot of activists. Also, I think academics often assume that activists don't care about analysis and that's just never been my experience. That's not to say that activist settings always find the time and space to do the analysis that many of them will tell you they need. I think a lot of activists will honestly say, "We don't do enough analysis. We need more opportunity to do it and to develop popular education programmes," and so on.

But I'm also very conscious as somebody located in the academy, that when I'm engaged with fellow activists, they come with certain preconceptions of what an academic is, as well. And I think it is important, therefore, as an activist-academic to make it really clear how genuine one's commitment is to learning from the activists you work with. Because they are amazing repositories of huge amounts of practical and theoretical knowledge. They often don't get the chance to develop it in a very systematic way. And so, one of the things I actually find is that, very often, my work, my written work, often gives some expressions to some of that practical knowledge that I've been picking up in the activist settings in which I move.

And so while I recognize that there's a tension between these roles, I have to say that I want it to be a productive tension. That is to say, I hope that some of the theoretical work I do feeds back into my activism and I certainly hope that what I am learning as an activist is also informing how I'm theorizing that whole business of the production of knowledge.

And I think that one of things that you can see is that my life experience, my intellectual trajectory is one where there are shifts. And that some of those shifts come through the activist experience. I just was simply

forced to re-engage with feminism and anti-racism, in particular, across the '90s and 2000s, in really, for me, profoundly important ways. Anti-racism goes back very, very early for me. My first year as an undergrad, forming the Committee to Free Angela Davis, for instance. But I would also say that I've had to deepen and renew and develop analyses in those areas.

I think one of the things we want to do, as we build a real rooted left in the years ahead, is to create the spaces for the development of the two kinds of organic intellectuals that Gramsci talks about. Some people forget that Gramsci does talk about it in two ways, which is to say, the activists from the real movements of the day, the real resistance movements, who become theorists of and for the movement. That is to say, we create the spaces where their political self-education becomes an ongoing priority. But also, where traditional intellectuals as Gramsci describes them, really move their centre of gravity from the traditional institutions of the intellectuals to the movements as the centre. And Gramsci, of course, himself was one of those intellectuals who had a university education and became an integral and enduring part of the working class left.

That, of course, requires that we create a left where that's actually possible. And at the moment the academy and activist work tend, too often, to be miles and miles apart. But, if we can create a new radical anti-capitalist left, then the development of new organic intellectuals has to be part of that project.

That can almost be our conclusion! But one more question about your forthcoming book. Another one in the pipe, it's obviously been a productive sabbatical.

Actually, pre-sabbatical! I did just print the galleys, so, yes, a productive sabbatical, too.

Your forthcoming book, *Monsters of the Market* (2011) seems -- from what I've seen because it's not even out yet -- to mark a return to the questions of the body. It delves into cultural theory, tackles Mary Shelley, Shakespeare, along with Marx. Tell us a bit about that project and how you ended up writing about monsters, vampires and zombies. Are trying to get the orthodox Marxists mad at you again? Should we expect any discussion of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or the *Twilight* (television) series?

Alas, some of my friends are disappointed that there is no *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in the book. But it's an interesting convergence of a variety of interests. It's partly, as you say, a return to the body. Partly it's an attempt to extend the engagement with culture that I think Marxists need to be serious about. And in other ways it comes out of my own political economy and social movement work. The book represents a coming together of certain kinds of observations that I had. I was really struck in doing all of my political economy around globalization, by the fact that there has been in sub-Saharan Africa, the area most ravaged by neoliberalism, this spate of zombie and vampire tales. They're found in film, folklore, all kinds of video, pulp fiction and so on, but they're everywhere.

And of course lots of mainstream social scientists just see them as superstitious. I was struck, though, in getting more acquainted with some of them, by the centrality of the figure of the zombie-labourer. One story after another is about people being kidnapped or taken in their sleep, to work all night and then waking up exhausted in the mornings and going to their regular day jobs. In other words, I was really struck by the way that labour figures centrally. And labour where your body has been captured by alien forces and coerced. And it was pretty hard not to see the connection of those kinds of images and metaphors to the actual circuits of global capitalism today.

Then, I've been teaching Marx's *Capital* in recent years. And there are key parts of that text where Marx turns to monster metaphors, in particular, the vampire but not only the vampire. And I began to think about those as not just literary embellishments but as attempts by Marx to express something that the language of political economy doesn't really provide very good vehicles for expressing. Which is to try to get at the actual texture of experience in a capitalist society, where your life energies are actually being sucked dry, over and over again. And I think Marx struggles to convey that, in *Capital*. That when he is giving us technical formulas for the rate of exploitation and the rate of profit, he doesn't want us to lose sight of the fact that actual human bodies are being exploited. They're suffering, they're feeling pain, they're being exhausted, they're being worn out. And there are whole chapters on the working day and modern industry where Marx just, in immense detail, goes through this.

And so those kinds of considerations then dovetailed with some of my earliest work which is on the emergence of capitalism in England. And as I thought about that in terms of the problems of monstrosity, I was really struck by the way in which the British working class, particularly in London, regularly

engaged in battles for working class bodies. And there are a few historians who've really written about this, although I don't know if they've always appreciated what is at stake. But we all know, if you read that history, as I did, that when hangings would take place condemned criminals' bodies were up for grabs. They could be given over to the anatomists to be dissected. This was part of the punishment in death. And quite often, the crowd that gathered at the gallows would enter into these huge battles, which would sometimes go on for hours, to get the bodies and give them a decent burial and prevent them being dissected, and carved up and chopped up by the anatomists. And they also hated the grave-robbers who would go to the paupers' graves, who would steal and then sell the corpses of the poor. And I started to think, "Why was this a site of such immense contestation?" And I began then to think about the ways in which, in fact, they were fighting after death about the indignities performed in life on working class bodies.

And then I realized that this is an ongoing theme that most of us had missed in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Victor Frankenstein is a grave-robber and Shelley tells us this. And he then cobbles together this gigantic creature with human and animal body parts. And of course, some commentators have noticed that there are ways in which the creature is a metaphor for the proletariat. And so I began to work all of that into the analysis.

But what this did, is that it created ways of thinking about the experience of capitalism and how groups of people experienced this as a horrifying and monstrous kind of development, particularly during periods where labour is being rapidly commodified, as in parts of sub-Saharan Africa today or as in 18th century England. The idea that you sell your energies to somebody, that they claim your body and have control over it for the period of that working day. And I think, too often, we don't appreciate how traumatic that experience is and how much the popular imaginary within capitalist societies reproduces stories about that experience.

And then I began to think about zombie and vampire stories much more in those terms. And I was really asking myself, "Why are the zombie and the vampire the two main monsters of capitalist society?" They are the ones who proliferate everywhere and what is the significance of that? So I am trying to develop a kind of Marxist account of monstrosity within capitalism. But also the story ends on the prospects for, if you will, the hopeful monster, which is ultimately Mary Shelley's creature, which is to say, the proletariat as a motley conglomeration of living, embodied humans that might actually have the final

say. So that's kind of the hopeful, concluding note of what is, I hope, a kind of interesting analysis of some of the cultural forms of capitalism today.

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