



# **Socialist Studies**

## **Études socialistes**

The Journal of the Society for Socialist Studies

Journal de la société d'études socialistes

Re-launching *Socialist Studies*

The Need for Critical  
Philosophy Today

*Vol. 5*

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Rethinking Leninism

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Media, Arts, and Culture

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Book Reviews



*Socialist Studies: the Journal of the Society for Socialist Studies*, is published by the Society for Socialist Studies.

The Society for Socialist Studies is an association of progressive academics, students, activists and members of the general public. Since its creation in 1966, the Society has been dedicated to providing a forum for those who promote a socialist perspective as a foundation on which to build solutions to political, economic, workplace, social, gender, ethnic, environmental and other forms of exploitation, oppression and injustice. It is unique in bringing together individuals from all walks of life and as a member of the Canadian Federation for Humanities and Social Sciences, is in a position to create links with other organizations, promote the concerns of members, and present an influential face to policy makers.

As such, *Socialist Studies: The Journal of the Society for Socialist Studies* is a peer-reviewed journal dedicated to publishing articles on as broad an array of topics as possible from all fields of study. Typically, articles will adopt a critical perspective, which will shed light on, and offer remedies for, any form of social, economic or political injustice. *Socialist Studies* is published in the spring and fall.

For further information on the Society for Socialist Studies, please visit [www.socialiststudies.ca](http://www.socialiststudies.ca) or contact [societyforsocialiststudies@gmail.com](mailto:societyforsocialiststudies@gmail.com)

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*EDITORS' NOTE*

## **Re-launching *Socialist Studies***

ELAINE COBURN & CHAD D. THOMPSON

Co-Editors, *Socialist Studies: the Journal for the Society of Socialist Studies*

This issue marks the re-launch of the journal *Socialist Studies*. Beginning with this issue, and over the next few years, we seek to establish a stronger, more visible presence for the journal, making *Socialist Studies* an essential part of the debate among the critical left in Canada, and beyond. Capitalism is in crisis, once again. A few have more wealth than they could possibly use in a thousand lifetimes, while over a billion others live without enough to eat. More goods and services are being produced than at any other time in history, yet masses of human beings struggle to provide food, shelter and clothing for themselves and their families. The world is in need of alternatives and a space for dialogue around critiques and alternatives is vital, for new and established scholars, activists and others. *Socialist Studies* has an essential role to play, providing a place both for critical reflections on the capitalist world system and for discussions about a more equal, just world beyond capitalism.

This new step, aiming to increase the content, visibility and utility of *Socialist Studies* for critical scholars and activists on the left, is the latest development in the life of the journal. In May 2005, *Socialist Studies: the Journal of the Society of Socialist Studies* was established as a peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary journal, replacing the *Socialist Studies Bulletin*, a more informal publication mainly featuring contributions by members of the Society for Socialist Studies. Sandra Rollings-Magnusson, a sociologist from Grant MacEwan University, served as the editor of *Socialist Studies* for the first nine issues, shepherding the journal through its early years and transition to a fully on-line journal in 2008. In this, she was supported by the energies of many committed volunteers, including the executive and 'lay' members of the Society for Socialist Studies.

In its first five years, contributing authors to *Socialist Studies* have drawn upon a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives to address many different subjects: globalization, neoliberalism, unemployment, processes of racialization, ecology, anarchism, citizenship, heterosexuality, social control, alternative globalization, colonialism, labour union politics, the

New Democratic Party in Canada, and more. What the different contributions share are broad and diverse socialist perspectives, beginning with questions like: How are diverse social phenomena articulated with historical and contemporary forms of capitalism? What sorts of political struggles contribute to the transformation of human social relationships beyond capitalism, so that human needs are met and human capacities liberated?

### **Our Vision for *Socialist Studies***

As editors, we remain committed to *Socialist Studies* as a journal that welcomes contributions from all possible disciplinary perspectives, from both new and established scholars, from activists as well as academics, on a wide range of topics, from the family to ecology to the workplace to analyses of cultural events. Socialism offers distinctive ‘takes’ on all and any subjects, insofar as capitalism forms the context for social relationships in the contemporary context and historically, reaching back to the establishment of the capitalist world system over five hundred years ago. Yet, socialism is not any single, fixed theory with clear answers to every political injustice. We want *Socialist Studies* to initiate and sustain dialogues within the diversity of perspectives on the left: anarchisms; feminisms; social democracy, Marxisms, social ecology; and anti-colonial thought. We would like to emphasize the explicitly interdisciplinary, open character of *Socialist Studies* and the journal’s role in participating and encouraging the widest possible terms of debate under the socialist banner.

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### **New Features of *Socialist Studies***

As we re-launch *Socialist Studies* as a critical part of socialist debates in Canada and internationally, we are making changes to the journal. Some of these are apparent in the autumn 2009 issue, while others will be made for the spring 2010 issue:

- There are more full-length articles, an expanded book review section under the book review editorship of Murray Cooke and a substantive editorial to introduce each issue;
- *Socialist Studies* is now indexed with EBSCO Publishing, the Left Index and Wilson Social Sciences Full-text databases and is available through many Canadian universities;

- Beginning with the spring issue, *Socialist Studies* will have a feature interview with an academic or activist. We are honoured that our first interviewee in the Spring 2010 issue will be well-known sociologist and long-time member of the Society for Socialist Studies William K. Carroll;
- Our website is undergoing transformation, seeking to be more reader-friendly and accessible. By spring, there will be a French mirror site as we strive to make the journal more genuinely bilingual. We are building reciprocal relationships with sister publications so that we have better links and are better known among the critical left community, especially in Canada.

We have also given the articles a new look and presentation, providing authors and readers with easier reference to publishing details, and increasing the ease of locating materials using online search engines. We hope these changes will increase the visibility and impact of *Socialist Studies*.

#### **Your Role in Re-Launching *Socialist Studies***

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As we work to establish *Socialist Studies* as a central reference for scholars, policymakers and activists in progressive circles in Canada and beyond, we will need your help. The left is not able to rely on the kinds of resources that are available to mainstream publications. Volunteer labour is vital to the left. Members of the Society for Socialist Studies, contributors and readers of *Socialist Studies*, and supporters of socialist ideas have always been necessary to existence and development of the journal. Your continued support of *Socialist Studies* is particularly urgent during this process of renewal. We ask you to consider some of the following actions:

- Contribute high-quality manuscripts of your own and let colleagues and students know we are an accessible forum for scholars, policy makers and activists seeking to reach other critical thinkers, with the advantage that we can publish relatively quickly and offer close editorial contact;
- Offer to guest-edit a special issue of the journal on a particular topic. In addition, we are eager to publish book reviews and reviews of special issues of other journals or cultural events;
- Ensure that your university library has us listed among its open-access journals and contact us for a poster advertising our Fall 2009 and Spring 2010 issues;



- Alert colleagues, students and friends to the re-launch of *Socialist Studies* by email, including our website address: [www.socialiststudies.com](http://www.socialiststudies.com).

Whether you are a long-time member of the Society for Socialist Studies or new to the journal, a young or established scholar or activist, please do not hesitate to contact us. Elaine Coburn and Chad Thompson may be reached at:

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We look forward to your suggestions for strengthening *Socialist Studies*, as we make the journal more visible, more relevant and ultimately an essential part of debates among progressive thinkers in Canada and internationally.

### **Acknowledgements**

There are many, many hours of volunteer labour behind each issue of *Socialist Studies*. A few sentences are not adequate recognition of this work. Nonetheless, we would like to thank the Society for Socialist Studies for their financial, logistic and moral support. This notably includes the past executive of the Society for Socialist Studies, including past president Ken Collier and the current executive, including Norma Jo Baker, Debbie Dergousoff, Jerry Kachur, Colleen Lundy, June Madeley, Darrell McLaughlin and Jesse Vorst. Other members of the Society of Socialist Studies who have contributed to the development of the journal include Howie Chodos, past editor of the *Socialist Studies Bulletin* and Alice Vorst. We would like to acknowledge Sandra Magnusson-Rollins for editing *Socialist Studies*, including during times of terrible personal tragedy, as well as for her advice during the transition period. In addition, we thank Robert Sweeny for his help maintaining the *Socialist Studies* website. As we launch ourselves into our editorial tasks, we have particularly relied on the support of fellow board members William Carroll and Murray Cooke. The timely response of our many peer reviewers is greatly appreciated, especially given busy schedules: *Socialist Studies* could not function without this contribution. We are grateful to past members of the editorial board, Meir Amor, Gary Bieler, Tami Bereska, Christ Borst, Marie Campbell, Denise Doherty-Delorme, MaryAnn Farkas, Donald Fisher, Jamie-Lynn Magnusson, Robert Ratner, Robert Stirling, Jeffrey Taylor and the late Tom Middlebro and continuing editorial board members, Wayne Antony,

William K. Carroll, Murray Cooke, Philip Hansen, Ian Hussey, Ross Klein, Patrice Leclerc, June Madeley, Stephen McBride, Dorothy Smith, and Gary Teeple. Finally, we would like to welcome new editorial board members, Sarah Amsler, Susan Dodd, Joseph Kaufert, Bryan Mitchell Evans and Ingo Schmidt.

The progressive left does not have easy access to financial resources, and socialist publications must operate largely at the margins of the mainstream academic and general media. Against this, we have a strong network of committed individuals who ensure that progressive left ideas continue to be debated. We appreciate your help with the journal and we look forward to working with you, as we create a stronger, more visible and more vital *Socialist Studies*.

*EDITORIAL*

## **What is Socialism? What are Socialist Studies?**

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There is no single answer to the question: 'What is socialism?' At the very least, socialism is at once a critical theory of capitalism and an aspiration for a more socially just and democratic society beyond capitalism. G.A Cohen (2009) might have said that socialism is like a camping trip, in which activities are carried out both cooperatively and independently, partly according to ability and predilection, in a context in which sharing seems natural. Utopian socialists, as they were called by Marx and Engels (1985), might argue that socialism is about the creation of model communities based on values of solidarity and equality within capitalism. The former communist countries claimed to be examples of actually-existing socialism within a capitalist world system, an argument that socialists must take seriously.

Clearly, given the broadness of the debate, the answer sketched out below to the question, 'What is socialism?' is a partial, particular vision. Insights are drawn mainly from Marx, rather than other socialist thinkers but this is not an attempt to interpret Marx's vision of socialism. Rather, it is an open exploration, informed by a sociological outlook, of what socialism might mean in contemporary times.

The general argument runs as follows. Socialism seeks to create a truly democratic society by extending the principle of democratic debate to the economic as well as the formal political sphere. As a critical theory, socialism is founded on a critique of the class inequalities fundamental to the existing capitalist mode of production and characteristic of previous modes of production. These inequalities are incompatible with genuine democracy. Socialism has organic links with other social movements with

liberatory impulses, from radical feminism to the disabled movement, insofar as these strive for real equality, necessary to true democratic decision-making. Finally, socialism is an ideological as well as material project, concerned with freeing the human imagination to think of new, more just ways of organizing our profoundly social lives.

In the second half, the question 'What is socialist studies?' is explored. Following from the above, it is argued that socialist studies are a critical analytical approach that understands the world capitalist political economy as *the* context for contemporary social relationships. Yet, capitalism is not static, but has undergone several historical transformations and exists in somewhat different forms across the world system. Socialist studies seek to understand these historical transformations and different types of contemporary capitalism, offering insights into its characteristics functions and dysfunctions or 'contradictions' as well as its effects on human welfare. This includes analysis of how class-based oppressions are historically linked with other forms of oppression, for example, based on race or gender. Finally, in examining the contradictions of capitalism, socialist studies consider capitalism's faultlines and contradictions. In so doing, the aim is not to discern the automatic unfolding of History but rather to understand spaces for political struggle that challenge capitalism, portending a world beyond existing capitalist relationships.

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In a world of stark inequalities, socialism and socialist studies matter, both as a critical theory of capitalism and as an aspiration for a more just organization of human relationships. Socialism and socialist studies may not have all the answers, but they are an important, necessary part of the debates about the kind of world in which we would like to live, one in which healthy, creative lives are no longer the privilege of the few but the experience of all.

### **Socialism as Democracy and as Critique of Capitalism**

Socialism seeks to transcend capitalism to create a thoroughly democratic society. This means ending capitalist relations based on an exploitative class relationship between the capitalist and working class. Democratic decision-making is extended to the economic sphere. The ways that human beings get together to create what they need to live, food, clothing, shelter and so on, becomes the subject of conscious collective discussion and debate. In socialism, the mode of production is no longer the more or less visible determinant of basic social chances, like the likelihood of living or

dying in the first year of life. Instead, the mode of production becomes the social product of democratic decisionmaking.

Historically, socialism can be understood as a response to the incomplete liberal revolution against feudalism, with its naturalized inequalities and servitude, based on the idea that some are born better than others. Indeed, one of Marx's basic messages is that the liberal revolution did not go far enough, prisoner of its own contradictions. Thus, with liberals, Marx calls for freedom and equality, both essential to democracy. Against liberals, he argues that capitalist market relationships are fundamentally incompatible with real freedom and equality – and so genuine democracy.

The critical argument against capitalism is familiar. Marx asks what real freedom exists for the billions of workers who spend the better part of their waking hours 'chained to the machine', stunted physically, mentally and emotionally by mindnumbing labour. In the contemporary capitalist world, despite all the talk about the 'virtual' economy, millions in both the developed and developing world are chained to the machine, in sweatshops and assembly lines of the kind that were familiar to Marx and Engels in 19<sup>th</sup> century England (Huws 1999). Many other working people carry out service activities of daily mindnumbing drudgery, from telephone sales to caring activities that in other contexts may be difficult but rewarding. Lives are not free in any meaningful sense when they are spent tending the machine or offering services at an inhuman pace and in circumstances that degrade both the service giver and receiver. Nor is it reasonable to talk about freedom when there is no alternative to participation in the market nexus. For many 'choice' is reduced to earning a wage in work that may be monotonous, degrading or dangerous; the alternative is a life of penury.

At the same time, socialists reject liberal visions of freedom, particularly the impoverished vision of freedom that develops in market societies. Of course, freedom to choose matters, not least in the realm of formal politics. Clearly, formal political choice in regularly held, fair elections every few years is an improvement on the inherited political power wielded by feudal lords and kings. Movements across the world against dictatorships are a reminder, if one is needed, of the importance of many formal political liberties. The millions of workers who participated in the Solidarity movement in Poland, eventually leading to the fall of the officially Communist Soviet regime there and contributing to the collapse of the Soviet Union generally, struggled for a wide range of basic political freedoms, from the right to form legally-recognized unions to the right to

present candidates in state elections. These rights and freedoms are not trivial and the exercise of formal national and sub-national politics still matters. Indeed, the role of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), now New Democratic Party (NDP) in introducing universal health care in Canada during the CCF's decades in power in post-war Saskatchewan, is just one important reminder of the ways that formal politics can result in major, if reversible working class gains.

Yet, socialists maintain that such formal political freedoms do not go far enough, both substantively and in terms of scope. Substantively, for many, formal political freedoms centre on the right to vote once every several years, often for a narrow range of political choices. Voting rates around 50% are common in many western developed nations, symptomatic of the disillusionment with formal, representative politics. Rights to present candidates and form unions are critical, but their translation into genuine political power is often frustrated for the working class relative to the bourgeoisie, in a context in which many fundamental questions are defined as 'extra-political'. Indeed, the scope of liberal political freedoms is defined to exclude whole areas of social life. Notably, they do not extend to the workplace, for example, where 'the market decides'. The distribution of goods, services and wealth are not a matter for democratic debate. Profits, for example, automatically accrue to capitalist owners of the means of production, rather than workers. Thus, the liberal vision of freedom, especially political freedom, is limited and contradictory, excluding vast areas of social life and ignoring the ways in which class inequalities (about which more below) translate into the unequal exercise of formal political freedoms.

Moreover, in market societies, this original liberal vision of freedom is frequently lost. In everyday life, freedom comes to mean little more the ability to 'choose' between different commodified goods and services. In the heart of market fundamentalism, in much of the United States, freedom is literally equated with market relationships. Thus, for example, in the current debate on extending public healthcare, freedom is equated with the citizen-as-consumer's *right to pay* for privatized healthcare, even if this means that a substantial minority goes without any healthcare at all. The identification of freedom with market relationships is so strong that many Americans are literally protesting for their right to pay for the ambulance that takes them to a hospital in an emergency – this would merely be an absurd spectacle, if it didn't have tragic consequences for so many. Indeed, for many Americans, 'freedom' to choose to pay for health care means compulsory attendance at free 'charitable' clinics or going without any

treatment. Consumer 'freedom' is directly proportionate to ability to pay. And of course, this impoverished vision of consumerism as freedom is unavailable to the world's vast majority, as the recurrent crises of underconsumption recall.

For socialists, as for liberals, freedom is an important value. But, for socialists, freedom means the ability to opt out of paid, formalized work, not least work that is degrading and dangerous, with the possibility of maintaining a decent life. Genuine freedom first means freedom from want. More broadly, for socialists, it is obvious that political freedom, the liberal 'freedom to choose', must be extended beyond the formal political to the economic realm. This includes the free exercise of the individual and collective will in deciding how work is organized and how goods and services will be shared. None of this is possible under capitalism, which, moreover, has a tendency to reduce the original liberal celebration of freedom to little more than consumer choice, a privilege based on the ability to pay.

Relatedly, and in addition to rejecting liberal visions of freedom, Marx rejects liberal claims that genuine equality is possible within capitalism. In liberal capitalism, human beings are formally equal, a value commitment legally asserted in international charters like the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Clearly, this is progress over assertions of natural inequality among human beings. However, such formal declarations of equality are systematically undermined by the normal workings of the class-based capitalist system. Class inequalities inevitably translate into systematic class-based divergences in the advantages enjoyed across all spheres of life. The bourgeois and the working class, the rich and the poor across the capitalist world system, have unequal access to social goods, like health and education, and unequal exposure to social risks, including violence, the effects of environmental disasters and so on. In a world in which a few are billionaires and over a billion other human beings are starving, declarations of equality are purely formal and aspirational, entirely at odds with grotesque material inequalities.

In the political realm, as in other spheres of social life, capitalism skews the field of class struggle, so that the bourgeois have greater political weight than the working class. The relative dominance of the bourgeoisie is exercised in all sorts of ways, many mundane and direct. For example, corporate and private donations ensure that most political parties are captured by bourgeois interests, granting them a significant edge in resources for organizing and advertising over genuinely working class

parties. More fundamentally, bourgeois interests are served because they are able to propagate ideologies that present capitalism as natural, inevitable and 'in the general interest' (Marx 1978a), whilst excluding ideas that emphasize capitalism's social, therefore changeable nature and that ways that capitalism serves a minority bourgeois rather than majority working class interest. Indeed, bourgeois control over the means of mental production, over the ideological apparatus, notably including the mainstream for-profit media, means that anti-capitalist ideas are literally unthinkable for many, outside the realm of 'commonsense' and rationality (Gramsci 1971). Together with other ideological apparatus, from educational manuals to street and building names that celebrate capitalist entrepreneurial 'donors' but ignore the working class hands that built them, capitalism becomes an inevitability beyond political debate. Material inequalities translate into inequalities in the realm of ideas, with bourgeois interests prevailing over working class interests.

Ultimately, Marx rejects liberal, capitalist notions of equality. Equality of opportunity is a chimera, because class, but also gender, race, disability and other factors, which are not chosen, profoundly affect the life course under capitalism. Similarly, Marx rejects equality of outcome. Equality of outcome is not desirable, at least in the simple-minded sense of everyone having equal access to the same goods, broadly defined. Rather, the Marxist notion of equality is summed up in the famous phrase, 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his need' (Marx 1978b), a notion of justice and rights that depends upon the full expression of individual capacities *and* attention to differential human needs. How such a vision of equality might play out is obvious in many common situations. For example, a student who excels at school and is comfortable in the school environment does not the same support as a student who struggles at school. Justice does not depend upon treating these students equally, but paying attention to the specific capacities and needs of each, including more support for the struggling student.

Moreover, in actually-existing market societies, inequality is championed more often than equality. Naturalized inequalities supposedly relate to individual, entrepreneurial initiative and merit. Class inequalities are seen as functional, assigning the most talented individuals to the most important social roles. At the same time, the poor are despised for their poverty, often taking forms of mean-ness that fuse class, racial and gender hatreds, summed up in shorthand terms like 'the welfare queen', the 'chav', 'white trash' and so on (Tyler 2008). The working class are blamed for their plight, including in social theories that explain inequalities as a



consequence of a 'culture of poverty' rather than as the expression of inherited class privilege and what might be termed a 'culture of tolerance' for inequality (Crutchfield and Pettinicchio 2009). Liberal ideas about equality are perverted within market society, so that ultimately it is inequality that is rationalized. The incredible wastefulness of capitalism, which resigns billions – with all their capacities and talents -- to misery, is obscured by rhetoric celebrating individual achievement. In place of such market rationalizations, socialists emphasize the importance of solidarity.

In sum, Marx maintains that the liberal revolution did not go far enough. In overthrowing the naturalized, rigid god-given inequalities of the feudal mode of production, the capitalist mode of production generates new, naturalized inequalities, supposedly related to individual entrepreneurial initiative and merit. In fact, such inequalities are the consequence of the domination of the working class by the capitalist class, in the workplace, in the formal political realm and across social life generally. Insofar as capitalism is characterized by an absence of real freedom and real equality, it is inevitably fundamentally undemocratic, generating a bourgeois political system as opposed to an authentically democratic one. Finally, without a strong democratic voice, the terrible fate of the humanity's majority will continue unheard, as the wants of the wealthy win out in an unequal political field over the fundamental needs of the poor (Coburn and Coburn 2007, 26).

Socialism is not simply a critique of capitalism, but an argument for a world governed by different social relationships and different values than those that prevail in market societies. Socialists argue that genuine freedom and choice can only begin when there is freedom from want. Formal declarations of equality, including in the political sphere, is only possible in the context of material equality, in the sense of having needs met. Celebrations of individual talents are only meaningful in a context of solidarity, in which socially generated wealth is shared so that the capacities of all may be expressed. Democratic decision-making cannot be constrained to the narrow, formal political sphere. Rather, democratic decision-making must be extended to all areas of social life, including the workplace and the economy generally. Ultimately, ensuring the conditions for true liberty, true equality and genuine democracy depends upon revolutionizing the fundamentally unequal class relationships that characterize capitalism. In a classless society, history would begin, in the sense that for the first time human beings would self-consciously organize to decide how to produce and share the goods and services needed in order to live. Rather than an inherited 'nightmare' weighing upon social

relationships, the mode of production is for the first time the product of reflexive, democratic decision-making.

### **What are Socialist Studies?**

Socialist studies are critical reflections about the workings of the capitalist mode of production. Theoretically, such analyses privilege an understanding of class relationships, and the ways that class struggles have shaped capitalism over time and across different national types of capitalism. This means that socialist studies reach back to explain the different phases of capitalism, from its beginnings five hundred years ago (Wallerstein 1976), when what would now be called transnational corporations set forth, with state support, from the imperial centres to conquer 'new' territories, murdering indigenous peoples to gain access to resources or forcibly assimilating indigenous peoples into market relationships with distant colonial centres. At the same time, socialist studies seek to understand the different forms of capitalist relationships across different national contexts. The neoliberal Anglophone states, for example, contrast in important ways with Scandinavian welfare states, which, although increasingly market-oriented, still have more extensively decommodified social relationships than in many other nations. There are ideological differences across national states, too, reflected in the different understandings of what constitutes 'common sense' and the limits of public debate. In North America, being called a socialist or communist is enough to disqualify an individual from legitimate political debate, while in France and other contexts, socialists and communists participate regularly and respectably – if still at the margins – of public debates, including in the mainstream, for-profit media.

Understanding capitalism's different forms means analysing the balance of class forces or the state of political struggle at any historically specific moment. Moments of crisis may be particularly important, marking moments of struggle that result in a new balance of class forces. For example, it is impossible to understand the emergence and worldwide diffusion of the contemporary neoliberal regime without recognizing the ways in which the 1970s economic crisis undermined the post-war Keynesian consensus in the developed world. This created an uncertain policy environment that an emerging transnational capitalist class was able to exploit, as newly mobile capital credibly threatened both states and the working class with capital flight in order to make relative political gains at the expense of the working class (Ross and Trachte 1990).

In particular, the relative increase in the strength of transnational capital vis-à-vis the working class translated into the extension of market relationships, through a now-familiar bundle of policies: the privatization of goods and services, the commodification of the former global commons, including living organisms, and the liberalization of financial capital. These processes of market expansion were developed alongside an authoritarian, penal state disciplining segments of the working class domestically, while military interventions sought to protect domestic capital and secure resources for domestic capital abroad. During the same period, in the developing world, the neoliberal consensus reflecting the new relative strength of the capitalist class was often imposed via institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Mainstream economists, the ideologues of capitalism, rationalized the extension of capitalist markets via these institutions as non-political ‘technical’ interventions. The collapse of the Soviet Union was said to herald the ‘end of History’ (Fukuyama 1992), and the final triumph of liberal capitalism as the ultimate horizon for all possible political economies.

In this way, socialist studies seek to understand transformations within capitalism, as a consequence of the changing balance of class forces. This means recognizing the ways in which material changes, including cyclical crises of capitalism, are linked with ideological transformations and new hegemonic justifications for specific market forms.

In addition to analysing the state of class struggle in any particular historical moment or national context, socialist studies seek to describe and explain the ways in which capitalism has been articulated with other forms of social oppression. Although the specific contribution of Marxism is an emphasis on unequal *class* relationships, as the defining feature of capitalism, feminist scholars and scholars of colour have emphasized the ways in which early and contemporary capitalist expansion depends upon racist and sexist ideologies. Thus, it is impossible to understand early imperialist forms of capitalism without recognizing the ways in which racist ideologies justified the murder or forced assimilation of indigenous people whose existence threatened to block the appropriation of ‘new world’ resources and whose traditional ways of life challenged the spread of market relationships. Today, racist ideologies continue to be useful to the capitalist class, insofar as divisions among racialized workers fracture potential working class solidarity. Indeed, postmodern identity politics are arguably an expression of the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism’, in which fragmented national, racial, sexual and other identities are celebrated

specifically *at the expense of* class based politics, rather than being articulated with them (Carroll 2006, 12).

Likewise, socialist studies now grapple with the ways that capitalism is articulated with gender inequality. Women's reproductive labour, including housework, childrearing, eldercare and other work, whether paid or unpaid, is necessary to maintain both working class and bourgeois households. At the same time, women's role in reproductive labour frees men to participate in other activities outside of the home, including union organizing for working class men. Within the contemporary working class, paid work is still sharply gendered. Indeed, some have argued that a typical feature of migrant labour in neoliberal capitalism is 'women in services', including sex work or prostitution, with 'men in arms' (Falquet 2006), employed in private security and military services. Socialist studies cannot pretend to understand actually-existing capitalism without analysing the ways in which class relationships are historically intertwined with gender inequalities over time and across different national contexts.

Of course, socialist studies have not always addressed insights by feminists, anti-racist scholars and other progressive traditions, including ecological arguments. Rather, struggles by women, people of colour, environmental activists and so on, obliged socialists to take into account these aspects of actually-existing capitalisms neglected in 'mainstream' socialism. At the same time, socialist studies do not simply adopt feminist or anti-racist approaches to understanding social relationships. Rather, they are critical of such studies insofar as they specifically overlook dimensions of class inequality. Socialist feminism, for example, rejects the idea that there is a single, unified category of 'women.' Lucy Neville Rolfe, an executive with Tesco, the British-based grocery store and the world's third largest retailer, may share the social attribution of 'woman' with the mainly black South African women fruitpickers that supply Tesco (Smithers and Smith 2009). But their interests are opposed, since higher wages for the South African women means lower profits for Tesco. Furthermore, Rolfe-Neville has a broad structural interest in supporting a capitalist system that justifies the expropriation of these women's labour as profit for Tesco in the first place. Women do not share a common fate within the world capitalist system and the political implication is that women's solidarity cannot extend, except in a temporary strategic way, across class lines. A perfectly gender-blind capitalist society would still leave the vast majority of women in the working class, sharing the unequal fate of working class men compared to their bourgeois counterparts.

Socialist studies insist that women's liberation, like the liberation of racialized minorities, will only be meaningful for *all* women when unequal class relationships are ended as well as gender inequalities. A similar approach informs socialist appreciations of anti-racist scholarship.

Socialist studies have a particular responsibility to study the so-called Communist nations, including the former Soviet Empire and dictatorships like that in Romania under Ceausescu. These have to be taken seriously as studies in actually-existing socialism, in the same way that actually-existing capitalism, with all its contradictions and excesses, cannot simply be ignored by free-market ideologues who insist that cyclical crisis and persistent poverty would not be characteristic of a pure market society e.g., one without 'residual' state interference. The horrors committed by the Communist dictatorships, their characteristic lack of basic, formal political freedoms, may be the antithesis of socialist aspirations, grounded in the pursuit of genuine freedom, real equality and meaningful democracy. But, any critical, reflexive socialist analysis must confront these regimes' claims to be socialist and consider the lessons for socialist political struggle. Characteristic of this necessary intellectual honesty, for example, is Einstein's warning, in his article, 'Why Socialism?' (1949) about the anti-democratic tendencies inherent in 'technocratic' centralized planning. This theme would be taken up more directly by Foucault (not, of course, a socialist scholar) but represents one argument that must surely be considered by any socialist in the post-Soviet era.

Socialist studies are wide-ranging. Insofar as the world capitalist system has been the context for social relationships for hundreds of years, socialist studies have distinctive, class-based insights to bring to the study of most social phenomena. Few realms, if any, maintain total autonomy from the capitalist system. Indeed, even radical utopians who decide to live entirely 'apart from' market relationships are marked by the capitalist system, beginning with their own inevitable marginality. Thus, socialist studies address every topic, more or less obviously linked with analyses of the world capitalist political economy: environmental questions, the ways in which class is reproduced in styles of dress and speech, the contradictions of formal anti-racism in the Soviet Union (Roman 2007), the ways in which physician-patient interactions and forms of 'consent' reproduce liberal models of deracinated individuals that do not take into account the ways that individuals are socially embedded, including in unequal class but also cross-cultural relationships (Kaufert and O'Neill 1998), and so on. In addition, socialists consider every aspect of research, so that research 'methods' are recognized not simply as technical tools for

discovering truths about the capitalist political economy but as deeply implicated in political relationships, not least between the researcher and those studied. Whether or not Tuhiwai Smith (2004) is identified as a socialist scholar, her lessons about the ways in which researchers are implicated in the colonial project – ‘they came, they named, they claimed’ – are clearly salient for socialist researchers concerned both to analyse how research is shaped by the capitalist (imperialist) context and how it might be better oriented to serve liberatory political struggles against capitalism.

In the same vein, socialist studies analyse the contradictions of capitalism, not least since such contradictions are the places where spaces open up for progressive struggle both for reforms within capitalism and for transformations beyond capitalism. One reason for seeking to describe and explain the differences between Scandinavian and Anglo-saxon welfare states, for example, is to understand how decommodified spaces can be constructed within capitalist states. Thus, Scandinavian welfare states offer more opportunities for women and men to achieve a better life-work balance than many Anglosaxon welfare states eg., via programmes that enable parents to temporarily opt out of the workforce to look after children. This comparative difference ought to be of interest to socialists pressing for decommodified spaces in all national contexts. If the Communist state of Kerala in India has lower infant mortality rates, better longevity and superior literacy rates compared to most other ‘developing’ states, despite its relatively meagre resources, then it is important for socialists to understand why, with an aim to improving life conditions here and now. Socialists cannot sacrifice the current generation to a future socialist world, but must be concerned with making life better for as many as possible, right now.

Socialist studies are interested in the limits and possibilities of projects that embody the kind of practices socialism hopes to achieve more broadly: political experiments like the participatory budgets in Porto Alegre, Brazil, open-source software like the kind that hosts *Socialist Studies*, co-operative societies in Québec, public sector ‘social unionism’, and the emergence of the ‘alter-globalization’ movement around events like the World Social Forum, with its counterhegemonic slogan ‘Another World Is Possible’. Socialist studies analyse such dynamics, to understand how working class solidarity may be fostered and capitalism challenged, as well as the ways that such projects may be captured or sometimes, perhaps usually, defeated by a world capitalist system that has shown tremendous resiliency and flexibility over its centuries-old existence. Recognizing the ways that, for example, environmental impulses are translated into a

shallow 'green consumerism' is not simply a defeatist message for socialist struggles, but a call for environmentalism to be linked more durably to a critique of market relationships (Carroll 2006). In sum, socialist studies critically analyse what Harvey (2000) has called the 'spaces of hope' within capitalism.

### **The Future of Socialism and Socialist Studies**

Socialism is both a critical tool, a class-based analysis of the world capitalist system that has been the context of human lives for centuries, and an aspiration for a more just equal world in which human needs are met and the creative capacities of all may be expressed and shared. Socialist studies are an ambitious field of theoretical reflection and research, seeking to understand all aspects of contemporary social life, including the research process itself, and the ways in which these are shaped by an unequal class system. At the same time, socialist studies analyse how class oppressions are articulated with other oppressions, notably gender and race inequalities, but indeed, *any* source of oppression that limits the full participation of any human being. Thus, for example, disabled activism that articulates the ways in which needs of the diverse disabled population may be better accommodated, matters to a socialism that envisions equality in terms of 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs'. Socialist studies emphasize the ways in which disability can be understood through the lens of class analysis, describing and explaining the interactions between disability and class location and more broadly the ways in which market societies devalue disabled populations whose needs cannot be met through market signals that see disability accommodation, first and foremost, as cost. In this sense, socialist studies are omnivorous, interested in all aspects of social life within an analytical framework that stresses the role of capitalism and unequal class relationships. In addition, socialist studies are concerned with the emergent possibilities for different social relationships that are evident in political struggles by the working class and other progressive movements: struggles organized around commitments to genuine equality, freedom and democracy within a society that emphasizes solidarity as much as individual self-expression.

Today's world is one in which the contradictions of capitalism, its abject failure to live up to its original liberal promises of equality and freedom, are arguably more obvious than at any time in history. We live in time of immense wealth and terrible misery. Inequalities are greater than

they have ever been. A tiny minority have so much wealth that it is no longer connected in any way to needs or even wants. Rather, this wealth is an expression of money fetishism that is at once irrational and inevitably connected with the exercise of power, the will of the few prevailing over the interests of the many. Yet, despite this enormous wealth, over one billion human beings, one sixth of humanity, do not have enough to eat (United Nations 2009). This grotesque situation is the consequence of five hundred years of capitalism, which is capable of producing more goods than at any other time in human history but incapable of ensuring even basic subsistence to masses of human beings.

The current economic crisis has forced attention to the failings and contradictions of the latest, neoliberal phase of capitalism, making them starker. Even in the heart of market fundamentalism, in the declining hegemonic power of the United States, it is apparent that business simply cannot continue 'as usual'. The crisis of underconsumption, in a world where more goods than ever are produced, is grossly perverse and unacceptable. Ephemeral products that, in many cases, no one really wants and that are made at the cost of tremendous human suffering and environmental devastation, are churned out. Meanwhile, many go with basic needs unmet. Human values and social life are deformed in a world in which the only value that matters is exchange-value. In such a world, should it be surprising that even children and human organs may be bought and sold, despite formal commitments to the contrary? Liberal commitments to equality and freedom are inevitably starkly contradicted by the normal functioning of markets, that systematically undercut such formal rights in order to privilege profit creation.

Socialism may not answer all the problems within capitalism. But, with its sustained critique of unequal class relationships that characterize the world capitalist political economy, it is a beginning. Socialism challenges capitalist 'common sense', confronting capitalism with its own contradictions and the unacceptable human cost of its everyday functions. At the same time, socialism offers more or less radical alternative visions for human social relationships, based on putting human needs first and privileging solidarity as the precondition for real equality, freedom and democracy. Ultimately, socialism confronts humanity with its own responsibility, insisting that human life is profoundly social. No set of social arrangements is permanent, a given that cannot be changed. Rather, it is up to us, collectively to decide what kind of world in which we want to live.



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ARTICLE

## **Philosophy at the Service of History** **Marx and the Need for Critical Philosophy Today**

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### **Abstract**

Marx is famous for apparently dismissing the practical role of philosophy. Yet, as accumulating empirical knowledge of growing life-crises proves, the simply availability of facts is insufficient to motivate struggles for fundamental change. So too manifest social crisis. The economic crisis which began in 2008 has indeed motivated social struggles, but nothing on the order of the revolutionary struggles Marx expected. Rather than make Marx irrelevant, however, the absence of global struggles for truly radical change make his early engagement with the role of philosophy more important than ever. This engagement suggests a conception of philosophy as a uniquely practical discipline distinguished from empirical science by its unique capacity to synthesise values from the facts of life. The article examines the development of this conception of philosophy in Marx's early work and concludes with the outlines for a new critical philosophy capable of generating a new set of universal values necessary to motivate anti-capitalist struggles today.

### **Résumé**

Si Hegel a raison et que la philosophie émerge toujours dans un monde social dans lequel les contradictions se sont fossilisées, où le pouvoir d'unification semble avoir disparu, alors notre monde est un monde qui a besoin de la philosophie. L'automne 2008 a été témoin du début d'une crise économique qui promet d'être la pire de sa génération. La crise économique est liée à une crise politique de la démocratie sur le long terme (même si la crise n'est pas typiquement reconnue comme telle), caractérisée à travers le monde par un retrait de la régulation de l'activité économique par l'Etat et (sous le prétexte de la 'guerre contre le terrorisme') l'hyperrégulation des

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vies publiques et privées des citoyens. Les crises économiques et politiques sont toutes deux enserrées dans une profonde crise environnementale provoquée par la croissance hypertrophiée de l'économie capitaliste dirigée par l'argent-comme-valeur. Si cette valeur est en crise parce qu'elle ne peut plus 'unifier' le monde social (elle est maintenant la cause et non pas la solution des problèmes fondamentaux de la vie humaine) alors la philosophie, si Hegel a raison, devrait être conviée en tant qu'unique pratique intellectuelle capable de générer une nouvelle synthèse sur la base des nouvelles valeurs (ou au moins une nouvelle articulation des anciennes valeurs).

**Keywords**

• philosophy • life-value • life-requirements • capitalism • social criticism

**Mots clés**

• philosophie • valeur-de-vie • besoins vitaux • capitalisme • critique sociale

If Hegel is correct and philosophy always appears in a social world whose contradictions have become ossified, where it appears that the 'power of unification' has been lost, then ours is a world in need of philosophy (Hegel 1978, 12). Autumn 2008 witnessed the onset of an economic crisis that promises to be the worst in at least a generation. The economic crisis was related to a longer term political crisis of democracy (although this crisis is usually not named as such) characterised across the globe by a simultaneous withdrawal of state regulation of economic activity and (under the cover of the 'War on Terror') hyper-regulation of citizens' public and private lives. Both the economic and the political crisis are wrapped inside a deeper environmental crisis caused by the hypertrophied growth of the money-value steered capitalist economy. The longer-term threat to life and human life posed by the environmental crisis has recently been sidelined by politicians in full panic mode grasping for Keynesian mechanisms to restart the disrupted pattern of ever higher rates of commodity consumption, even though those rates of consumption, and the energy use they require, are at the root of the environmental crisis. The overall structure of the crisis, however, is neither environmental, nor economic, nor political, but normative. By 'normative' I mean that the crisis is generated by the steering value of contemporary liberal-democratic-capitalist society. That steering value is the increase of money wealth understood not only as an economic 'necessity' but also the social condition of individual 'choice' and the essence of good human lives. If this value-system is in crisis because it can no longer 'unify' the social world then philosophy, if Hegel is correct, ought to be called forth to generate a new synthesis of values.

Where, however, is philosophy? This question is not new but has been posed repeatedly in the history of philosophy. In terms most relevant for the present argument it was posed by Max Horkheimer in the early 1930s. Horkheimer was turning the Institute for Social Research in a new direction to enable it to understand the social and economic changes at the root of monopoly capitalism and mass culture. Like Horkheimer, I am interested in defending a conception of philosophy 'as a theoretical undertaking oriented to the general, the 'essential' ... capable of giving particular studies animating impulses' (Horkheimer 1993, 9). That which I take as 'essential' to philosophy is its unique capacity for synthesising values out of the facts of life. The Frankfurt School articulated some of the most sophisticated and important criticisms of twentieth century liberal-capitalist society, but conditions today are not the conditions of the 1930s or even the 1960s. Hence a new explanation of what it means to interpret philosophy as a value-synthesising discipline is required.

There is no doubt that many philosophers from many different philosophical traditions have engaged themselves with different dimensions of the normative problems underlying the global crisis. Yet, if we judge their efforts from the standpoint of civil society, the informal sphere of free association of which liberal and republican philosophers have been so enamoured over the past two decades, these efforts have been in vain. Philosophical interventions into the crisis have almost no public standing. Rare is the case where a philosopher appears on CNN, writes for the *New York Times*, is invited to non-academic conferences where concrete solutions to concrete problems are discussed, or even comes up in political conversation between citizens over a coffee or a beer. The public absence of philosophy is a sign that philosophy too faces a crisis, one whose timing could not be worse given the present world's need for philosophy. This crisis was first announced by Jean-Francois Lyotard more than two decades ago. 'Speculative or humanistic philosophy is forced to relinquish its legitimisation duties, which explains why philosophy is facing a crisis wherever it persists in arrogating such functions and is reduced to the study of systems of logic or the history of ideas where it has been realistic enough to surrender them' (Lyotard 1984, 41).

There are exceptions, of course, the most important of which is perhaps Alain Badiou. Badiou directly confronts this crisis in *Manifesto for Philosophy*, but his response perhaps exemplifies rather than solves it (Badiou 1999). Badiou's ethical work, while it affirms a universal conception of the human good, rigidly distinguishes the good from our 'animal' embodied nature. His ethic of truths is divorced from all

connection to the fundamental requirements of human life. Truths are true just because people affirm them as true and persist in this affirmation against all opposition (Badiou 2001, 58; Badiou 2005, 202-208, 231-239, 331-343). Yet what is at stake in the present crisis of values is precisely the natural and social foundations of human life-support, the 'animal' precondition for commitment to truths whatever the content of those commitments might be. A philosophical response to this crisis that is worthy of the dignity of philosophy must articulate a new philosophical synthesis of the values that express humanity's intrinsic dependence on the natural world and our interdependence with others in the social world. It must do so because those are the values whose loss or suppression are at the root of the crisis of life-value today.

My argument will not explicate or defend the content of the new life-values that our world stands in need of today. I have defended what I take these values to be in many other places over the past several years (Noonan 2006; 2007; 2008a; 2008b). My focus here, rather, will be on philosophy itself, and in particular its being an essentially *practical* discipline uniquely structured to produce and defend a new value synthesis by a process of generalization of the 'facts of life.' Knowledge of these facts of life is supplied to philosophy, at least in part, by empirical disciplines. While this is a similar programmatic aim to that defended by Horkheimer, my historical touchstone lays behind the Frankfurt School in the work of Marx. Some, many Marxists included, will find this choice ironic given that Marx apparently rejected the practical nature of philosophy. Yet, Marx is the best historical platform from which to construct my argument. Marx was a philosopher that struggled repeatedly against philosophy. He was constantly tempted in his later work by what he took to be the methods of natural science, but was unable to free his work from the values first synthesised philosophically in his early work. Marx's body of work is famously huge, and I will not attempt a complete exegesis of even this thread of argument. Instead, I will focus for the most part on the period from 1843 to 1845 in which his self-conscious struggle within and against philosophy was most acute. Out of this struggle emerges a unique conception (or so I will argue) of the *practical* relevance of philosophy as a value synthesising discipline. In the second section I will generalise Marx's insights into a defence of philosophy today as the necessary condition for a new synthesis of life-values. These life-values must underlie, in some form, any possible solution to contemporary life-crisis which is neither authoritarian nor regressive.

### **History, Philosophy, Values and the Future**

The Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach is generally interpreted as Marx's final repudiation of philosophy in favour of empirical social criticism and revolutionary practice. His words are terse and his meaning apparently unambiguous: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways. The point, however, is to change it' (Suchting 1979, 24). However, if we set this aphorism in the context of his reflections on the practice of philosophy that led up to this apparently ultimate break with the discipline, ambiguity does indeed emerge.

Marx's earliest systematic thoughts on the status of philosophy in relation to empirical disciplines like history are scattered throughout his early criticisms of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and in letters to Feuerbach and Arnold Ruge. When these thoughts are read in the political context in which Marx was working, it becomes clear, I believe, that Marx understood philosophy in two distinct ways. The first is as a discipline which synthesises values out of empirical knowledge of certain basic facts of life. The second is as an abstract discipline which holds itself above the fray of human struggles for a better life. In order to understand this difference, and the contemporary significance of the first conception, it is essential to keep in mind two elements of Marx's political context. First is the contradiction, remarked upon by all progressive German intellectuals of the time, between the economic and political 'backwardness' of Germany and its 'advanced' philosophical culture. Second is the Young Hegelian understanding of the function of philosophy.

It was a staple of German progressive politics in the early 1840s that philosophy would have to play an outsized role in the emancipation of Germany from its backward social and political conditions (Kouvelakis 2003, 235). Since German industrial development lagged behind England, it could not look to a powerful working class to lead progressive struggles. Furthermore, since Germany had not undergone a classic 'bourgeois' revolution as had France, its national political consciousness was also underdeveloped. Hence intellectuals would have to play a more profound mediating role than in either England or France. In other words, young German radicals argued that the very social backwardness of Germany enabled German intellectuals to develop a richer understanding of human emancipation because their thinking was not dominated by the need to first construct and manage a liberal-capitalist society. German philosophers could prepare the future in theory, and had only to await the inevitable development of the social forces necessary to realize the idea.

'The only practically possible liberation of Germany,' Marx wrote, 'is the liberation that proceeds from the standpoint of the theory [Feuerbach's] which proclaims man to be the highest being for man' (Marx 1975a, 187).

As is evident, at this point Marx does not conceive philosophy as 'only' an interpretation of the world. He understands philosophy as the intellectual discipline that identifies and proclaims the universal value foundation for truly revolutionary political change. That universal value foundation is a materialist understanding of human nature, an understanding which, as we will see, emphasises both humanity's dependence on physical nature and interdependence with each other in social relationships (especially economic and political relationships). The German revolution will be the most radical precisely because it rests on a deeper value foundation than was possible in France and England, because French and English revolutionaries had to fight both for and against liberal values. These values obscured from their understanding the deepest contradictions between capitalism and human freedom. These contradictions themselves, Marx argued, stemmed from the alienation that capitalism imposes between the human collectivity and nature and between human individuals locked in zero-sum competitive social relationships.

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Since there was no revolutionary bourgeoisie in Germany, philosophers were able to grasp in mind what capitalist social dynamics denied in material reality. The importance of this mediating role is what concerns me most. For Marx philosophy is framed but not determined by the past and present. Instead its systematic impulse towards universality pushes it beneath immediate contradictions in search of the ultimate foundations of human social life. These ultimate foundations, the most basic facts of life, then function as the material out of which philosophy can synthesise universal values and posit these as the normative foundation of a free social order to be constructed in the future.

It is this understanding of universal values as embedded in the fundamental facts of natural and social life that distinguishes Marx's conception of philosophy from his Young Hegelian contemporaries. Beneath the class identities of the groups contending for power and legitimacy lies the humanity of the combatants. It is only when philosophy understands this humanity that it can become properly radical. History, which Marx uses as a *portmanteau* term for all manner of empirical enquiries into the structure of human life, explicates the particular structure of the facts of life as they change across social space and time. Three general facts are crucial: our dependence on nature, our social need



to produce what our lives require, and the general capability to do so as agents, or the fundamental form of human freedom this productive agency encodes. 'The task of history,' he writes, 'is to establish the truth of this world. The task of philosophy, which is at the service of history, is to unmask estrangement in its unholy forms' (Marx 1975a, 176). History establishes the truth of the given social world by comprehending the interaction between material forces and human struggles that have produced the different forms of human society. This is an essentially empirical task. In these early writings, however, Marx does not assume, as he later would, that the future can be known on the basis of understanding the laws of the present 'with the precision of a natural science' (Marx 1970, 21). Instead, the future is not an object of knowledge but a potential site for conscious self-creation. The possibility of self-creation, however, presupposes definite normative goals. Philosophy renders itself practical by synthesising these goals out of the raw material supplied by the empirical study of the 'unholy forms' of alienation. In the absence of philosophy all one has are certain facts of life. Since philosophy by its very nature concerns itself with the *meaning* of the facts of life, it is able to synthesise universal values out of what would remain, in the absence of a specifically philosophical intervention, mere facts. The process here is analogous to the action of a chemist creating a new compound. The raw materials for the compound are present in the elements that compose it, but the compound itself requires something *not* contained in the different molecular structures. It requires the creative thought of the chemist who can see how they can be fit together in ways that do not appear in nature. Likewise, meaning, the basic condition of there being values, is not present in the raw facts of life *as* facts of life, but must be supplied by a philosophical intervention.

Unmasking estrangement in its unholy forms cannot be an act of empirical criticism alone. For in unmasking estrangement, one is doing more than saying what human beings are, one is saying what human beings ought to become through a collective political project. If establishing the empirical truth of this world were sufficient to overcome it, then anytime one observes social problems one should also observe widespread movements to solve them. By including a statement of philosophy's task, however, Marx at least implies that universal values must be synthesised out of these facts as the necessary condition of motivating political change. If the truth of the world can be established by history, without that truth being in and of itself sufficient to motivate the process of political revolution, then philosophy, which deals with the *ought-to-become*, is an

irreducible practical contribution to the process of political change. For any empirical discipline ruling values (the values of self-estrangement) can only be given, historically contingent facts. The values that will organize the future, however, cannot be treated *simply* as facts, because the social reality in which they could circulate as facts does not yet exist. The values of the future exist as suppressed potentialities whose superior value cannot be proven by empirical arguments, since the data to support the empirical claims does not exist. Thus, only normative arguments rooted in, but not reducible to, facts about human nature and how it is affected by given social formations can play the required role. At the same time, philosophy does not preach from on high about mere aspirations or ideas. It is at the service of history. The values of the future that it defends are possibilities that history has disclosed, but which the present structure of society cannot realize. The values of the future are not *mere* oughts, (as Marx dismissed Kant's Categorical Imperative) but oughts-to-become which motivate because they respond to real life-crises felt in the present. The realizability of these values can plausibly be established by reference to what can be known from history about human potentiality (Marx 1976, 210-211).

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A philosophy at the service of history does not thereby invent values *ex nihilo*. 'We do not confront the world dogmatically with a new principle... we develop for the world new principles out of the principles of this world' (Marx 1979a, 32). In other words, the values of the world that ought-to-become are produced by human historical activity, but can reach the fullness of their development, expression, and enjoyment only in a different social world. This social world cannot come to be without conscious effort, and conscious effort that would produce a new social world must be steered by universal, truly human values. Connecting past and future is human activity; separating present from future are the institutions of the given society. Marx is clear that these potentially ruling values cannot triumph simply as automatic results of the *forces of history*. 'It is not enough for thought to strive towards realization, reality itself must strive towards thought' (Marx 1975a, 183). This claim is far different from claiming, as Marx later would, that periods of crisis are the inevitable result of a contradiction between the forces and relations of production (Marx and Engels 1986, 39-40). That contradiction might generate social crisis, but revolution, to be successful, must also strive towards thought. In other words, there must be a conscious normative goal to motivate people to respond to the crisis in a revolutionary rather than a reformist way.

Philosophy is thus a practical discipline for Marx to the extent that it clarifies the values according to which reality ought to strive.

This essential point is supported by contrasting it with a different conception of philosophy to which Marx was, and remained, hostile. This conception of philosophy dominated the Young Hegelian movement from which Marx was struggling to differentiate himself (Breckman 1999). The Young Hegelian understanding of philosophical practice was exemplified for Marx in the work of Bruno Bauer. For Bauer, the relationship between history and philosophy is the converse of that posited by Marx. Rather than philosophy being at the service of history, history is meaningful only in so far as it serves as the substance for philosophical interpretation. Moreover, the goal of this interpretation is not to derive from history the values that will lead radical political movements, but rather to disclose the unbridgeable chasm between philosophical ideals and historical development. As Bauer wrote, 'the critic participates neither in the sufferings nor the joys of society; he knows neither friendship nor love, neither hatred nor envy; he reigns in solitude, where now and then the laughter of the Olympian gods over the perversity of the world rings from his lips' (Marx 1979b, 36). For Bauer, therefore, philosophy is essentially contextless and timeless. Its role is not to 'strive towards reality' but to demonstrate that no matter how far human striving goes, it can never attain the Olympian heights of speculative criticism. Its relationship to history is therefore entirely negative. It can learn nothing from history, but nor, as a consequence, can it teach anyone anything of practical value. As Bauer says, the critic reigns in solitude, above the swirl of events and the mundane joys and sufferings of ordinary people. Bauer's perspective is the purity of the Beautiful Soul of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* who dares not act for fear of burdening his principles with the unpredictability of consequences (Hegel 1987, 383-409).

Marx, however, demands action, but not normatively blind action. Collective struggles must serve general yet definite values synthesised out of those aspects of the facts of life which are meaningful because they are requirements of human life and free human activity. What are the most salient facts? To uncover these it is necessary to examine in general Marx's understanding of how the relationships between human beings and nature and between human beings and each other become alienated under capitalist social relationships. Three facts are essential: Human beings cannot live apart from on-going interactions with the natural world. 'The life of the species, both in man and in animals, consists physically in the fact that man (like the animal) lives on organic nature' (Marx 1975b, 275).

As John Bellamy Foster demonstrates in exquisite textual detail, it is the primacy of this connection between humanity and the natural world that underlies Marx's entire critique of capitalism. He argues that 'alienation from the natural world is the fundamental form of human alienation' (Foster 2000, 174). Second, human beings do not live ready to hand on what they find in nature but together in societies which cooperatively produce that which each and all require to live. 'Thus the social character is the general character of the whole movement: just as society itself produces man as man, so is society produced by him. Activity and enjoyment, both in their content and in their mode of existence, are social' (Marx 1979b, 298). Finally, and as a consequence of the first two points, human freedom is at first a fact of the productive nature of human beings. Freedom is not created in the first instance by political forms or legal structures, but is essentially the power of human beings to consciously produce their conditions of existence. This production has both a biological and a social dimension. Production both maintains human life and creates the meaningful forms through which human beings interpret their world and find their own purposes within it. As Marx says, 'the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species ... is contained in the character of its life-activity; and free, conscious activity is man's species character' (Marx 1979b, 276). These facts are transhistorical constants of human life. Yet, read philosophically, from the standpoint of why they matter to human life, they permit the synthesis of definite universal values that can then guide the development of the world that ought-to-become.

What explains the move from a mere description of general facts to the philosophical synthesis of the values they contain? This crucial move is what Horkheimer, for example, does not explain. The movement is generated by the way in which specific structures of a given society can contradict the general facts of human life. While some philosophers may object that contradictions can only hold between propositions, this view is overly narrow. Specific social structures can contradict the general facts of life when those specific structures prevent people from satisfying their life-requirements, even though the essential purpose of society is to enable people to satisfy those requirements. Take for example the most general fact of human life, its dependence on the natural system of life-support. Human labour transforms the natural world in order to provide the goods necessary to sustain life. In capitalism, by contrast, life becomes dependent upon labour and commodity markets; money becomes a condition of acquiring the goods that we need to live. People can therefore

suffer harm, not because resources in general are lacking, but because people lack paid work and therefore the money required to purchase needed resources. In this way the specific structure of capitalist markets contradicts the general fact of the human need for certain resources to keep themselves alive. People are intelligent and can recognize this contradiction. When they do they construct normative arguments which maintain that it is wrong for social structures to impede access to that which they ought to provide: those life-requirements necessary to existence and a good life.

Marx initially seems to have planned a much more systematic synthesis between empirical science and philosophy. He hoped to create a genuinely philosophical science that would supersede the opposition between natural and human science. 'To assume one basis for life and one basis science is as a matter of course a lie' (Marx, 1975b, 303). Science presupposes life. The reproduction and meaningful social development of life presupposes on-going connection with the natural world in forms of productive relationship which prioritise the satisfaction of both natural and social life-requirements. The conscious nature of human productive relationships prove that human beings are not programmed machines but invent their own social conditions of life. From these three claims it follows that science, the principled understanding of the universe by conscious human beings who dwell within it, must ultimately be unified. This unity cannot be reductive, however, because reductive physicalism eliminates the human sources of wonder, imagination, and caring that motivate science in the first place. Instead, the unity, Marx suggests, must be synthetic and not reductive. The science of which Marx speculates here would be a complex explanation of how the capacities and values that steer human action emerge out of productive activity and how they are furthered or impeded by the particular steering values of a given productive system. All sound scientific inquiry must link back to the general conditions of life and what makes it better or worse. The new science would thus be a science in which normative goals are intrinsic, not as mere facts as an empirical sociologist would treat them, but as real values whose progressive development and realization the empirical understanding of the facts of life can help advance. In this synthesis, philosophy would be the crucial element since it is only the philosophical moment of the synthesis that can articulate the value dimension. Values are not mere artefacts found like minerals or plants, but but are consciously constructed. The conscious construction is in turn dependent upon the philosophical understanding of life's being meaningful. Only in

such a new science would the “chimerical” relationship between philosophy and natural science which Marx laments be superseded (Marx 1975b, 303).

Marx never completed this prospective synthesis of empirical science and philosophy. I will make some general suggestions in the next section about why such a synthesis ought to become a goal for scientists and philosophers alike today, and why philosophy alone can play the leading role in developing it. At this point, however, let us sum up this part by returning to the Eleventh Thesis and see whether it still reads like the complete rejection of philosophy it is generally taken to be. I believe that read in light of the preceding argument an initially unapparent ambiguity initially appears. Is Marx repudiating philosophy as such in the Eleventh Thesis, or is he only repudiating the timeless and disengaged philosophy preached by Bauer and others? The subsequent work of Marx does not resolve the ambiguity. As his work turns to the critique of political economy he often draws analogies between his work and the methods of the natural sciences (Marx 1986, 21). At the same time, the ‘prescientific’ normative ideas of alienation and truly human life-activity never disappear from his work, and are central to the *Grundrisse* and key arguments in *Capital*, especially his discussion of the labour process (Marx 1986, 173-175). I have no intention here of solving the ambiguity or insisting, as Althusser did, on a fundamental ‘epistemological break’ in Marx’s work, or in answering that charge, as others have already done (Althusser 1997, 49-86; Meszaros 1970, 213-253). Instead I want to put the ambiguity to work in vindicating for the present the idea of philosophical practice central to Marx’s own understanding of philosophy in 1843 and 1844.

When Marx says that philosophers have only interpreted the world, he is clearly rejecting the sort of philosophy practiced by Bruno Bauer. The rejection of philosophy as relentless negative critique of the present, undertaken from a purportedly timeless perspective claimed (but not defended) by the critic, does not entail, however, the rejection of a philosophy of the future whose relationship to the present is concretely situated criticism of the specific ways in which it impedes the free realization of human life-capabilities. That sort of philosophy does not simply interpret the world, but nor does it trust the world’s transformation to inexorable historical forces or classes steered by their positional interests within a given social structure. Instead, philosophy as engaged critique of the present argues against ruling system values on the basis of deeper values synthesised by the philosophical understanding of the self-creative processes at the foundation of historical change. By developing an

account of universal values as emergent from the facts of human life, this situated, timely, and critical philosophy provides something that no other discipline can: an understanding of values as neither mere natural facts (about genetically regulated behaviour, for example) nor historical facts (functional rules necessary for social reproduction) nor laws imposed by transcendent divinity ('take it or leave it' divine commands), but as goals that emerge in historical development whose full realization depends upon the conscious, collective construction of a future society in which contemporary life-crises have been resolved.

Natural and social sciences would have a central role to play because they have immensely enriched our understanding of the natural and social frames within which human beings must act. Knowledge of these frames, in addition to being intrinsic epistemic goods, also contributes to a positive knowledge of human freedom by disclosing the space in which conscious human action and the values that steer it can make a difference to the future development of society. Knowledge of the frames of action does not, however, entail any conclusions about how we ought to act within them. The frames are the facts that await uptake in the new philosophical synthesis Marx proposed but did not develop. To actually develop that synthesis would require real collaboration and collective efforts, efforts which cannot be accomplished in a single paper. My focus in conclusion, therefore, will be on the role philosophy can play in such a synthesis, and why assuming that sort of role is key to the return of philosophy to the position of public prominence it ought to have.

### **For a New Critical Public Philosophy**

The key to the solution of contemporary life-crises is the development of a new philosophical synthesis of foundational human values out of the facts of life in its natural and social dimensions. On this basis the universal structure of contemporary social problems can be coherently understood as a unified crisis of life-value across the natural and social dimensions of being alive. An essential moment of this synthesis is as rich an empirical understanding as it is possible to construct of the different concrete ways in which this unified crisis manifests itself. Biochemistry, atmospheric science, ecology, zoology, and oceanography are all essential to understanding what it means to say that there is a crisis of the natural conditions of life-support. Critical forms of empirical sociology, economics, history, and political science are essential to understanding the concrete effects of natural and social life-crisis on differently situated groups of

people. The 'lie' implicit in establishing different bases for life and science in effect means that the ultimate warrant of science, natural or social, is not to control nature in the service of a particular structure of ruling values and its attendant asymmetries of wealth, power, knowledge, and status, but to generate the practical knowledge necessary to improve life-conditions for each and all who live. This goal, however, cannot be a goal generated by empirical science itself. Empirical science, in order to accumulate knowledge, must focus on its object and its object does not include 'value' in the normative sense required as the foundation of the solution to life crisis. Without philosophy the empirical disciplines risk 'sinking into empirical-technical minutiae,' with no value-ground, as Horkheimer worried (Horkheimer 1993, 14). Marx takes us some of the way to the goal in so far as his early struggles with and against philosophy disclose the method by which values may be synthesised from the facts of natural and social life. Yet Marx himself does not go far enough.

In his early struggles with and against philosophy Marx assumes a normative understanding of values as universal steering goals leading the struggle for a free and life-supportive society, but he never defines value as such. In his later political economic work value is defined in a one-sided way as exclusively materialised labour-time. That definition is inadequate to the deep normative arguments developed in his early work. These arguments were not essentially political economy, but focussed on the sorts of goals that political economy ought to serve. Yet Marx does at least imply the required understanding of value in so far as he implies that life is the fundamental condition of there being any value at all. This conclusion is implied in his claim that productive life is life-engendering life, and its converse, that there is a deep normative contradiction involved where, instead of engendering life, productive activity threatens or destroys it. Still, implying a conclusion and drawing a conclusion are logically distinct. Hence, in order to explicate the conception of value required by the new philosophical synthesis I am proposing, we need to go beyond Marx.

If we think of values in terms of the bases of motivation of an agent's (individual or collective) action, and keep in mind the obvious, that action requires life, then the satisfaction of the natural and social requirements of being alive as an agent are universal conditions of any action at all. From the perspective that understands life and the satisfaction of life's requirements as universal preconditions of activity, a value is 'that in the object which makes it an object of care and concern for a living subject.' This definition applies across the range of things that can have value and the different ways in which things can be valued. The



reason why people care about food is because it has nutritional value, the reason why people care about education is because it has cognitive value (it is the only way in which the intellectual capabilities of the human brain can be developed); the reason why people care about politics is because it has social value in so far as its outcomes determine the legal frames within which active life must be led.

In general we can say that the overall goodness or badness of a society can be determined by reference to the degree to which its institutions and practices satisfy the natural and social life-requirements of its citizens being able to live as free, conscious agents whose concrete life-expressions contribute, via a virtuous circle, to the ability of other citizens to live as free, conscious agents. To the extent that these requirements are satisfied, citizens' lives increase in what McMurtry calls 'life-value.' Life-value is realized both in the satisfaction of natural and social life-requirements and the enjoyed expression of the human capabilities to sense and feel, think and act, in ways which do not unsustainably destroy the natural field of life-support or depend upon the exploitation and oppression of others for their expression and enjoyment (McMurtry 2008). Life-value is neither an abstraction nor a timeless ideal. It can always be determined by reference to the life-requirements that given societies satisfy and do not satisfy, and by the range and depth of the meaningful human capabilities their satisfaction enables and their deprivation disables.

A complete understanding of life-value requires a rich understanding of human life-requirements and human capabilities as well as the natural and social frames within which we must live. Empirical natural and social science thus play an indispensable role in understanding what these frames are and what their impact on existing and future human life is and will be. In order to create a society in which life-value is maximised for each and all, we need to understand the carrying capacity of the natural world, sustainable levels of resource extraction, how to create production processes which minimise toxic pollution, and how to produce clean energy at quantities sufficient for lives of maximum life-value but not beyond the carrying capacity of the natural life-support system. This synthesis also requires the contributions of empirical social science, and especially, as Marx argued, history. Those in positions of privilege need to hear, understand, and internalise the different experiences of exploitation and oppression of all the different subaltern groups. Concrete political strategies for life-grounded change cannot be inferred deductively from the general principle of life-value maximization, but can only be advanced

democratically in movements whose goals are emergent expressions of all subaltern groups experiences and ideas for change

In this way, the philosophically articulated idea of life-value forms the basis of a new synthesis of philosophy and empirical science. The unifying goal would be the full realization of life-value posited as the ought-to-become of the future. This ought-to-become is not a dogmatic and arbitrary stipulation of goal, but rather an empirically justified argument about the natural and social conditions for a life-coherent development of the human capabilities that make life worth living. Fundamental social change in the direction of more life-valuable forms of social organization is inconceivable in the absence of society-wide repudiation of the rule of money-value accumulation in favour of life-value maximization for each and all. Such a change in values must be empirically defensible. The required empirical defence can only be constructed with information concerning biological and social life-requirements and the capacity of natural and social worlds to satisfy them. Together, philosophy and empirical science united in the synthesis here proposed are capable of motivating change by disclosing the 'material irrationality' of the ruling value-system. By material irrationality, I mean that a set of ruling social values, if adhered to consistently over the long term, will undermine the life-support systems, natural or social, which even the ruling system values presuppose. In the contemporary world, faced with the environmental, economic, and political crises noted in the introduction, philosophy can best put itself at the service of history by consistently and systematically exposing and confronting people with the material irrationality of the prevailing value system.

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As it was in Marx's time, so too in ours, the ruling value system continues to judge value in terms of money value, and affirms or repudiates collective and individual projects according to the likelihood of their returning profit to those that invest their time in them. As McMurtry argues, from within this system of value, 'nothing which is not an atomic money sum or priced commodity ... can register in this paradigm=s terms of reference, no shared life-good can exist for it' (McMurtry 2002, 134). Of course, this is not the only set of values at work. It is the socially dominant system, however, in so far as it is disseminated through the media, dominates culturally approved symbols of success, guides economic enterprises, and shapes government policy across the globe. Yet the growth of money value which this ruling value system demands is materially unsustainable. It is impossible, on a finite globe, for growing numbers of people to demand ever higher output and thus make ever

rising energy demands without finally causing a global collapse of the life-support system of the natural world. What John Gray astutely remarks in relation to the looming oil crisis has general significance for any energy source; 'technology cannot repeal the laws of thermodynamics... When the energy costs of extracting oil exceed the energy thereby produced, no price can make the process profitable ... It is a consequence of the universal law of entropy' (Gray 2003, 67). Yet the ruling value system does in fact demand ever higher 'standards of living' as measured by market commodities consumed, and thus ever more energy to drive production. An empirically informed and life-grounded critical philosophical synthesis is the only intellectual basis which can expose the material irrationality of this system. Disclosing this material irrationality is, in turn, the precondition for a new opening toward a future that pursues the realization of different values by different means. This openness is not a contentless existential horizon, but a concrete opening for human action to change the world on the basis of new values generated from the empirical and rational demonstration of the material irrationality of the ruling value system. If philosophy remains institutionally marginalized and publically silenced then the world will lose its systematic capacity for self-criticism and conscious value transformation at just the point in history when it most needs philosophy's unique contribution.

These are not esoteric arguments. The need for a fundamentally different structure of ruling values is increasingly obvious because the evidence that speaks against the sustainability and justice of the present world order is more and more difficult to rationally deny. It is evidenced by the growing recognition across societies of the ecological unsustainability of capitalist economic practices, of the inexcusable waste of the lives of the two billion people who are forced to subsist on two dollars a day, by the moral insanity of armed conflicts that do nothing but set the stage for revenge and more killing, of the vacuity of consumer culture and the anaesthetizing effects of mass entertainment, of the mindless subservience demanded of most workers, and of the empty shell of democracy that ignores the considered demands and life-requirements of majorities. Far from being 'only' an interpretation, the philosophical practice of empirically informed social critique is the precondition of any intelligent and emancipatory social change that might emerge from these as yet disparate insights into the real structure of life-crisis today.

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*SPECIAL SECTION ON RETHINKING LENINISM*

## **Introduction: Rethinking Leninism**

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**Abstract:**

This special section on 'Rethinking Leninism' emerges from sessions organized at the Society for Socialist Studies' Annual Meetings, held at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in May 2009 at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. The articles re-consider Lenin's legacy, suggesting new ways of understanding his political thought and the implications for political strategies on the left today.

**Résumé:**

Cette section spéciale sur le thème 'Re-penser le léninisme' est le résultat de sessions organisées lors des réunions annuelles de la société pour les études socialistes, qui se sont déroulées pendant le Congrès des sciences humaines en mai 2009 à Carleton University à Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Les articles réinterrogent l'héritage de Lénine, suggérant des nouvelles manières de comprendre sa pensée politique et leurs conséquences en termes de stratégie politique pour la gauche aujourd'hui.

**Keywords**

• Leninism • political strategy • socialism

**Mots clés**

• Léninisme • stratégie politique • socialisme

This section is based on two panels entitled 'Rethinking Leninism,' which were held at the annual conference of the Society for Socialist Studies in Ottawa in May 2009. Senior and innovative scholars presented their recent work, breaking a near-silence on Leninism in the academy. These panels were organized as part of an effort to consider the nature and significance of Lenin's intervention in Marxist praxis. While there is little

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disagreement about the magnitude of his influence on Marxism, this influence is not properly reflected in contemporary Marxist scholarship. Rethinking Marxism has won a measure of legitimacy in the academy, but rethinking Leninism continues to exist largely on the margins. The current collection, along with the recent publication of *Lenin Reloaded*, edited by Budgen, Kouvelakis, and Žižek, and *Lenin Rediscovered* by Lars T. Lih, points to the importance of returning to Lenin, to re-examining his engagement with a set of questions, which continue to confront us today.

Perhaps the most significant and enduring of all the questions is: 'What is to be done?' Lenin's 1902 pamphlet on the subject remains an important point of reference in Marxist theory. His conception of a 'party of a new type' has been seen as a turning point in the break with bureaucratic, reformist, and fatalist tendencies that plagued the Second International. However, as some of the contributors to this special section forcefully argue, Lenin's thought on organization is not so straightforward. On the contrary, there seems to be the development of an engagement with Lenin that is much richer and perhaps even more ground breaking than the Leninism we know. As the title of Paul Kellogg's piece provocatively states, 'Leninism: It's not what you think.'

Our current understanding of Lenin's work is, in fact, quite limited. However, this should come as no surprise given the various ways in which his thought has been refracted through the fissures in the communist movement and through the ideological wars between East and West. Vilified by some and deified by others, he continues to be one of the most controversial figures of our time. Shortly after his death, and against the wishes of his widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, he was mummified, and countless colossal statues of his likeness were raised across the USSR. It is interesting to note her plea to the Soviet people in *Pravda* only days after his death. On 24 January 1924, she wrote, 'Comrades Workers and Peasants! I have a great request to make of you: do not allow your grief for Ilich to express itself in the external veneration of his person. Do not build memorials to him.... If you want to honour the name of Vladimir Ilich – build day care centres, kindergartens, homes, schools' (Buck-Morss 2000, 72). This collection of articles is not another memorial to Lenin; it is part of a renewed effort to open Leninism to a critical re-examination.

For instance, Paul Kellogg identifies two very different Leninisms: the Leninism of the Third Congress of the Comintern (1921) with which we are more familiar – 'the central leading body of the Party controls the activity and the correct functioning and composition of all the committees subordinate to it' – and that of Lenin's own comments in 1905 which insist

on 'the autonomy of every Party organization' and that all higher-standing bodies should be 'elected, accountable, and subject to recall.' Kellogg argues that the difference between the two approaches reflects Lenin's close attention to context. In fact, according to Kellogg, Lenin critiqued the 'hard Leninism' of the Third Congress as 'too Russian,' i.e. as inappropriate to conditions that existed in liberal democracies. 'There is, in other words, a discontinuity – a very large discontinuity – between what most people think Leninism is (the authoritarian, top-down, steel-hardy party) and the "Leninism" that Lenin himself thought appropriate for liberal democracies in advanced capitalist society: party organization that allowed tremendous scope for debate, disagreement and discussion, party organization where the central unit was not the Central Committee, but the local organization, party organization imbued with democracy from top to bottom.'

The point of this special section is not, however, to rehabilitate Lenin, to rescue a 'nice, democratic' Lenin from the shadow of his 'authoritarian, vanguardist' image. His rehabilitation is only necessary for, and occurs in the process of, uncovering a rich terrain of Marxist thought that is useful for struggle in the present. Similar to Kellogg, Stephen D'Arcy approaches Lenin with an eye to the current context.

D'Arcy's article, 'Strategy, Meta-strategy and Anti-capitalist Activism,' offers an original reading of Leninism as a political strategy that is relevant for contemporary anti-capitalist activism. He argues that the political strategy that we tend to associate with Leninism is only a first-order strategy – a strategy developed for the situation in Russia at the time. However, underlying this first-order strategy is a second-order meta-strategy – a deeper set of strategic imperatives that are broader in scope and applicability. D'Arcy identifies this meta-strategy and applies it to the current context, generating a Leninism for today. The result challenges some deeply-held assumptions about Leninism and offers strategic vision for anti-capitalism today in the form of the concept of 'anti-capitalist attrition.'

Perhaps the most ground-breaking intervention in contemporary scholarship on Lenin has been Lars T. Lih's *Lenin Rediscovered* (2006), which challenges the significance and meaning of Lenin's *What is to be done?* as an articulation of a 'party of a new type' that eventually signalled a break with the reformism of the Second International. 'The experts regarded *What is to be done?* as the founding document of Bolshevism, the book where Lenin first revealed the essence of his outlook. But even the experts worked without a proper knowledge of context – particularly the large context of international Social Democracy and the small context of



the polemical infighting among the Russian Social Democrats in late 1901. To speak plainly, they misread *What is to be done?* and therefore misunderstood Lenin, and then successfully raised up this image of Lenin to textbook status' (4-5). Through a meticulous reconstruction of the debates of the day, Lih re-contextualizes Lenin's pamphlet bringing it into focus in a new and astonishing way. 'I reject all the central propositions of the textbook interpretation. The keynote of Lenin's outlook was not worry about workers but exhilaration about workers. The formulations about spontaneity are not the heart of *What is to be done?* but a tacked-on polemical sally.... *What is to be done?* did not reject the Western model of a Social-Democratic party but invoked this model at every turn. Lenin certainly advocated a "vanguard party," for this was the common understanding of what Social Democracy was all about.... The positions advanced in *What is to be done?* were not the cause of the party split in 1904' (20).

Among the various consequences of Lih's reading is the surprising continuity between Kautsky and Lenin. Specifically, he notes the origin of the 'party of a new type,' not in Lenin's *What is to be done?* but in Kautsky's 1892 *Class Struggle*. He demonstrates that Lenin considered himself a Kautskyist up to 1914, and that even after 1914, when he referred to Kautsky as a 'renegade,' he continued to see himself following the principles expounded by Kautsky pre-1914, i.e. that it was Kautsky, and not himself, who changed course. This reading challenges not only our understanding of Leninism, but also how we have understood the relationship between the Second and Third International, and the problem of reformism through this 'Leninist' lens.

Lih continues to develop this line of thought in his present piece, 'Lenin's Aggressive Unoriginality, 1914-1916.' He demonstrates that Lenin continued to draw on Kautsky's thought even after 1914. In fact, he makes a convincing argument that Lenin's ideas from 1914 to 1919 do not represent a break with orthodox Second International Marxism, that in fact his ideas at that time came directly from Kautsky, especially Kautsky's 1909 work *Road to Power*, as well as other orthodox writers, and that Lenin himself emphasized his own unoriginality. This article is a continuation of Lih's recent work, which has shaken the textbook interpretation of Lenin, the consequences of which are yet to be fully appreciated.

This special section offers a re-examination of Leninism that leaves the reader with a Lenin that is no longer larger than life, a Lenin that does not obstruct our view of the strategic debates of this important time in the

history of socialism. For too long, 'Leninism' has served as a gloss on a complex history of struggle, which grappled with many of the issues that continue to confront the Left today. The articles in this collection contribute to clearing some of the deadweight that has been associated with Leninism, uncovering a rich terrain of ideas that we would be wise to examine.

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*SPECIAL SECTION ON RETHINKING LENINISM*

## **Leninism: It's Not What You Think**

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**Abstract:**

Leninism is universally understood as involving an emphasis on centralism and discipline inside the workers' party, a centralism and discipline necessary as a counter to the centralized power of the capitalist state. This article argues: 1) that Lenin's famous centralism was a necessity imposed on all socialists of his generation because of conditions of tsarist autocracy; 2) that when given the chance during moments of revolutionary upheaval, this centralism was pushed to the background, and a heavy emphasis was placed upon democracy and debate; 3) that late in life, Lenin realized that the 'Leninism' being aggressively promoted by the Communist International was too heavily weighted towards Russian conditions, and was a barrier to the development of the left outside of Russia; and 4) that this immanent critique of actually-existing Leninism was cut short and buried by the rise of Stalinism, for which an emphasis on centralism was a useful counterpart in party organization to the authoritarianism being constructed in the Stalinist state.

**Résumé:**

On pense généralement que le léninisme insiste sur le centralisme et la discipline dans le parti ouvrier, centralisme et discipline nécessaires pour contrer le pouvoir centralisé de l'état capitaliste. Cet article défend que: 1) le centralisme célèbre de Lénine était une nécessité imposée à tous les socialistes de sa génération du fait de l'autocratie tsariste; 2) dès lors qu'il y avait un espace pendant les moments de bouleversement révolutionnaire, ce centralisme était mis en retrait et un accent lourd était mis sur la démocratie et le débat; 3) plus tard dans sa vie, Lénine a réalisé que le 'léninisme' qui était promu d'une façon agressive par l'Internationale communiste était trop lourdement biaisé par le contexte russe et que ceci était une barrière au

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développement de la gauche en dehors de la Russie; et 4) cette critique immanente du léninisme en place a été muselée et enterrée par l'ascension du stalinisme, pour qui l'accent sur le centralisme était un parallèle utile dans l'organisation du parti à l'autoritarisme en construction dans l'état staliniste.

**Keywords**

• Lenin • democracy • democratic centralism • Leninism • Russia

**Mots clés**

• Lénine • démocratie • centralisme démocratique • léninisme • Russie

'There is no question that literature is least of all subject to mechanical adjustment or levelling, to the rule of the majority over the minority. There is no question, either, that in this field greater scope must undoubtedly be allowed for personal initiative, individual inclination, thought and fantasy' (Liebman 1975, 50-51). This was a comment on criteria for socialist publications written by a Russian socialist the year following the great 1905 revolution.

The author goes further. S/he has the following comments on internal party organization, arguing that 'the principal organizational units of the Party' must be 'the local organizations... in fact, and not merely in name,' going on to insist that 'all the higher-standing bodies' should be 'elected, accountable, and subject to recall' (51). Further, 'the autonomy of every Party organization, which hitherto has been largely a dead letter, must become a reality.'

Contrast this with the viewpoint of the Third Congress of the Communist International (or Comintern) in 1921. 'The leading Party district committee and, ultimately, the central leading body of the Party *controls* the *activity* and the correct functioning and *composition* of all the committees subordinate to it' (Koenen 1983, 256). Now that is much more familiar to us, a clear precondition for what the American Leninist, James Cannon, called, 'the Bolshevik discipline, the iron hardness, the capacity for decisive action... which a party of Leninism must have' (Cannon 1924).

Here's the problem – the advocate of fantasy in the pages of the socialist press, the advocate of the autonomy of every Party organization, the advocate of seeing the local organizations as the principal units of the Party – that advocate was the original Leninist, Vladimir Lenin (Lenin 1978a, 46; 1978b, 376). And Lenin's considered response to the 'hard Leninism' of the Third Congress of the Comintern ('considered' because a year earlier he had praised the resolution uncritically) is worth quoting at length:

The resolution is an excellent one, but it is almost entirely Russian... everything in it is based on Russian conditions ... I am sure that no foreigner can read it... they will not understand it because it is too Russian ... because it is thoroughly imbued with the Russian spirit... [I]f by way of exception some foreigner does understand it, he cannot carry it out.... [W]e made a big mistake with this resolution... we blocked our own road to further success (Lenin 1980, 418).

This is evidence, this article argues, of a discontinuity – a very large discontinuity – between what most people think Leninism is (the authoritarian, top-down, steel-hard party) and the ‘Leninism’ that Lenin himself thought appropriate for liberal democracies in advanced capitalist societies: party organization that allowed tremendous scope for debate, disagreement and discussion, party organization where the central unit was not the Central Committee, but the local organization, party organization imbued with democracy from top to bottom. The tremendous value of Marcel Liebman’s now classic study, *Leninism under Lenin*, is that he – more than any other author – clearly highlights this discontinuity. The Leninism with which we became acquainted in the liberal democracies of the West was not the Leninism being advocated by, amongst others, Vladimir Lenin.

There is another reason to base this article in large part on Liebman. There is a new and welcome revival of Lenin scholarship that is attempting to peel back the misconceptions and abuses of past analyses, and finally to place our understanding of Lenin in a clear light, one that avoids both demonization and idolatry. Lars T. Lih – insisting on contextualizing the debates of the Russian left, very much in the spirit of Liebman – has written a detailed, scholarly recreation of the context and meaning of the oft-misunderstood *What is to be Done?* (Lih 2006). However, not all scholars are using such an approach. Slavoj Žižek is probably getting more sound bites than any other figure in the new revival of Lenin studies. The difficulty is that Žižek’s interpretation of Lenin repeats many of the mistakes made by Leninists in the 1970s – including a romanticization of the role of the individual – Lenin – and a picture of Leninist organizational theory which shows little sensitivity to the way Lenin himself was aware of the very different kind of party organization required in the liberal-capitalist ‘West.’ Even worse, in his *Revolution at the Gates* (Žižek 2002) he has a confusing and at times insulting section with the appalling title, ‘The Inner Greatness of Stalinism’ (165-336).

In our generation’s revival of Lenin studies we need to bring back the best of the last generation (critical scholarship along the lines of Liebman) and avoid the pitfall of re-linking Lenin to Stalin. This article both

re-introduces a new generation to the careful scholarship of Marcel Liebman, and in so doing paints a picture of the 'pro-fantasy' Lenin about which so little has been developed in the 'Leninism' which made its way to the West. There is a complex and buried lived history of Lenin and the original Leninists that – taken seriously – demands a sharp rethinking of our inherited conception of Leninism, and for those who have been influenced by Leninism, a careful rethinking of what 'Leninism' means in the context of liberal democracies in advanced capitalism.

### **Recontextualizing Lenin**

It is important, Liebman argues, 'not to separate the doctrine from the historical setting in which it arose and developed. An analysis of Leninism must be a *history* of Leninism in its living evolution, and no history of Leninism can be separated from the history of the Russian revolution' (Liebman 1975, 21). By contrast, many 'works concerned with his teachings tend to isolate them from their historical context' (21). When theory and practice are decontextualized and artificially transplanted into extremely different conditions, when party organization is so 'thoroughly imbued with the Russian spirit' that either the non-Russian 'will not understand it' or if s/he understands it 'cannot carry it out', the result is, at best, a caricature.

With this method, we can examine the legendary 'authoritarianism' of Leninist organization. From 1903 on, the Russian socialists were divided into two principal groups, the Bolsheviks (Lenin's section) and the Mensheviks. Up to 1905, the Bolsheviks were organized in an extremely centralized fashion. In particular, the committees 'made up exclusively of professional revolutionaries' had 'almost unlimited powers' in relation to other members of the Party. In selecting local committees and structures, 'the principle of co-option' – that is of leading bodies selecting people, as opposed to having them elected by the membership – 'was applied "from top to bottom"' (44). However, these two characteristics – 'the important role played by the committees, and the absence of any electoral procedure... was characteristic of all Russia's socialist organizations down to 1905' (45). There was nothing specifically 'Leninist' about this – it was simply a question of survival. In later years, two leading Russian socialists – Georgi Plekhanov and Julius Martov – were to become critics of Lenin's methods. But in the early 1900s, these two 'were also agreed in considering that, in the circumstances prevailing in Russia, any revolutionary, or indeed any political organization must depend for its

strength upon centralization; for them, the need for cohesion and secrecy had to be given priority over the desire for large-scale recruiting' (28-29).

The 'circumstances prevailing' would be completely foreign to activists whose experience is confined to liberal democracies in the advanced capitalist world. Russia was an autocracy. Socialist work was carried out underground. Most of the leading members were in exile – in Western Europe if they were lucky, in the misery of Siberia if they were not. Arrests were constant. Liebman, in another of his excellent books, paints an extremely clear picture of the circumstances in which Russian socialists operated.

It was the twentieth century, but at the far side of Europe, Russia was still in many respects in the Middle Ages; poverty and ignorance continued unchecked... In pre-revolutionary Russia, autocracy was... maintained by brute force and often by sheer terror. The Tsarist regime was permanently identified with the negation of all liberties.... [T]he very notion of freedom seemed incompatible with Tsarism. None of the political liberties that had long since been written into Western law existed in Russia before the 1905 Revolution. No opposition of any form was tolerated ... (Liebman 1970, 15-23).

Lenin had 'constant trouble' in getting his paper *Iskra* into the [Russian] empire. Trusted persons returning legally were provided with double-bottomed trunks ... Or there was an outright smuggling through the frontier post'. All of this 'tended to multiply the usual hazards of revolutionary and conspiratorial existence. The archives of the Tsarist police make it clear that they were very well informed as to the identity of many agents ... Frequent arrests disrupted the network' (Ulam 1971, 167-168).

These conditions affected socialists, no matter what their organization. 'As a report by a Russian socialist to the Second International put it, "We fall not only in bloody fights, but also while printing our pamphlets, while selling books, distributing journals and tracts, speaking at meetings, holding conferences ... The average life of a committee is one to two months, that of a paper, one to two issues"' (Liebman 1970, 64).

Economically, Russia was equally far removed from advanced capitalism. The vast majority of the population was made up of peasants, only achieving emancipation from serfdom in the 1860s. Before emancipation, in the first half of the 19th century, serfs had an 'average death rate in excess of 40 per 1,000, a figure more than one-third higher than that of southern slaves [under plantation slavery in pre-civil war United States] and similar to that of Caribbean slaves. Especially appalling

was the mortality of young children... official statistics from Orel province [showed that] 60.9% of the province's recorded deaths in 1858 were of children five and under' (Kolchin 1987, 153).

In Peter Kolchin's magnificent comparative study of serfdom in Russia and plantation slavery in the United States, there is a graphic description of the bitter reality of serf life in winter.

[P]easant huts... were small, and their dominant feature was the stove that served not only as a place to prepare food but more important as a source of heat near – and on – which family members huddled and slept. In summer peasants often escaped their teeming quarters to sleep out of doors 'in hay lofts, in sheds, in the yard,' but most of the year they crowded together for warmth. 'The peasant family in the winter lives in the same hut as its cattle,' wrote one observer, who noted the prevalent 'dampness and stench' as well.... [W]rote another... 'the pregnant, sick, old, and young' rarely ventured far from [the stove in winter] (Kolchin 1987,151).

Liberation from serfdom was an important step, but life in the countryside remained extremely miserable. Semyon Ivanovich Kanatchikov described his 'free peasant' childhood in grim, sardonic, prose.

My early childhood was not accompanied by any particularly outstanding events, unless one counts the fact that I survived; I wasn't devoured by a pig, I wasn't butted by a cow, I didn't drown in a pool, and I didn't die of some infectious disease the way thousands of peasant children perished in those days... my own mother, according to some sources, brought eighteen children into this world – according to others the number was twelve – yet only four of us survived (Kanatchikov 1986, 1).

Kanatchikov was one of hundreds of thousands who left these miserable conditions to migrate to industry and the cities. But for the first generations to escape to the cities, life was still miserable, and far removed from the reality of advanced capitalism.

Our workday at the factory lasted eleven and a half hours, plus a one-and-a-half-hour lunch break. In the beginning I would grow terribly tired so that as soon as I got home from work and ate dinner, I would fall into my filthy, hard, straw-filled sack and sleep like a dead man, despite the myriad bed bugs and fleas.... We rented the apartment communally, as an artel of about fifteen men.... [My] room contained two wooden cots. One belonged to Korovin, my countryman and guardian; the other I shared with Korovin's son Vanka.... All fifteen men ate from a common bowl with wooden spoons. The cabbage soup contained little pieces of meat. First, they would ladle out only the soup then, when the soup was almost all gone, everyone tensely awaited a signal. A



moment later someone would bang his spoon against the edge of the soup basin and say the words we were waiting for: 'Dig in!' Then began the furious hunt of the spoons for the floating morsels of meat. The more dexterous would come up with the most (Kanatchikov 1986, 9).

It has been necessary to spell out in some detail these political, social and economic conditions. Too often they are ignored, or at least under-appreciated. These conditions cannot just be a footnote. An honest theorist has to attempt to assimilate them in their entirety. Without such an attempt, analyses of 'Leninism' are completely one-dimensional, completely formal, scholastic and empty. These are the 'Russian conditions' that Lenin warned would be incomprehensible to 'foreigners'.

Now Lenin, in making this warning, did not indicate exactly which 'foreigners' would have a difficult time 'translating from the Russian.' But we can have no doubt that he was referring to the socialists operating in the advanced capitalist countries – Britain, France and particularly Germany. As early as 1918 he had argued that 'our salvation... is an all-Europe revolution... it is the absolute truth that without a German revolution we are doomed' (Lenin 1977b, 95, 98). He was also aware then – certainly not as clearly as in 1922, but certainly aware – that 'the world socialist revolution cannot begin so easily in the advanced countries as the revolution began in Russia' (Lenin 1977b, 98) that conditions in Germany, France and Britain were quite different from those in Russia: '[I]n a country in which capitalism is developed and has given democratic culture and organisation to everybody, down to the last man... there we are only just approaching the painful period of the beginning of socialist revolutions' (Lenin 1977b, 99).

In his 'too Russian' speech of 1922, he is underlying and amplifying this fact. There could be no straight line drawn between Tsarism and liberal democracy, between Russian economic backwardness and West European economic development. Similarly, there could be no straight line drawn between the organizational conclusions developed by the Russian socialists as a survival mechanism, and the organizational requirements of socialists operating in liberal democracies inside advanced capitalist economies. Given these 'Russian conditions,' who could argue with the need for a tight, top-down, centralized organization? In fact, as was pointed out above, serious socialists did not so argue. The elective principle and open organizational forms did not operate with either the Bolsheviks or the Mensheviks. To do so would have meant infiltration by the secret police, collapse and failure.

### **1905 and the 'democratic centralist moment'**

However – what would happen if these conditions were suddenly to transform into their opposite? That is precisely what happened – briefly – during the revolutionary upsurge of 1905-06, and in that changed context 'Leninism' became unrecognizable.

The revolution of 1905 was a social and political earthquake. The year opened with a horrible massacre, when Tsarist soldiers opened fire on hundreds of thousands of demonstrating workers, killing hundreds. A massive wave of sympathy strikes swept the country, receded, and then exploded again in September with a strike of typesetters, followed by a general strike, followed by the beautiful establishment of the St. Petersburg Soviet, or Workers' Council. Thoroughgoing, city-wide democracy under the leadership of the urban working masses emerged for only the second time in history (the first being the Paris Commune thirty-five years earlier). In this context, Tsarist repression was for a moment swept aside. Public debate was everywhere, the socialist parties could operate openly, exiles could return to Russia, meetings could happen, newspapers could be sold – it was a flowering of freedom never before seen in the country.

'The upheaval in the country in 1905,' writes Liebman,

entailed an upheaval hardly less thoroughgoing in the Party. 'It will be necessary in very many cases to start from the beginning,' Lenin declared in November 1905. This will to renovation found expression in the democratizing of the Party's structures and methods. As Martov testifies, 'the leaders of both factions applied themselves with vigour to getting the elective principle accepted' (Liebman 1975, 49).

The British socialist Tony Cliff documents how this opening up of the party put Lenin up against the very Leninists formed in the earlier period. At the third congress of the Bolshevik Party in the spring of 1905, Lenin lost a vote to open up the party to the newly radicalizing workers:

Most of the delegates to the Congress were committee-men who were opposed to any move which would tend to weaken their authority over the rank and file. Buttressing themselves with quotations from *What is to be Done?* (a text written by Lenin in 1901 and 1902, usually seen as the 'textbook' for those seeking a centralized party based on professional revolutionaries), they called for 'extreme caution' in admitting workers into the committees and condemned 'playing at democracy' (Cliff 1975, 175).

Lenin eventually won the argument – arguing often against ideas he had helped formulate – the gates of the party opened, and a new democratic structure and practice swept aside those of the past:

The Bolshevik congress of 1905 declared in favour of ‘the autonomy of the committees’ in relation to the Central Committee, whose authority was seriously pruned... At the head of the socialist movement in Petersburg a *conference* was placed – an elected body, meeting at least twice a month, subject to re-election every six months, and itself electing the Party Committee in the capital... Lenin recommended that, as a general rule, a ‘referendum in the Party’ should be carried out where any important political question was concerned (Liebman 1975, 50).

Riding the wave of revolution, his party and all the left parties grew impressively. ‘In January 1905, on the eve of the revolution, the Bolshevik organizations had 8,400 members altogether. By the spring of 1906 the total membership of the RSDLP [the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party] stood at 48,000, of whom 34,000 were Bolsheviks and 14,000 Mensheviks. In October the total membership exceeded 70,000’ (47). This revolutionary tide created pressures none of the party leaders could ignore, pressures in particular to end the split between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, a split which had developed in confusing circumstances in 1903. So at Stockholm in 1906, the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks re-united into one socialist organization.

Now, it is not uncommon to recognize ‘discipline’ and ‘centralism’ as features of Leninism. But perhaps the most recognizable phrase in the dictionary of Leninism is the term ‘democratic centralism.’ What few realize is that this term was not developed by Lenin during the period of repression and tight centralization. It was not, in other words, a term used to insist on the necessity of centralism as part of a polemic against too loose an organizational structure and too much democracy. It was a term first introduced in 1906 at the unity Congress, in the period of revolution in 1905 and 1906 as part of a polemic against too much centralism, too tight an organizational structure and too little democracy.

Lenin said, in his report to the 1906 unification congress ‘that there was still work to be done to “really to apply the principles of democratic centralism in Party organization, to work tirelessly to make the local organizations the principal organizational units of the Party in fact and not merely in name, and to see to it that all the higher-standing bodies are elected, accountable and subject to recall.”’ The application of democratic centralism ‘implies universal and full *freedom to criticize*, so long as this

does not disturb the unity *of a definite action*' (Liebman 1975, 51). This didn't just mean criticism in the privacy of internal Party meetings. 'Criticism within the limits of the *principles* of the Party Programme must be quite free... not only at Party meetings, but also at public meetings. Such criticism, or such 'agitation' (for criticism is inseparable from agitation) cannot be prohibited' (Lenin 1978c, 442-443).

For Liebman, Lenin's synthesis of criticism and action is clear: 'Freedom of discussion, unity of action. What still needed to be clarified was, who was to have the power to issue these "calls for action"? ... Lenin's answer was clear: only *the Party Congress* possessed such power. At the same time, however, Lenin thought it was legitimate, in certain circumstances, to "fight ideologically against those decisions of the Congress which we regard as erroneous"' (Liebman 1975, 51-52).

This insistence on openness and democracy really should not be surprising. The construction of a socialist organization is part of a counter-hegemonic project. The hegemony it is countering is one where centralism is ubiquitous. This is embedded in the structures of the economy, which are organized in a completely centralized, hierarchical, anti-democratic fashion. There is, however, the important reality of democracy in formal state structures. This is a product of generations of struggle. But this democracy is kept within very strict limits, too often being more formal than real. Given the authoritarian nature of the private, capitalist economy and the restricted nature of formal, political democracy, it is not surprising that apathy, deference, subservience and passivity are everyday realities of life under capitalism. Under conditions of autocracy they are enforced through coercion. But since the time of Gramsci, we have become all too aware of the way in which they can, in liberal democracies, be just as easily – and sometimes more easily – enforced through consent. This then reinforces the centralism that is also ubiquitous. Apathy, deference, subservience and passivity are necessary accompaniments to centralism and hierarchy. We see this everywhere. Bureaucratic decision-making in the state apparatus is a completely hierarchical, centralized process. Churches are built from the top down. Unions again and again evolve into centralized, undemocratic, bureaucratically-run machines. The truth is, we get very little exposure to consultation and democracy in the normal course of life in capitalist society. Centralism is part of our DNA. Democracy is not. It should not be surprising, then, that when possible, a counter-hegemonic political project needs to put a strong emphasis upon creating and nurturing democratic structures.

This was certainly the orientation for the Lenin shaped by the Revolution of 1905. But this aspect of Lenin's practice – the insistence on local autonomy, on freedom of criticism (in public and in private), on frequent elections and frequent meetings to make actual the accountability of elected committees – this aspect of Lenin's practice is almost never mentioned, let alone analyzed. Perhaps this is because centralism comes much easier to those whose only experience is that of capitalism. Centralism is the easy part. Democracy is what it will take a fight to achieve. Whatever the reason, Liebman's book was, and is, an indispensable corrective to a century of Leninology.

### **Tsarism and Stalinism**

Among the reasons for the silencing of the democratic, 'pro-fantasy' Lenin, two in particular need to be highlighted. The first is the overwhelming weight of the life experiences of Lenin and his generation, experiences dominated by conditions that demanded harsh centralism in organization questions. The second is the long night of Stalinism. A particularly authoritarian version of 'Leninism' was the perfect party organizational counterpart to the extreme totalitarianism of Stalin's Russia.

In terms of Lenin's life experiences, the difficulties confronting socialists in Russia have already been outlined. Lenin was introduced to politics through the execution of his brother, had the 'luxury' of working out his political economy because of the peace and quiet of exile in Siberia, and spent most of his pre-revolutionary life in exile to escape from the Tsarist police. The 1905-1906 flowering of *de facto* political liberty was an all too-brief window into open, public, democratic organizing. First in Moscow, in the savage repression which followed the armed uprising in December 1905, and then by stages elsewhere in the country, reaction began to reassert itself. By 1907, the tsarist regime was on the offensive, rolling back the workers' gains, and the impact was staggering. Socialist organizations inside Russia were infiltrated by the secret police, and shattered. Many socialists – including Lenin – had to return to exile, where most lived in abject poverty, despair and isolation (Cliff 1975, 235-252). In such conditions, talk of the elective principle, frequent meetings, wide-scale recruitment and all the other accoutrements of the 'democratic centralist moment' were impossible. The party survived this period, rebuilt itself during the working class upsurge of 1912-14, only to be again forced underground during the horror of world war. It was, in other words, a party forged in conditions unimaginable to socialists in today's liberal

democracies. Not surprisingly, the organizational forms the Russian socialists had to adopt were harsh, and, to our eyes, 'authoritarian.' In a certain sense this 'authoritarianism' is not the surprising thing. How could it be otherwise, in a situation where any 'openness' would be exploited by the repressive state? What is surprising, is that in the brief 'democratic centralist moment' of 1905-1906, Lenin absolutely enthusiastically reached towards decentralization and democracy, and that again even in the harsh 1922 conditions in a workers' state surrounded by hostile imperialism, he could see clearly the need not to mechanically transplant organizational norms appropriate to Russian Tsarism onto the democratic, advanced capitalist stage of Western Europe.

Given the weight of a lifetime's experience, where democracy was a luxury and centralism a necessity, it is perhaps understandable that Lenin's 'democratic centralist' moment has been obscured. But by the time Lenin was trying to revive this democratic centralism, making an argument that liberal democracies required a different kind of 'Leninism' than had been appropriate in Russia, a new factor had emerged. Josef Stalin was gathering the forces around himself that were eventually to drown the gains of the Russian Revolution in blood, and install a monstrous dictatorship in its place. It was in November and December 1922 that Lenin wrote the lines warning the foreign communists about the 'too Russian' organizational norms being thrust upon them. But Lenin was a very sick man, and he had new and powerful enemies.

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On May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1922, Lenin suffered his first crisis of arteriosclerosis: his right hand and leg became paralyzed and his speech impaired. After a long convalescence, he returned to work in the first days of October 1922. On December 13<sup>th</sup> another attack forced Lenin to retire definitively. On March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1923, after an attack that occurred three days earlier, he finally lost the power of speech. He died on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1924. Behind these dates and details of Lenin's health, however, lies 'Lenin's last struggle', which was a struggle not only against illness but also, and above all, for Leninism and socialism. And never did Lenin the fighter have to fight harder or in more painful circumstances (Liebman 1975, 417-18).

As Lenin battled for his life, Stalin manoeuvred to undermine his authority, and to prevent his writings from being made public. One of the defining political issues of Lenin's life had been his insistence on the right of the oppressed national minorities, in Russia and elsewhere, to assert their own cultural and political autonomy and independence. For Lenin this was a hallmark of both self-determination and socialism. Any left project was a

dead letter without it. From his sick bed, he became alarmed at the repression being levelled by Stalin against the oppressed nationalities in the Caucasus. In spite of being 'up against a persistent refusal to co-operate...'

He did indeed fight, wresting information and concessions from those in control of him, and preparing, bit by bit, an immense report, which he intended for the Party congress that was soon to take place... [W]hen, by a miracle of effort, Lenin managed to dictate some articles and notes, he had to fight again to get the Party leadership to publish the material that he sent to Pravda. In the Political Bureau they even discussed having a single copy of Pravda printed for Lenin's benefit, containing an article he wanted published but which they would have preferred not to make known to the general public.... Cut off... from the outside world, isolated and spied upon, it was against Stalin that Lenin was waging the most furious, most desperate but also most significant of all his struggles. What was at stake was nothing less than whether or not he would succeed in changing the course being followed by the Soviet state in a number of vital areas: bureaucratic degeneration, the excessive power wielded by the future dictator, and tendencies towards oppression of the national minorities (Liebman 1975, 419).

Lenin lost this fight, and it was left to Leon Trotsky, his closest collaborator after 1917, to continue the struggle to preserve the real lessons of the Russian Revolution from their perversion at the hands of Stalin and the state capitalist ruling class he represented.

### **'Too Russian'**

As Stalin reinforced authoritarianism inside the Soviet Union, a parallel reinforcement of authoritarianism took place in the Communist Parties that looked to Russia for inspiration. This is a complicated story, whose outlines can only be sketched in this short article.

The organizational theses cited above – the theses that Lenin warned were 'too Russian' – were introduced to the Third Congress of the Communist International, July 12, 1921. But they were really an after-thought. At that Congress, the leading members of the Russian movement were preoccupied with other, much more pressing questions. An ultraleft and voluntarist leadership (encouraged by some leading members of the Russian Party) had captured control of much of the European communist movement, leading to a catastrophe in the 'March actions' in Germany. In March of 1921, the German Communist Party (KPD) – a real mass party with some 400,000 members (Cliff 1990, 225) – attempted a workers'

uprising, even though only a minority of the working class followed its lead. 'The inevitable collapse of the adventure was followed by a savage repression. The KPD was outlawed. Membership fell catastrophically to 150,000 or less and thousands of militants were imprisoned,' (Hallas 1985, 64) and 'tens of thousands lost their jobs' (Cliff 1990, 225). Given that the KPD was the most important communist organization outside Russia, and given that both Lenin and Trotsky were convinced that without workers' power in Germany, their situation in Russia was hopeless, this catastrophe understandably dominated the Third Congress of the Comintern, meeting as it did in the wake of these terrible events.

'A purely mechanical conception of proletarian revolution' wrote Leon Trotsky in a summation of the main lessons of the Third Congress, 'has led certain groups of comrades to construe theories which are false to the core: the false theory of an initiating minority which by its heroism shatters "the wall of universal passivity" among the proletariat. The false theory of uninterrupted offensives ... the false theory of partial battles which are waged by applying the methods of armed insurrection' (Trotsky 1972a, 295-296). For Trotsky, socialism 'can be gained only by the skilled conduct of battles and, above all, by first conquering the majority of the working class. This is the main lesson of the Third Congress' (296). In this summation of the key lessons of the Third Congress, Trotsky does not even mention the organizational question. In a separate speech on the same subject, he mentions it once, but only in passing. The key thing at the Third Congress was not party organization, but rather explaining to an impatient newly radicalized generation that it was necessary sometimes to 'strategically retreat':

In the March days [in Germany in 1921] – and I say this quite openly – we did not have behind us one-fifth or even one-sixth of the working class and we suffered a defeat... [A]fter such a defeat we must retreat... We must say to the working class... on the basis of facts we have become convinced that in this struggle we had only one-sixth of the workers behind us. But we must number at least four-sixths or two-thirds, in order to seriously think of victory; and to this end we must develop and safeguard those mental, spiritual, material and organizational forces which are our bonds with the class... [T]his signifies a strategic retreat for the sake of preparation (Trotsky 1972b, 308-309).

Here Trotsky was developing a strategic orientation that was to emerge in full flower in, what is for socialists today, the most important of the early congresses of the Communist International, the Fourth Congress. At this congress – the last where Trotsky and Lenin played a role, and the last



Congress not to be twisted and distorted by the baneful influence of Stalinism – the delegates formulated in clear and persuasive fashion the ‘united front tactic’:

The united front tactic is simply an initiative whereby the Communists propose to join with all workers belonging to other parties and groups and all unaligned workers in a common struggle to defend the immediate, basic interests of the working class against the bourgeoisie.... It is particularly important when using the united front tactic to achieve not just agitational but also organizational results. Every opportunity must be used to establish organizational footholds among the working masses themselves... The main aim of the united front tactic is to unify the working masses through agitation and organization. The real success of the united front tactic depends on a movement ‘from below,’ from the rank-and-file of the working masses. Nevertheless, there are circumstances in which Communists must not refuse to have talks with the leaders of the hostile workers’ parties, providing the masses are always kept fully informed of the course of these talks (Trotsky 1983a, 396).

This amounted to a complete turn in the orientation of radical socialists around the world. It was the magnificent obsession of Trotsky and Lenin to facilitate this turn. It was part of the enormous effort to make the political practices forged in conditions in Tsarist Russia closer to the Third World rather than the First, relevant to socialists operating in advanced capitalist societies, often in a situation of liberal democracy. In the context, this meant arguing for a ‘retreat’ from the extreme ‘leftism’ of the first years of the revolution. Hence at the Third Congress, they had a division of labour, Trotsky explaining the case for a ‘retreat’ in Western Europe, and Lenin explaining the case for a ‘retreat’ inside Russia. Trotsky’s report was ‘Theses of the Third World Congress on the International Situation’ (Trotsky 1983b, 184-203). Lenin’s report was ‘Theses for a Report on the Tactics of the RCP’ (Lenin 1983, 203-210), where he was intently focussed on explaining the transition to ‘state capitalism’ in the direction of the new Russian state – a transition made necessary by the devastation of civil war and foreign intervention.

These reports by Trotsky and Lenin were the critical documents of the Congress. There is little evidence that either of them paid very much attention to the question of party organization. The theses seem to have been drafted by a Finnish communist, Otto Kuusinen with some involvement from the Hungarian Béla Kun.<sup>1</sup> The job of delivering the

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to John Riddell for assistance in sorting out the details by which the organizational report was prepared and delivered.

report to the Congress was given to a German by the name of Wilhelm Koenen. But the involvement of Koenen, Kun and others in the preparation and delivery of this quite important report, raises some real questions.

Koenen was an individual of minor importance in the history of that tumultuous epoch. He had been on the executive of the Independent Social Democrats (USPD) in 1920. The majority of that very large party voted in October 1920 to join the German communists (Deutscher 1977, 50). It is perhaps his affiliation with the USPD majority that temporarily pushed Koenen into the spotlight. He would soon return to the obscurity from which he came. By 1924 he was out of the German communist party, and there is some suspicion that he had been one of the 'corrupt leaders' of the USPD.<sup>2</sup>

There is another aspect to Koenen's role that is worth noting. According to Koenen, the report that he delivered on 10 July 1921 'was assigned to me only in the course of the last week.' The person who was to have originally given the report was the Hungarian Béla Kun (Koenen n.d.). But why would Kun be given any leadership role at this Congress? The disastrous March Action, which had crushed the KPD in Germany, was in large measure carried out under his watch. Béla Kun had been 'Zinoviev's emissary' according to Tony Cliff (1990, 224). Grigory Zinoviev was chairman of the Comintern's executive committee and had been the leading proponent of the 'theory of the offensive' which led to the cataclysm of the March Action (Broué 1964). But Zinoviev too was not put out to pasture after what should have been a disgrace, but remained as chairman of the Comintern's executive committee. Further, it is largely due to Zinoviev that Koenen's report was passed. The first speaker to follow Koenen was a delegate from Switzerland who said that the report was 'an unsuitable basis for discussion.' He called the report 'eighteen pages of mishmash, which does indeed contain some good ideas, but is kept so vague, so blurred, that it does not deserve the name 'Theses' at all.' He moved 'to reject these Theses without discussion.' But Zinoviev intervened immediately, made a few demagogic points in support of Koenen,

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<sup>2</sup> In conversation with Heinrich Brandler, who had been a leader of the KPD in the 1920s, Deutscher asks: 'How much truth was there in Trotsky's view, expressed somewhere, that already in the Lenin period, around 1920, Zinoviev introduced the corruption of leaders of foreign parties as a matter of course? At first Brandler confirms this without reservation, and mentions the names of corrupt leaders of the independents, among them the name of Koenen' (Deutscher 1977, 50).

reminded the delegates 'that we are very tired,' and won the delegates to adopt the theses (Koenen n.d.).

This is a strange tale. Theses which were to become iconic in 'Leninist' organizing, were delivered by a minor figure from the German party, taking over from Béla Kun who should have been a disgraced ex-leader after his conduct in the March Action, and saved in the end by Gregory Zinoviev, another Comintern leader whose recent actions should have disqualified him from any leadership role. This is the context in which the Third Congress of the Comintern voted to accept the theses on organization, a bizarrely detailed text, with fifty-eight subsections, that include among other items, a universal prescription for weekly meetings, the 'duty to make reports,' the universal appropriateness of a factory cell structure for local organizing, and the need for 'enthusiastic' involvement in party campaigns. Perhaps this level of detail was felt necessary because of the inexperience of the young activists who had recently joined the Communist Parties in the west. Perhaps it reflected the obsessions of Koenen. We can only speculate. What we do know is that, in contrast to the sensitive and careful reports of Lenin and Trotsky, it reads like the worst kind of formalism and schematism, and has all the hallmarks of a report hastily thrown together and hastily passed. Lenin and Trotsky, the pre-eminent leaders of the early Comintern, were understandably pre-occupied with bigger questions.

Now as in all reflections on history, it is best not to judge actors at one point in time with lessons that could only be learned years later. It is probable that at the time, the full measure of the March catastrophe had yet to be absorbed. That is why Trotsky was bending every effort to explain the seriousness of the situation – precisely because it was not understood. It is also the case that if in 1922 Lenin was to see these theses as 'too Russian,' in 1921 he did not yet see the problem. That year, in letters addressed to authors of the thesis – including Koenen – Lenin had said that he read the 'draft theses on the organizational question with great pleasure. I think you have done a very good job' (Lenin 1977a, 318). If one of the bizarre features of the theses is its incessant detail, Lenin's direction was to add even more!

There is another road that this analysis could take. For obvious reasons, the focus of Lenin, Trotsky and the other socialists in Russia had been on overthrowing Tsarism and challenging capitalism in their own country, a country of peasants, illiteracy, autocracy and impoverishment. The fact that even after the catastrophe of March 1921, key architects of that catastrophe like Zinoviev and Béla Kun could be allowed leadership

roles 'directing' the new Communist International, is quite possibly an indication that Lenin, Trotsky and other leaders of the Comintern did not really appreciate a) the scale of the disaster that had unfolded; b) the ill-suited nature of the authoritarian directives which had come down from the Comintern to the German KPD; and c) the way in which both of those exposed the chasm which separated conditions in Germany from conditions in Russia. March 1921, in other words, was part of the harsh reality-check that Bolshevism encountered in its difficult move from autocratic semi-feudal Russia to capitalist and (sometimes) democratic Europe.<sup>3</sup>

If these elements weren't clear in 1921, they were quite a bit clearer one year later. By 1922 Lenin and Trotsky were starkly aware of the extent of the terrible isolation they faced. Lenin (as indicated above) and Trotsky had always been cognizant of the fact that without a revolution in the advanced countries, their revolution was doomed. But only with the defeat of the March Action did it become clear how difficult this new wave of revolution was going to be, and only after some months had passed did the scale of the catastrophe that the March Action had wreaked on the KPD and the prospects for socialism become apparent. And with their attention focussed on this huge difficulty, the gulf that separated the organizational measures appropriate to 'Russian conditions' and those appropriate to Western European conditions, became all too clear.

So when one year later, in preparing for the Fourth Congress, Lenin turned his attention again to the Kuusinen/Koenen/Kun report, he was horrified. His reaction to this document was completely different from his cursory praise of it the year previous. In the context of debilitating illness, Lenin was struggling on two fronts – to win the communist movement to the united front tactic, and to combat the Stalinist degeneration of his own party. It is clear that he saw a link between these two issues and the organization report passed just the previous year. He prefaces his remarks to the Congress by apologizing for the brevity of his speech: 'you will understand that after my lengthy illness I am not able to make a long report.' But in this short report, 'Five Years of the Russian Revolution and the Prospects of the World Revolution,' he devotes almost one-fifth of it to a criticism of Koenen's organizational document. Lenin concludes his report with the condemnation of the document, cited above: '[W]e made a big mistake with this resolution... we blocked our own road to further

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<sup>3</sup> The account of the Comintern's negative role in the catastrophe of the March Action is based on Pierre Broué's magnificent *The German Revolution: 1917-1923* (2006).

success,' and then urges Comintern members everywhere to approach this question with a critical perspective:

[O]ur most important task today is to study and to study hard. Our foreign comrades, too, must study.... [F]irst of all, among other things they must learn to understand what we have written about the organizational structure of the Communist Parties, and what the foreign comrades have signed without reading and understanding. This must be their first task.... The resolution is too Russian, it reflects Russian experience. That is why it is quite unintelligible to foreigners, and they cannot be content with hanging it in a corner like an icon and praying to it. Nothing will be achieved that way. They must assimilate part of the Russian experience. Just how that will be done, I do not know (Lenin 1980, 431).

These are not peripheral comments by Lenin. They are his central remarks in one of his last public appearances, words wrenched out of a dying body, appealing to his followers 'to study' and to not hang the organizational resolution 'in a corner like an icon and praying to it.'<sup>4</sup>

He lost this battle. The formalistic, schematic 'too Russian' precepts for organization were in fact fossilized into an icon. Critical study of them was made almost impossible. The Leninism that emerged onto the stage of history was exactly the caricature that Lenin had feared.

But this caricature was useful to the dictatorship that was in formation. At the Fifth Congress – the first one without Lenin, and with the campaign against Trotsky now in full swing – one of the key decisions was to 'bolshevize' the non-Russian communist parties. The context was the emergence of the 'troika' of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin as the heirs of the now deceased Lenin. The 'bolshevization' amounted to making universal, the authoritarian methods of the underground Bolsheviks, regardless of conditions prevailing in other countries – including liberal democracies in the advanced capitalist world. In this, Koenen's schematic theses were quite useful. The parties were to be tightly run, bureaucratically centralized operations, sections of an international party, headed of course by the Russian. The hymn to centralism by James Cannon, cited earlier, was in the context of defending this 'bolshevization' to his co-thinkers in the United States. British socialist Duncan Hallas very clearly captures the essence of this campaign:

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<sup>4</sup> His last public speech was delivered 22 November 1922 (Lewin 1973, 4). The speech quoted here was delivered 04 November 1922.

‘Bolshevisation’ was the watchword of the fifth congress of the Comintern in June-July 1924. It was the precise counterpart to the cult of the dead Lenin in the USSR and its actual content was the same: unqualified submission to the Troika as the supposed guardians of Leninist orthodoxy and hostility to all critical voices, above all to Trotsky. Naturally, this ‘Leninism’ had nothing in common with the spirit of Lenin’s own politics (Hallas 1985, 106).

Fernando Claudin, in his monumental history of the Comintern, describes the baneful effect this had inside Communist Parties around the world. ‘The campaign for “Bolshevization” of the Communist parties which began in 1924 was expressed in the German party, as in the others, by a strengthening of bureaucratic centralism and a rejection of national realities’ (Claudin 1975, 141). At the end, the Stalinist dictatorship had at its disposal disciplined, authoritarian parties which tragically combined sometimes brilliant work in their own working classes, with subservience to the twists and turns of the new Russian ruling class – all in the name of a perversion of the actual meaning of the term ‘democratic centralism.’

## Conclusion

The Stalinist Parties that selectively seized the authoritarian Leninism of the underground period and ignored the democratic Leninism of the revolutionary period – these parties have largely been swept from the stage of history. Liebman’s book is a scholarly, comprehensive and devastatingly persuasive critique of that Stalinist ‘moment.’ His work is the necessary starting point for a reconceptualization of Lenin for socialists in the twenty-first century. But if the Stalinist parties are gone, one-sided and ‘too Russian’ interpretations of Leninism are not their exclusive preserve – such interpretations are ubiquitous. None of the quotes from Lenin here are from secret archives. All of them are widely accessible on the web, and before the rise of the Internet were widely available in the Collected Works of Lenin. But this Lenin – the pro-fantasy Lenin who warned about the dangers of a ‘too Russian’ translation of the Russian Revolutionary experience – this Lenin is almost never cited. The silence on this Lenin, and the amplification of the *What Is To Be Done* Lenin (itself in a caricatured form, as Lars T. Lih has so forcefully indicated) speaks volumes about the way in which Leninism migrated to the Western World.

This article began by counterposing the approach of Liebman to that of Žižek, suggesting that we need more Liebman and less Žižek in the Lenin Studies which is developing in our century. Elsewhere I have written a longer critique of Žižek’s Leninism (Kellogg, 2008). For my purposes

here, it is enough to assert that Žižek needs to not promote the 'Inner Greatness of Stalinism' but seriously to engage with the 'Inner Bankruptcy of Stalinism' so clearly demonstrated by Marcel Liebman among others. Liebman concludes his book by outlining this bankruptcy, and it is an appropriate place to conclude this article:

Of course... [Stalin and Stalinism] dressed themselves up in the finery of dialectics... But although Stalinist practice often referred to dialectics... Stalinist dialectics was merely the ideological cover for the ramblings of a short-sighted pragmatism. If Stalinism is Leninism plus administrative tyranny and plus bureaucratic terror, it is also Leninism minus dialectics. It is thus Leninism impoverished by being deprived of that leaven which has made of it, even in its mistakes, and in spite of its failures, one of the richest sources of inspiration in the fight for socialism, one of the most fruitful contributions to men's [sic] struggle for their emancipation (Liebman 1975, 448).

To fully appreciate and apply this contribution will require the socialist generation of this century to rediscover the democratic Leninism for too long obscured by the romanticization of Leninist centralism and authoritarianism.

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*SPECIAL SECTION ON RETHINKING LENINISM*

## **Strategy, Meta-strategy and Anti-capitalist Activism** Rethinking Leninism by Re-reading Lenin

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### **Abstract**

Whereas Marxism is a theory, or rather a cluster of theories, Leninism is something else: a political strategy. And as Lenin himself pointed out, strategies are neither true nor false, but only effective or ineffective, depending largely on the context within which they are carried out. In the context of today's North America, however, the adoption by radical activists of the standard Leninist norms for anti-capitalist organizing would be counter-productive. What is needed now is a very different approach: a strategy of *attrition*, as Lenin would have said, rather than a strategy of *overthrow*. This article concludes by sketching an attrition strategy for contemporary anti-capitalist activism.

### **Résumé**

Tandis que le marxisme est une théorie, ou plutôt un agrégat de théories, le léninisme est autre chose: une stratégie politique. Et, comme Lénine lui-même l'a souligné, les stratégies sont ni vraies ni fausses, mais seulement efficaces ou pas efficaces, en fonction du contexte dans lequel elles sont mises en œuvre. Toutefois, dans le contexte de l'Amérique du Nord d'aujourd'hui, l'adoption par des activistes radicaux des normes léninistes habituelles pour des mobilisations anti-capitalistes serait contre-productive. Une approche très différente est désormais nécessaire: une stratégie d'*usure*, comme Lénine l'aurait dit, au lieu d'une stratégie de *renversement*. Cet article conclut en esquissant une stratégie d'usure pour l'activisme anti-capitaliste contemporain.

### **Keywords**

• Lenin • strategy • anti-capitalism • revolution • activism

### **Mots clés**

• Lénine • stratégie • anti-capitalisme • révolution • activisme

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Whereas Marxism is primarily a theory, or rather a cluster of theories, Leninism is something else: a political strategy. More specifically, Leninism is a political strategy for organizing radicals in pursuit of anti-capitalist revolution. In this paper I want to suggest a differentiated way of thinking about the kind of strategy proposed by Lenin. My aim is not historical. I make very little attempt to situate Lenin's thinking in its original social context. Rather, my aim is forward-looking and political. I want to clarify the relevance of Lenin's strategic framework for today's anti-capitalist activism.

I say 'anti-capitalist activism,' rather than 'socialist activism,' for two reasons. First, today many of those who identify as 'socialists,' especially those who adopt the label 'democratic socialists,' do not actually advocate an egalitarian post-capitalist economic democracy, but only an expansive welfare state variant of capitalism. For these socialists, questions of revolutionary strategy such as those addressed in this paper do not arise at all. Second, and conversely, many of those who today advocate dismantling capitalism and replacing it with an egalitarian post-capitalist economic democracy do not use the word 'socialism' to designate their project, preferring terms like 'participatory economics' (Albert 2000), 'equitable cooperation' (Hahnel 2005), 'a self-governing society' (Devine 1988), 'economic democracy' (Schweickart 2002), 'communalism' (Bookchin 2002), and so on. My concern is revolutionary strategy – the development of a strategy for defeating capitalism and replacing it with a democratic and egalitarian post-capitalist alternative – and it is the expression 'anti-capitalism' rather than 'socialism' that most lucidly and unambiguously picks out the relevant political project (Callinicos 2003). Nevertheless, if by 'socialism' one means 'egalitarian post-capitalist economic democracy,' everything that I say about 'anti-capitalist activism' may be taken to apply to 'socialist activism.'

Given the distance that separates the situation of revolutionaries in Lenin's time and context from the predicament of their counterparts in contemporary North America, extracting insights from Lenin's work to guide today's anti-capitalist revolutionaries is no simple matter, and here I propose to proceed in a new way. In essence, my proposal is to divide Lenin's strategic thinking into two levels, which I call the *first-order* and the *second-order* levels, respectively. It is not a distinction to which Lenin draws attention. But it is operative or 'at work' in what he says, and we can better understand what he does say if we keep the distinction in mind, as I hope to show.

As I use these terms, first-order strategic analysis proposes direct guidelines or prescriptions for political action, whereas second-order strategic analysis proposes guidelines not for political *action*, but for strategy development itself. Second-order strategic analysis, in short, does not propose strategies; it proposes general criteria for *choosing among* strategies, for counting some strategies as sound and others as ill-considered. This first-order/second-order distinction calls attention to the difference, as we might also put it, between pragmatically determined *strategy* and social-theoretically determined *meta-strategy*.

Consider a quick example, to clarify the contrast. If I suggest that a campaign of escalating disruptive direct action will force local politicians to reconsider their plans to implement a certain controversial measure, I am proposing a *first-order strategy*<sup>1</sup>, designed to guide the conduct of a conflict toward a successful outcome for one side. But suppose I instead suggest that the way to choose between rival strategic proposals is to identify the balance of forces between advocates and adversaries of the controversial measure, and to opt in favour of *whichever* proposed course of action (or first-order strategy) would maximize the capacity of the measure's opponents to resist its implementation, and minimize the capacity of the measure's advocates to carry out its implementation. This second suggestion makes a proposal on a different level altogether, the 'second-order' or 'meta-strategic' level. On its own it tells us nothing about what is to be done. It does not itself propose or constitute a strategy but rather offers guidelines for directing the development or selection of a suitable strategy.

In what follows, I begin by elucidating both Lenin's *first-order* revolutionary strategy, which is usually called 'Leninism,' and his *second-order* analysis of how to develop or choose a first-order strategy under various circumstances. I then review Lenin's distinction (borrowed from Karl Kautsky) between *strategies of attrition* and *strategies of overthrow*. Against this background, I then suggest that Lenin's second-order meta-strategy implies that anti-capitalist activism *in our own time* should repudiate first-order Leninism, which is a strategy of overthrow, in favour

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<sup>1</sup> By 'strategy,' I mean an action-guiding proposal for how to mobilize political capacities (forces, resources, opportunities) and deploy political tactics (strikes, demonstrations, civil disobedience, public advocacy campaigns, and so on) in order to achieve an outcome favourable to one side in a conflict. Tactics are methods used to advance a strategy. Note that a tactic can be either brief in duration (like a protest march) or extended over many years (like publishing a monthly magazine). Strategies, too, can be short-range (like an insurrectionary strategy) or long-range (like a protracted guerrilla warfare strategy).

of a strategy of attrition. Finally turning my attention to today's anti-capitalist movement, I briefly outline the elements of a strategy of anti-capitalist attrition, as a first-order revolutionary strategy for our own non-revolutionary times, which deviates from Lenin's first-order strategy precisely because it complies with his meta-strategy.

### **Lenin's Principles of Strategy and Meta-Strategy**

When one says 'Leninism,' one does not usually mean Lenin's world-view, with its 'copy' theory of knowledge (Lenin 1909), its 'dialectical materialism' (Lenin 1914), its progress-relativist theory of morality (Lenin 1920c), its 'labour aristocracy' theory of opportunism (Lenin 1917a), and so on. Rather, by 'Leninism' one usually means only the first-order revolutionary strategy proposed by Lenin, especially as this took its mature shape, and to some extent underwent a certain codification, in the context of the early congresses of the Communist International.

No doubt, some will object to my account – or to any particular account – of first-order Leninism, but I believe that a relatively uncontroversial characterization of some of the key elements of this first-order strategy can be stated in the form of *six strategic principles* for revolutionary activism plus one grand-strategic *line of march*. By 'grand strategy' I mean an overall account of the character of the revolutionary project in a particular time and place, which prescribes a particular developmental trajectory for the revolutionary movement: a wide-lens story of how we get from here to there. Lenin's grand-strategic line of march looks to the global working class, with its strategically sensitive location at the centre of the capitalist mode of production, to be the leading force of a broader anti-capitalist alliance of workers with the impoverished peasantry and other exploited 'intermediate classes.' This alliance, led by the political forces of a hegemonic working class, would pursue an ambitious transformative project, with two aspects. First, it would bring to completion by revolutionary means the democratic agenda that had been abandoned by capitalism's elites, including displacing autocratic regimes with democratic republics under universal suffrage, securing equal civil rights for all citizens, redistributing land to the peasants, and winning self-determination for oppressed nations. Second, it would use state power to push the democratic revolution – either very quickly (see Lenin 1917b) or in a later stage of an extended revolutionary process (see Lenin 1905) – to burst the bounds of liberal capitalism and undertake the expropriation of the capitalist class and the construction of a post-capitalist, socialist

political and economic order on a global scale. This grand strategy is not central to my argument in this paper, since what is most distinctive about Lenin's first-order strategy is its particular set of *organizational* prescriptions, not its prescriptions about the overall line of march for working-class revolution against capitalism, a grand strategy that was in its essentials already articulated by Marx and Engels (1848). The six (largely organizational) strategic principles that comprise the most distinctive and controversial elements of Lenin's first-order strategy are as follows:

1. First, that the organizational form of the *political party* should be the central vehicle for leading the anti-capitalist movement, rather than, say, unions or cooperatives, as proposed by some syndicalists, anarchists and others (Lenin 1920b).
2. Second, that the party should be a party of the most *advanced* activists in the workers' movement, rather than a party of the working class as a whole, contrary to the views of radical social democrats in our contemporary sense (Lenin 1904).
3. Third, that the party should be *centralist* in matters of practical policy, not pluralist (Lenin 1921).
4. Fourth, that the party's centralism should be regulated by a *command-and-control hierarchy* of party governance, with lower level bodies acting under the direction of higher level bodies (Lenin 1904).
5. Fifth, that the party should try to participate in and exert influence on *mass organizations* of the workers' movement (such as unions and cooperatives), rather than to construct revolutionary alternatives to those organizations (Lenin 1920a).
6. And, finally, sixth, that the party's work ought to be integrated into, and ideally coordinated directly with, a wider process of global anti-capitalist revolution, in the form of *organized and disciplined internationalism*, of the sort typified by the early Communist International (Lenin 1920d).

This, I take it, comprises the core of Lenin's first-order revolutionary strategy. These six principles (joined to the grand strategy sketched above) are enough to bring into focus the outlines of Lenin's strategy, with its familiar picture of a global workers' movement led by its so-called vanguard of radical activists, who are organized into a democratic centralist party, disciplined internally, but also internationally, by the norm of unity in action. *This* is 'Leninism.'

And yet, there is more to Lenin's overall strategic framework than can be gleaned directly from this first-order strategy. And our reception of first-order Leninism ought to be informed by an appreciation of Lenin's thinking on strategy choice and strategy development, that is, by an appreciation of his second-order meta-strategy.

For my purposes, five of Lenin's meta-strategic principles stand out as especially important.

1. First, that the criterion of soundness in matters of strategy is not *epistemic correctness* (truth), but *pragmatic efficacy* (Lenin 1906).
2. Second, that pragmatic soundness is always *context-relative*, in the sense that a strategy that is sound in one context may be unsound in another (Lenin 1906).
3. Third, that the crucial contextual variable in assessing revolutionary strategies is, precisely, the *balance of forces* between the contending classes and their allied social forces (Lenin 1910).
4. Fourth, that as long as the balance of forces favours the ruling class and its allied social forces, the revolutionary struggle must be *preparatory* in nature, and hence *protracted and asymmetrical*, but as soon as the balance of forces favours the oppositional class and its allied forces, so that a rapid and fundamental strategic reversal seems possible, the struggle passes from a *preparatory* into a *critical* phase (Lenin 1910).
5. Fifth, that the strategic orientation appropriate to *protracted and asymmetrical* struggle, that is, to the *preparatory* phase of anti-capitalist struggle, is that of an *attrition* strategy, whereas the strategic orientation appropriate to the *critical* phase of anti-capitalist struggle is that of an *overthrow* strategy (Lenin 1910).

I take it that some of these points are self-evident, and require no special comment, notably the first three of Lenin's second-order principles, which jointly constitute a doctrine that we may call 'strategic contextualism': that strategies are neither true nor false, but only effective or ineffective; that effectiveness depends crucially on socio-political context; and that the decisive feature of the social context is the balance of power between the ruling class and the exploited and oppressed masses. But some of Lenin's meta-strategic principles make reference to political debates and strategic concepts that are less well-known, notably the distinction between *preparatory* and *crisis* phases of the anti-capitalist struggle and the further and related distinction between *attrition* and *overthrow* strategies.

### **Attrition and Overthrow**

Lenin's distinction between 'attrition' and 'overthrow' originated in the discourse of the German military historian Hans Delbrück (1848-1929). According to Delbrück, a strategy of overthrow (*Niederwerfungsstrategie*) proceeds by seeking out opportunities to confront the enemy directly in order to defeat it in decisive battles by overpowering its capacity to resist. A strategy of attrition (*Ermattungsstrategie*), by contrast, attempts to avoid or delay such decisive battles, usually because these cannot yet be won, and seeks instead to exploit every opportunity to strengthen the forces of the weaker side and to weaken those of their stronger enemy (Craig 1986). These terms, and the contrast between them, were borrowed from Delbrück and introduced into debates about socialist strategy by Karl Kautsky in 1910. Kautsky explained the distinction as follows:

Modern military science [viz., Delbrück] distinguishes between two kinds of strategy: the strategy of overthrow and the strategy of attrition. The former draws its forces rapidly together in order to go to meet the enemy and to deal decisive blows by means of which the enemy is overthrown and rendered incapable of struggle. In the attrition strategy, the commander-in-chief initially avoids any decisive battle; he aims to keep the opposing army on the move by all sorts of manoeuvres, without giving it the opportunity of raising the morale of its troops by gaining victories; he strives to gradually wear them out by continual exhaustion and threats and to consistently reduce their resistance and paralyse them. (Kautsky 1910, 54)

The occasion for Kautsky's introduction of the attrition/overthrow distinction was a debate between himself and Rosa Luxemburg, over how best to advance the aim of winning universal suffrage across Germany (Anderson 1976; Kautsky 1910; Luxemburg 1910). Luxemburg's favoured strategy, informed by the experience of the 1905 revolutionary movement in Russia, relied crucially on the use of militant mass strikes. In Kautsky's view, such a course of action would have been 'imprudent' (Kautsky 1910, 70), because Luxemburg's supposed 'overthrow' approach risked provoking a wave of state repression and anti-socialist legislation, in a context in which the radical Left might be unable to prevail. As a result, he argued, Luxemburg's strategy would have squandered the considerable gains that had been made over the years by the German Left. 'The worst defeat would be...if we summoned the proletariat to the political mass strike and it did not respond to the appeal by an overwhelming majority,' Kautsky argued. 'We would nip in the bud all the promising seeds being nurtured in the coming Reichstag elections if, without it being necessary,



we provoked struggles which brought us heavy defeats.... Today our agitation must escalate not towards the mass strike, but towards the coming Reichstag elections' (Kautsky 1910, 71). Thus, the term 'attrition' was first introduced into strategy debates on the Left in order to justify a rejection of militancy in favour of a passive, electoralist strategy,<sup>2</sup> like that proposed by Kautsky.

In spite of this inauspicious introduction of Delbrück's vocabulary into strategy debates on the Left, Lenin cites the distinction approvingly later in that same year, in his article, 'The Historical Meaning of the Inner-Party Struggle' (Lenin 1910). Lenin's purpose, we should note, is not to intervene into the strategy quarrel in Germany. Rather, as the context makes clear, Lenin's aim is only to chastise the Menshevik Julius Martov for misappropriating Kautsky's notion of attrition in the context of Russian debates about the 1905 revolt in Russia. It is quite correct to deploy the notion of attrition, Lenin suggests, but Kautsky rightly saw attrition strategies as appropriate only for preparatory phases of the struggle, when power asymmetries were to the great disadvantage of anti-capitalists. By contrast, Lenin says, 'Martov ... advocated the 'strategy of attrition' for the period when the revolution reached its highest intensity' (Lenin 1910, 383).

At this point, therefore, some caution is called for, to avoid a misreading of Lenin. True, Lenin endorses Kautsky's embrace of Delbrück's attrition/overthrow distinction. Moreover, Lenin also endorses Kautsky's insistence (in Kautsky 1910) that the anti-capitalist Left is not to choose *between* these strategic frameworks, but rather to *sequence them correctly*, switching from attrition to overthrow strategies when the preparatory phase gives way to a social crisis, opening up a path toward possible victory for the anti-capitalist Left (Lenin 1910). On these points, which are what I am calling *meta-strategic* points, Lenin follows Kautsky no less closely than Gramsci would go on to do some years later, in his prison notebooks (Gramsci 1971, 242-43 and throughout), where one of Delbrück's other names for attrition, 'war of position' (*Stellungskrieg*; see

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<sup>2</sup> Note that Kautsky advocates electoralism as a strategy, not simply electioneering as a tactic: 'Our opponents are already reckoning with the possibility,' Kautsky said against Luxemburg, 'that in the coming election we will get 125 seats' (1910: 66). 'I have no doubt at all,' he added, 'that the next elections will shake this system to its foundations' (1910: 70). He was convinced 'that the earliest conceivable opportunity of inflicting a shattering blow to the worst enemies of the people, is the coming Reichstag elections; and that we should summon and rally all our forces for this end' (1910: 72).

Delbrück 1918), is counterposed to 'war of manoeuvre'<sup>3</sup> in a manner that follows Kautsky's text very closely indeed<sup>4</sup> (Anderson 1976, 61-63). However, it would be wrong to jump to the further conclusion that Lenin would have endorsed – or that he actually did endorse – Kautsky's call for an attrition strategy in opposition to the overthrow stance of Luxemburg, in the context of the German debate. What we need to see here is that the case that Lenin makes against Martov – precisely when he embraces the attrition/overthrow contrast – is the very same case that Luxemburg makes against Kautsky. Luxemburg's hostility to Kautsky's call for an attrition strategy is, quite explicitly, bound up with an analysis of the balance of social power in the historical context of 1910 Germany. What Luxemburg says against Kautsky, and what Lenin says against Martov, is

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<sup>3</sup> It should be pointed out that Gramsci's introduction of 'war of manoeuvre' as a name for the strategy of overthrow is potentially a source of confusion, because it exacerbates the likelihood that readers will confuse Kautsky's and Lenin's contrast between attrition strategies and overthrow strategies with the similar-sounding but actually very different contrast between 'wars of attrition' and 'wars of manoeuvre' as these terms are used by many contemporary military strategists (see Mearsheimer 1981/82; and Lind 1979). The trench warfare so typical of World War I exemplified the strategy of *overthrow*, not *attrition*, in Delbrück's sense, because each side sought to directly confront its adversary in order to overpower it. Yet, in the distinctly non-Delbrückian idiom of contemporary military strategists, World War I was a 'war of attrition.' To writers like Mearsheimer and Lind, a 'war of attrition' is – like Delbrück's strategy of overthrow – primarily focused on seeking out and conducting decisive battles, in a mutual test of strength. When they say 'war of manoeuvre,' on the other hand, they have in mind attempts to use bold and unexpected movements to strike suddenly at an adversary's 'Achilles heel,' leading to a rapid breakdown of the enemy's morale and system of command and control. Nevertheless, because the strategic discourse of the socialist Left has been shaped mainly by the usage familiar from writings by people like Kautsky, Gramsci, Luxemburg and Lenin, in this article I retain their Delbrückian vocabulary.

<sup>4</sup> Strangely, Anderson contends that Gramsci's recapitulation of Kautsky's attrition/overthrow argument was a mere 'coincidence,' albeit an 'arresting' and 'disconcerting' coincidence (61-62). But this is by no means plausible. As Anderson himself points out, Gramsci's position/manoeuvre contrast is not only formally analogous to Kautsky's attrition/overthrow contrast, but 'Kautsky evoked precisely the same historical and geographical contrasts as Gramsci was to do in his discussion of war of position and war of manoeuvre' (Anderson 1976, 62). It is perhaps not inconceivable that Gramsci – who was known to be an *afficionado* of strategy debates – was somehow unfamiliar with the Kautsky/Luxemburg debate over mass strikes (or Lenin's response to it in Lenin 1910). However, the burden of proof surely falls on anyone who, like Anderson, wants to claim that the arresting coincidence is indeed a mere coincidence, rather than (as seems more likely) a case of Gramsci simply adopting a view that had been popularized on the European Left by Kautsky and, within limits, endorsed by Lenin. Anderson does nothing to meet that burden of proof except simply to assert that, 'unknown to himself, Gramsci had an illustrious predecessor' in Kautsky (Anderson 1976, 61).

that a sound meta-strategic principle – namely, that in the context of protracted, asymmetrical struggles against stronger adversaries an attrition strategy should be favoured over an overthrow strategy – is misappropriated by being pressed into service to defend a wrong-headed first-order strategy.<sup>5</sup> Lenin and Luxemburg agree with Martov and Kautsky at the level of meta-strategy, but disagree at the level of strategy. And they disagree with the strategy primarily because the context is, in each case, not a context in which an unfavourable balance of power necessitates a protracted asymmetrical struggle against an adversary that is too strong to confront head-on. In both Lenin's reply to Martov (Lenin 1910) and Luxemburg's reply to Kautsky (Luxemburg 1910, part 2), the authors introduce evidence, such as strike levels and other data, to demonstrate that the workers' movement is stronger, and the ruling class is weaker, than Martov and Kautsky have suggested.

Moreover, it would also be a mistake to assume that, because Lenin endorsed the meta-strategic principle that attrition strategies are called for in prolonged non-revolutionary periods, he must have agreed with Kautsky's apparent assumption that an attrition strategy for the Left will be an electoralist one. In fact, agreement on meta-strategy does not imply agreement on first-order strategy: Lenin had a very different perspective on the place of electoral tactics in strategic planning for non-revolutionary periods and at no time did he endorse an electoralist strategy for any country, although he certainly favoured participation in elections as a tactic in many cases (Lenin 1920a).

### **Lenin's Meta-strategy versus Lenin's Strategy**

What conclusions can we draw from the fact that Lenin embraced meta-strategic principles quite close to those embraced by Kautsky and Martov? For one thing, this suggests that Lenin's commitment to first-order Leninism is *not* a function of supposedly timeless truths about how to maximize the effectiveness of anti-capitalist resistance. There are those (for example, Harnecker 2009) who deduce the core elements of first-order Leninism from such timeless premises as the claim that institutionalized unity-in-action is more effective than strategic dispersal,

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<sup>5</sup> Contrary to the suggestion of Anderson (1976), Luxemburg's evident resistance to Kautsky's use of Delbrück is not a rejection in principle of the attrition/overthrow distinction, but a rejection of its relevance to the contrast Kautsky draws between Russian and German conditions, a contrast that she depicts as simplistic and wrong-headed (see Luxemburg 1910).

in multiple programmatically differentiated organizations, even when that differentiation is consistent with tactical concentration in united-front type activity. Arguably, that is not true as a generalization about effective political organizing. But in any case, it is not the basis for Lenin's first-order strategy. On the contrary, Lenin hinges his case for first-order Leninism on its sensitivity to the demands of a particular context, namely, as he puts it against Martov, 'the period when the revolution reached its highest intensity.' More broadly, it is a strategy appropriate to what he calls 'an epoch of wars and revolutions' (Lenin 1916, 283), that is, a period of generalized social crisis, either underway or on the immediate horizon.<sup>6</sup>

The key point that I want to insist on is that Lenin's own mature strategic proposal, first-order Leninism, as codified in the early congresses of the Communist International, was an overthrow strategy which, by Lenin's own meta-strategic standards, ought to be suspended in contexts of protracted, asymmetrical struggle against a ruling class that is much more well-positioned strategically than the forces of the anti-capitalist opposition. In the latter circumstances, an attrition strategy is more suitable. Because it is clear, at least in reference to today's North America, that the balance of forces between the contending classes makes revolution an unlikely outcome in the foreseeable future, it is equally clear that Lenin's second-order strategic principles jointly imply, in the context of contemporary North American anti-capitalist activism, a strong case in favour of rejecting an overthrow strategy (such as first-order Leninism) and adopting instead an attrition strategy. In particular, several of Lenin's first-order principles – namely, the first, third, fourth, and sixth – have little

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<sup>6</sup> By 'crisis,' in this context, I do not mean just any sort of crisis, such as a constitutional crisis or an economic crisis (although these can play a role as elements of a crisis in the present sense). Rather, I mean specifically the 'crisis phase of the anti-capitalist struggle,' which is to say any period in the history of a revolutionary movement in which the realistic possibility of actually carrying out revolution, as opposed to preparing for it, is on the historical agenda. Of course, even this notion is too vague to capture Lenin's thinking on this matter, because Lenin actually distinguishes between 'revolutionary periods,' such as the European epoch of wars and revolutions before, during and after World War I, and 'revolutionary situations,' in which the historical tasks of the 'crisis phase' become immediate requirements. These concepts are discussed in 'The Collapse of the Second International' (Lenin 1915): on 'revolutionary periods,' see 247; on 'revolutionary situations,' see 228. In a revolutionary *period* the task is to prepare for a revolutionary *situation*. The latter may only obtain for 'days,' according to Lenin (270). 'History places this form of struggle on the order of the day *very infrequently*,' he says. But 'it will demand arduous preparatory activities' (270). An overthrow strategy is called for in revolutionary *periods*, precisely because in such periods it is necessary to prepare for a revolutionary *situation*, which is not the case during non-revolutionary periods.

or no strategically sound application under circumstances where a first-order strategy of attrition is called for. This is especially so under circumstances of legality (low levels of anti-radical repression).

Consider the first principle, that the *political party* is the central vehicle for leading the anti-capitalist movement. The whole conception of a 'political party' that Lenin takes for granted – whether he depicts as his paradigm case the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in the decades immediately prior to World War I or the Russian Communist Party after 1917 – presupposes that the party will be a *mass* organization, with real influence among millions of members of the working class. But a 'micro-party' of only a few hundred or a even a few thousand members will remain quite marginal to the many millions of workers in most countries. It is, therefore, a phenomenon of an entirely different type. Whatever the real or imaginary merits of micro-parties, it is clear that they have nothing to do with Lenin's notion of the Party as a vehicle for 'advanced workers' (i.e. militant workers, influenced by radical politics) to play a leadership role vis-à-vis the wider working class. So, in a context like that of present-day North America, in which no revolutionary 'party' that is more than a 'micro-party' has existed for many decades, this first principle of Lenin's first-order strategy has no application. Such a party *cannot* exist today or in the currently foreseeable future. Consider, too, the third and fourth principles, that a revolutionary organization should be centralist in two senses: 'non-pluralist' in matters of practical policy or program, and regulated by a command-and-control hierarchy of governance wherein lower-level bodies act under the direction of higher-level bodies. The rationale for these principles – which (together with a commitment to democratic decision-making after thorough discussion) jointly constitute the core of the complex notion of 'democratic centralism' – was always bound up, in Lenin's strategic thought, with strategic contextualism. It was the context – an 'epoch of wars and revolutions,' or what Lukács (1971) called 'the actuality of the revolution' – that made this kind of disciplined unity in action necessary. Disciplined centralism reflected the constraints associated with a life-and-death struggle against the ruling class and its political representatives. But under circumstances of legality (i.e. relatively mild political repression of radicals) and asymmetry (i.e. a weak Left confronting a powerful and entrenched ruling class) these constraints do not seem to hold. Indeed, by cultivating authoritarian personality traits among some activists, they may have the perverse effect over time of weakening the radical and militant impulses of revolutionary activists and creating a psycho-social 'disconnect' between revolutionaries and the

wider working class. Consider, finally, the sixth of Lenin's first-order strategic principles, that the political conduct of revolutionary organizations in each country should be disciplined by a global coordinating body of the sort typified by the Comintern. This principle, too, is without application in a context in which the global radical Left, to say nothing of the North American radical Left, is far too weak to organize an 'International' of the sort represented by the Second and Third Internationals in Lenin's time. These Internationals brought together delegates from socialist mass parties in several countries. Nothing of that sort exists right now, and there is no reason to suppose that revolutionaries in North America have any sound reason to incorporate this notion – which was indeed relevant to radicals in Lenin's time – into their political strategy today.

It seems clear, therefore, that Lenin's first-order strategy has no application in contemporary North America, and we owe this insight to Lenin's own meta-strategic contextualism. As a matter of historical fact, after all, first-order Leninism proceeded from the assumption of the 'actuality of the revolution' (Lukács 1971), that is, the assumption that the anti-capitalist movement is operating in an 'epoch of wars and revolutions' (Lenin 1916). In contemporary North America, by contrast, a very different strategy is required: a strategy of *anti-capitalist attrition*. But, as always, meta-strategic principles of this kind imply no determinate directives on matters of first-order strategy. We can see clearly that a 'Leninesque' meta-strategy implies that we should embrace an attrition strategy *of some sort*. But what sort of attrition strategy, exactly? What might a first-order strategy of anti-capitalist attrition look like, grounded in a Leninesque, and therefore also a Kautskyist and Martovian, meta-strategy, applied to contemporary North American conditions?

### **Anti-Capitalist Attrition: Revolutionary Strategy in a Non-revolutionary Period**

There is, to be sure, something paradoxical about the task of formulating a revolutionary strategy for a non-revolutionary period. Intuitively, we expect that a revolutionary strategy will define success as the carrying out of a revolutionary transformation of society. But an attrition strategy – at least as Lenin understood it – starts out with the assumption that carrying out an actual revolution is not on the immediate agenda for anti-capitalist activists. In today's North America, there is no mistaking the predicament of those who aim to overturn the power of big business and to establish a

radically democratic alternative to capitalism: the forces of the radical Left are in disarray, whereas the strength and confidence of the ruling class, though shaken by recent events (namely, the financial and macroeconomic crises of 2008-09), remain formidable indeed by comparison. The asymmetry between the power of an entrenched ruling class and the relative weakness of the anti-capitalist opposition poses a more modest, but equally challenging task: to develop a strategy for reversing this unfavourable balance of forces, to the advantage of the radical Left, so that the more ambitious project of attempting the 'overthrow' of capitalist rule can once again be taken up by anti-capitalists.

Obviously, the meta-strategically motivated decision to 'hold off' on pursuing an overthrow strategy has little in common with the position of those who regard the prospects for anti-capitalist revolution as so bleak that there is no point in pursuing revolutionary activism in this period. On the contrary, a strategy of anti-capitalist attrition is, precisely, a guide for conducting political action today with a view to laying the foundation for a revolutionary transformation in the future. Such a strategy will propose a set of strategic objectives, not on the grounds that revolution is impossible, but on the grounds that attaining these objectives will in fact open up a pathway toward a revival and reinvigoration of the revolutionary project. It is for this reason that an anti-capitalist attrition strategy, in the context of an asymmetrical and protracted struggle against an entrenched ruling class, is indeed a revolutionary strategy, even if it is not an overthrow strategy.<sup>7</sup>

Today's revolutionaries need an attrition strategy because they need to *rebuild* the radical Left, to *revive* the socialist project, to *renew* the movement to dismantle capitalism and replace it with a radically egalitarian, post-capitalist economic democracy. Today's tasks, in other words, are *preparatory* in nature. A strategy of anti-capitalist attrition can serve as a guide to this kind of preparatory revolutionary activism, offering activists a much-needed sense of orientation in strategic space: a framework for setting goals, developing tactics, choosing allies, assessing the movement's strengths and weaknesses, and identifying the period's dangers and opportunities.

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<sup>7</sup> As discussed in above, to the extent that Kautsky and Martov advocated attrition strategies – indeed, narrowly electoralist ones at that – in a context in which 'the revolution reached its highest intensity,' they were in fact disavowing the whole idea of transitioning from an attrition strategy into an overthrow strategy in the context of a revolutionary period. In that sense, these were clearly not revolutionary strategies, except in name.

How, then, might North American revolutionaries proceed in the contemporary context? What kind of strategic objectives could they pursue in the hope of reversing today's unfavourable balance of forces?

Before identifying a set of objectives, it is necessary to take stock of just what we mean when we talk about a 'powerful' and 'entrenched' ruling class and a "weak" radical Left. Successfully identifying the sources of this imbalance should make it easier to identify the changes that would have to be brought about in order to achieve the core aim of any attrition strategy – to strengthen the weaker side and weaken the stronger side in an asymmetrical conflict.

I suggest that the strength of the North American ruling class, and the weakness of its anti-capitalist opposition, is rooted in four key features of the contemporary situation. First, we are living in *a time of relative social stability*, rather than a time of great upheaval and unrest, and this has been so for decades. That is not to say that there is no class conflict or significant social protest. Nor is it to deny the obvious economic dislocations and crises that continue to plague capitalism everywhere, indeed seldom more so than in the past couple of years. It is simply to take note of the obvious: that this is not a time of great social unrest and upheaval in North America. Second, the historical *alternatives to capitalism are widely held to have been discredited*, largely because the only two such alternatives that have been broadly acknowledged – welfare-state expansionism and bureaucratic command planning – have both fallen into a mostly-deserved state of broad disrepute (D'Arcy 2009). Third, the declining strength of the trade union movement, especially the private sector industrial unions, has meant that there is *no united, organized social force that seems ready and able to challenge corporate power* and fight for an alternative. And finally, fourth, the main historically important currents of anti-capitalist radicalism, such as anarchism and Marxism, that once exercised such a profound influence on masses of working-class activists, have in recent decades become almost entirely marginal to public political discourse in North America. This *marginalization of anti-capitalist political currents* has had the effect of allowing the ideology of capitalism's elites to go largely unchallenged by any coherent, visible, and credible alternative.

If these four circumstances are the sources of capitalism's strength in contemporary North America, then we know what anti-capitalists pursuing an attrition strategy will have to try to do. First, faced with levels of social upheaval and confrontational protest that are too low to pose the kinds of questions to which political radicalism purports to offer answers, today's anti-capitalists will have to destabilize the political order by



fomenting sustained civil unrest. Second, faced with the discrediting of the leading historical alternatives to capitalism (namely, welfare-state expansionism and bureaucratic planning), anti-capitalist activists will have to construct prefigurative forms of egalitarian economic democracy, modelling sustainability and social justice, in order thereby to revive the lost sense of optimism about the viability and appeal of post-capitalist alternatives. Third, faced with the lack of a social force capable of confronting and challenging capitalism's ruling class and its underlings in government, anti-capitalists will have to construct an anti-corporate alliance of labour and community organizations, with the potential over the long run to contest the dominance and hegemony of big business. Finally, fourth, faced with the ideological marginalization of leftist challenges to capitalism, today's radicals will have to re-establish vital currents of anti-capitalist radicalism, and to begin to regain a capacity to exercise significant influence on activists on the broader Left, with the aim of re-inserting anti-capitalist ideas into the public sphere as a source of dissident analysis, vision and strategy.

Were anti-capitalist activists to succeed in carrying out *these* tasks, the resulting shift in the balance of forces between defenders and opponents of the capitalist system would be remarkable: it would signal the emergence of a *strong* Left, and an undermined, weakened ruling class. An anti-capitalist attrition strategy for North America under contemporary conditions, therefore, should aim to achieve these *four strategic objectives*: (1) fomenting civil unrest; (2) building prefigurative, non-capitalist alternatives; (3) constructing an anti-corporate alliance; and (4) re-establishing vital currents of anti-capitalist radicalism.

Enumerating these tasks is obviously easier than carrying them out, but anti-capitalists are by no means lacking in fruitful paths to follow with the aim of making real progress on these tasks. I will take up each in turn.

### *Fomenting Civil Unrest*

Protest is at the heart of radical politics. The vitality of the Left relies crucially on the existence of powerful mass protest movements, which draw people into oppositional political activity, expose them to critical insights about how social institutions work, and in many cases transform their understanding of the prospects for participating directly in shaping the course of events by organizing resistance collectively with their neighbours, co-workers and allies. This relationship between the dynamism of the Left and the vitality of mass protest movements makes

the decline of social protest in recent decades all the more troubling. Clearly an attrition strategy must address this problem.

Fortunately, anti-capitalist activists on the whole know better than most political activists how to foment civil unrest. After all, radicals have always played a leading role in fostering the development of militant mass mobilizations in which exploited and oppressed people take action to demand redress for their grievances. In recent years, too, anti-capitalists have had considerable success building grassroots protest movements by adopting the approach of combining *strategic dispersal* with *tactical concentration*. This was illustrated vividly in the organizing for the Seattle protest against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in November 1999. Strategic dispersal means cultivating the development of a pluralistic Left, comprised of multiple organizations, pursuing diverse agendas, favouring a wide range of tactics and organizing methods, and focusing on differentiated constituencies or audiences. Tactical concentration, on the other hand, means cultivating the capacity of this plurality of highly differentiated organizations and projects to engage in *timely tactical convergence*, uniting for coordinated action to advance an agreed upon aim in agreed upon ways at an agreed upon time and place. The global justice mass protests in cities like Seattle, Québec City, Washington, DC, Prague, and so on, in the period 1999-2001, all exemplified this approach.

And yet, even these successes have been fleeting and difficult to sustain. Building mass *demonstrations* is one thing; building and sustaining mass protest *movements* is something rather more difficult. Nevertheless, a resurgence of mass protest movements is a necessary condition for the revival of the prospects for a renewed revolutionary movement. If the Left has so far failed to achieve this resurgence, it is not because anti-capitalists do not know *how* to do it. After all, in 1999-2001, the Left *was* building the beginnings of a militant mass protest movement demanding global justice and opposing neo-liberalism. The emerging movement was derailed and disoriented by the events of 11 September 2001, but this could hardly have been predicted or avoided by the Left. Again, in late 2002 and early 2003, the scattered remnants of the global justice movement reconstituted themselves as a mass anti-war movement, which mobilized millions in an attempt to prevent the invasion of Iraq (D'Arcy 2008). In this case, the movement was derailed, not by an external shock, but by its inability to secure any unambiguous victories, a failure which dashed the hopes of many participants and took the steam out of the emerging movement. It is clear that a mass protest movement cannot be built without a string of victories to boost the confidence and sense of efficacy among organizers

and actual or potential participants. But, notwithstanding their obvious limitations, both of these experiences with nascent mass movement-building in recent years should be seen as confirming that grassroots popular mobilization *can* be effective at politicizing millions of people and sparking a resurgence of mass protest movements. To be sure, there is no guarantee of success in these efforts. But neither is there any reason to doubt the *possibility* of success.

*Building Prefigurative, Non-capitalist Alternatives*

There is more to the Left than protest, of course. The Left has always aspired to point out a path toward a different kind of society: an egalitarian post-capitalist economy. We know, however, that the vision of a post-capitalist, socialist political and economic alternative to capitalism suffers from a crisis of credibility. There are some people who reject the idea of a socialist alternative because they regard it as fatally unworkable. But far more people reject socialism because they regard it as fundamentally unappealing. The experience of the social-democratic 'road' has given people an ample opportunity to experience the fruits of welfare-state expansionism. But, whatever the accomplishments of the bureaucratic welfare state, few people have found themselves drawn to it as an inspiring ideal of human liberation. The 'East European' model has been, if anything, still less inspiring than the welfare-state capitalism of the social-democrats. For these reasons, there can be little reason to expect a resurgence of the revolutionary anti-capitalist project unless radicals can develop a compelling case for the *appeal* of an egalitarian post-capitalist economy. But doing so will require going beyond rearticulating the familiar ideals of equality and democracy. It is necessary to take the further step of drawing masses of people into actually existing, and actually appealing, alternative economies. This means taking very seriously the task of building up the so-called 'social economy': workers' co-operatives, consumer and housing co-operatives, experiments in 'participatory economics,' small-scale barter economies, and other forms of democratic and egalitarian economic activity operating in the margins and interstices of contemporary capitalism (Gibson-Graham 2006). Marx rightly saw in co-operatives the seeds of a new, radically democratic and egalitarian alternative to capitalism (Marx 1894, Chapter 27), yet many self-described 'Marxists' pay almost no attention to the co-operative movement. The radical Left in the twentieth century, frankly, made a disastrous decision to drop its earlier commitment to co-operatives in favour of a bureaucratic-statist reinterpretation of the socialist ideal. A revitalized Left will have to do a

much better job at promoting co-operatives and other prefigurative forms of economic democracy as living illustrations of the appeal of community-based alternatives to profit-motivated market economics.

Though urgently necessary, such a renewal of the Left's commitment to co-operatives and other prefigurative, anti-capitalist economic forms will not be sufficient to revive the credibility of a socialist alternative to capitalism. Just as important is the building of an alternative *politics*. In the short term, that means systematically encouraging the development of an *oppositional* rather than an *integrative* politics: a channelling of popular political engagement away from the 'official' forms of political participation within the framework of the capitalist state, such as voting or joining electoralist parties, into specifically *extra-parliamentary* modes of civic engagement, notably protest movement activism and other forms of grassroots, community-based civic activism. In the long term, though, building an alternative politics will mean fostering the re-emergence of counter-capitalist, parallel political institutions beyond the control of capital and the state, such as popular assemblies or community councils. This has been a hallmark of mass radicalizations for decades, as we have seen in so many of the major social upheavals of modern times (Gluckstein 1985; Barker 1987). Just as co-operatives and experiments in participatory economics can anticipate or prefigure possibilities for post-capitalist economic institutions and practices, so too can these community councils and assemblies anticipate participatory-democratic modes of civic engagement in public policy-making in a post-capitalist context.

#### *Constructing an Anti-corporate Alliance*

Once again, there is no particular mystery about how to pursue the third strategic objective of the attrition strategy proposed here: *constructing an anti-corporate alliance* that is capable of posing a real threat to capitalism.

North American anti-capitalist activists are now a politically marginal and numerically tiny force. Yet the viability of their project depends on the participation of many millions of people. How can the radical Left link up its ambitious, transformative agenda with broad and politically efficacious forces capable (in the long run) of rivalling the economic power of big business and the political power of the capitalist state? Here a resurgent radical Left should embrace the good judgment of its earlier incarnations: the Left has traditionally identified as its potential base of mass support a broad sector of the public, consisting of the membership of working-class organizations, classically including unions

and co-operatives but also encompassing other forms of working-class self-organization, and their 'natural allies' in those democratic and egalitarian community organizations working within civil society to achieve social and environmental justice, and political and economic democracy: feminists, anti-racists, environmentalists, disability-rights activists, and so on. This simply restates, in a contemporary idiom, the core of the 'grand-strategic line of march' that Lenin embraced and that I recounted above. This constituency has the two advantages of being both potentially receptive to anti-capitalist (or at least anti-corporate) politics, and potentially powerful in the threat that it can pose to the status quo. Unfortunately, the *actual* receptivity of that audience to anti-capitalist politics and the *actual* threat it poses to the status quo, fall far short of its *potential* in these respects. This, of course, is a problem with which 'Western Marxists' have been trying to grapple for many decades. My response to this set of problems is captured by the cumulative content of my comments on the first, second, and fourth strategic objectives of the anti-capitalist attrition strategy proposed in this paper (about fomenting civil unrest, building counter-capitalist alternatives, and re-establishing vital currents of anti-capitalist radicalism). The constituency in question – working-class organizations and community-based social and environmental justice organizations – is no doubt demobilized and demoralized, but its resurgence represents the only hope for a transformative political project based upon the self-organization of exploited and oppressed people. So, whatever the difficulties, what anti-capitalists need to do is mobilize this constituency to build a powerful anti-corporate alliance of labour and community organizations.

It seems clear that such a labour/community alliance is necessary for a revival of the anti-capitalist project. But what, tactically speaking, can anti-capitalists do to build it? We can think of this in terms of the need to foster a double transformation: unions and other working-class organizations have to move in the direction of deeper and more consistent forms of solidarity with the wider circle of community-based movement activism within civil society; and these non-labour community organizations need to reject alliances with big business and its political representatives, and to embrace instead a consistently anti-corporate, pro-worker political analysis and strategy. Within the labour movement, this means that anti-capitalists need to challenge every manifestation of narrowly economic 'business unionism' by organizing at the rank and file level within unions for a 'solidarity' or 'social movement' approach to unionism, which besides focusing on bargaining for wages and benefits

also gives priority to the promotion of a broader political agenda for democratizing the economy, and for promoting social movements against racism, sexism, poverty and environmental destruction. Conversely, within the wider civil society social movements, activists pursuing anti-capitalist attrition need to promote a consistently anti-corporate, pro-worker consciousness, as an indispensable element of Left politics generally. Thus, for example, they need to make the case for specifically *class-struggle* (militantly anti-corporate) forms of feminism, anti-racism, environmentalism, and so on. Doing so will sharpen the antagonism that divides participants in these movements from the economic and political elites of capitalism. But it will also enhance their capacity to win real gains by encouraging the development of a powerful strategic alliance with the workers' movement at the grassroots level.

*Re-establishing Vital Currents of Anti-capitalist Radicalism*

I argued above that, in a preparatory period, when revolutionary politics has little influence on the vast majority of working-class people, it makes no sense to think that 'the role of the party' sketched by Lenin (1920b) has any contemporary relevance. There are no masses of radical workers to organize into a party of the 'advanced workers' (or 'vanguard of the working class'). So there is no party to build. Nevertheless, the fourth strategic objective of re-establishing vital currents of anti-capitalist radicalism, as sources of radical analysis, strategy, and vision, is at all times of crucial importance. The question is, how do we advance that aim in the present context?

First, anti-capitalists, starting from their position at the margins of public discourse, need to develop a *voice*: a capacity to convey their ideas about the world in ways that advance the project of radical social change. Here we can draw on Hal Draper's important and influential idea that, in a non-revolutionary time, the way to advance the socialist project is by creating, not a micro-party, but a 'political centre': a distinctive current of anti-capitalist radicalism, with its own identity and point of view, expressed in a body of literature and usually a periodical publication, and able to establish 'its "kind of socialism" as a presence in left politics' (Draper 1971). It is a matter, not of organization-building *per se*, but developing vital currents of socialist analysis, strategy, and vision, and then seeking to gain influence for this 'kind of socialism' among politicizing and radicalizing people, in the broader working class.

On the other hand, perhaps we can see today that all references to 'gaining influence' in the working class are in an important sense

misleading. After all, the socialist movement has never made great advances by simply permeating the consciousness of workers, in a *unilateral* way. Rather, in its high points (the Revolutions of 1848, the Paris Commune of 1871, the 1905 and 1917 revolts in Russia, the events of May 1968 in France, to name only a few) it has moved forward by establishing a dialogical process of interchange between the pre-existing currents of anti-capitalist radicalism and the so-called 'spontaneity' of grassroots political innovation by *newly* politicized and radicalizing people who do not simply throw their weight behind the 'leadership' or 'program' of existing radical organizations, but instead take initiatives and develop insights that are entirely their own. This suggests that re-establishing vital currents of anti-capitalist radicalism must proceed in the form of a dialogical, reciprocal learning process between activists seeking to draw on existing political traditions (like Marxism, social anarchism, socialist-feminism, and so on) and newly politicizing people with whom they work in social movements, who may have their own ways of articulating their grievances and aspirations, and their own ideas about how society works or how best to change it.

These two imperatives – on the one hand, developing a voice, and on the other, cultivating a capacity to listen to others and learn from them – are what anti-capitalists need to address, as best they can, in order to make headway in re-establishing radical political currents with the capacity to speak to the concerns of wider circles of potential participants in the renewal of the radical Left.

This, then, is a sketch of a first-order strategy of anti-capitalist attrition that would be consistent with Lenin's strategic contextualism, and his meta-strategy as a whole. As an attrition strategy, it focuses on one basic goal: to strengthen the anti-capitalist Left while weakening the ruling class and its political representatives. In its strategic objectives, it obviously diverges sharply from first-order Leninism. But it is equally obvious – for reasons that Lenin well understood – that a serious approach to revolutionary strategy *must* do so, given the circumstances facing anti-capitalist activists in contemporary North America.

## **Conclusion**

I conclude with a general thought about how we might best think about Lenin in the contemporary context. Most people who identify as Leninists adopt an approach that focusses on the doctrinal content of Lenin's body of work, and the substantive practical or strategic 'lessons' of his political

activism. But a better way might be to look to Lenin's work, not for doctrines to adopt or strategic dictums to follow, but for a model of how to develop a context-sensitive political strategy for the anti-capitalist Left. Learning from Lenin would then not be a matter of agreeing with what he says, but rather emulating the manner in which he goes about deciding what to say. What is interesting about Lenin, on this view, is that he starts from an analysis of the present-day trajectory of capitalist development, attentive to the balance of class forces and the strengths and weaknesses of the radical Left, and on this basis he develops a political strategy for anti-capitalist organizing that is sensitive to the particularities of the present context. From this point of view, the impulse to find historically invariant first-order strategic principles in Lenin's work (about democratic centralism or party-building, for example) is fundamentally missing the point of what is most compelling about Lenin's approach to political strategy: it is to ignore the context-sensitivity and historical groundedness of his strategic prescriptions. It would be better, I suggest, to rethink Leninism by re-reading, more carefully, what Lenin says about anti-capitalist meta-strategy, and heeding his advice.

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*SPECIAL SECTION ON RETHINKING LENINISM*

## Lenin's Aggressive Unoriginality, 1914-1916

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**Abstract:**

Lenin received a severe shock in 1914 when the main parties of the socialist Second International supported the war effort of their respective governments. But the shock did not lead to his rejection of the prewar Marxist orthodoxy but rather to an outraged affirmation of this orthodoxy against those who (in Lenin's view) had betrayed it. Lenin's rhetorical stance can therefore be described as 'aggressive unoriginality'. Lenin insisted that the key themes of 'Left Zimmerwald'—the name given to the socialist current of which he was the principal spokesman from 1914 to 1916—were based squarely on the prewar consensus of 'revolutionary Marxists', particularly as expressed by Karl Kautsky. Among these themes are the underlying idea of a revolutionary situation, the assumption that the war had created a revolutionary situation, and the claim that 'socialist patriotism' during the war represented the triumph of prewar opportunism.

**Résumé:**

Lénine a reçu un choc sévère en 1914 quand les principaux partis de la Deuxième Internationale socialiste ont soutenu l'effort de guerre de leurs gouvernements respectifs. Toutefois, le choc ne l'a pas amené à rejeter l'orthodoxie marxiste de l'avant-guerre mais plutôt à affirmer outrageusement cette orthodoxie contre ceux qui, de son point de vue, l'avaient trahie. La posture rhétorique de Lénine peut ainsi être décrite comme 'banalement agressive.' Lénine soutenait que les thèmes clés de la 'Gauche de Zimmerwald' – le nom donné au courant socialiste dont il était le principal porte-parole entre 1914 et 1916 – étaient fondamentalement basés sur le consensus d'avant-guerre des 'Marxistes révolutionnaires,' comme pouvait l'exprimer en particulier Karl Kautsky. Parmi ces thèmes figurent l'idée sous-jacente d'une situation

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révolutionnaire, l'hypothèse que cette situation révolutionnaire a été créée par la guerre, et l'argument selon lequel le 'patriotisme socialiste' d'alors correspondait au triomphe de l'opportunisme de l'avant-guerre.

**Keywords**

• Lenin • Kautsky • Second International • Left Zimmerwald • imperialism

**Mots clés**

• Lénine • Kautsky • Deuxième Internationale • La Gauche de Zimmerwald • impérialisme

In the early summer of 1914, Lenin had very little idea of what the looming war would mean for him personally. He even assumed his work load would be eased somewhat if war actually broke out, since his connections with the Russian underground would be thoroughly disrupted. But when war finally came, it brought some devastating surprises. Even after Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August 1914, the Social Democratic parties in Germany, Austro-Hungary and France were still organizing mass protests against war. The main German Social Democratic Party (SPD) newspaper, *Vorwärts*, continued to thunder against the imperialist war and to threaten the capitalist warmongers with revolutionary action. But on 5 August Lenin received a major shock: the SPD Reichstag delegation had voted unanimously for war credits. Forgotten was the traditional cry of 'not one penny — not one man' for the capitalist state. When Lenin first saw the headlines in the village of Poronino (his summer residence outside Kraków), he was sure that it must be a provocation, a trick by the government to confuse the opposition.

Lenin soon had his own firsthand experience with war hysteria. The local officials in Austrian Poland suspected the outlandish Russian emigrant of espionage. A police official reported that many meetings of Russian nationals had taken place at the residence of V. Ulyanov. There were rumors that Ulyanov had been seen taking photographs in the surrounding hills, but these proved unfounded. Nevertheless, the police official was of the opinion that Ulyanov should be under lock and key—after all, his identity papers were in French, he received money from Petersburg, and he was in a very good position to give information about Austria to the Russians.

Based on this irrefutable logic, Lenin was arrested and kept in the local jail from 8 August to 19 August. Thus the third decade of his political career began the same way as his first decade—in jail. But the big difference between 1894 and 1914 was that Lenin now had powerful

friends on the outside. Among these was the leader of the Austrian Social Democrats, Victor Adler, who went to the Austrian Minister of the Interior to give personal assurance that no one was less likely to help the tsarist government than V. Ulyanov. When the minister asked, 'are you sure he's an enemy of the tsar?' Adler answered, truly enough, 'he is a more implacable enemy than your Excellency.'

Orders soon came down to release Lenin, and even to allow him to travel to Switzerland. Right after getting out of jail, Lenin received another shock, in the form of a leaflet entitled 'Declaration of Russian Socialists Joining the French Army as Volunteers.' These Russian socialists outdid the Germans in their support of their government's war effort—they joined the ranks of an allied army. Among the émigrés in France who showed their devotion to internationalism in this way were several Bolsheviks.

Among many harrowing scenes, Lenin, his wife and his confused and soon-to-die mother-in-law packed up and embarked on a week-long train trip to Bern, Switzerland (with a stop in Vienna to get necessary documents and to thank Victor Adler, soon to be a political enemy). When he arrived in Bern on 5 September, Lenin hit the ground running. The day he stepped off the train, he met with local Bolshevik émigrés and proposed a set of theses about the proper reaction to the war. Just a month had gone by since the outbreak of the war—a month mostly taken up with the hassles and uncertainties of jail and of picking up stakes—and yet Lenin was ready with theses that defined a radically new chapter of his career.

Yet Lenin had to endure one more shock—in some ways, perhaps the most disorienting of all. The betrayal of the SPD majority was an unpleasant surprise, but Lenin could instantly identify its cause: today's 'social chauvinists' (socialists who supported the war effort of their respective governments) were simply the incarnation of the age-old enemy: opportunism, 'the bourgeois nature and the danger of which have long been indicated by the finest representatives of the revolutionary proletariat of all countries' (Lenin 1960-68, 21:16). Anyone reading these words from Lenin's theses of September 1914 would have realized whom Lenin meant by 'the finest representatives': Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky. Luxemburg did in fact react to the war crisis as befitted an uncompromising foe of opportunism. But Kautsky? Lenin read with horror Kautsky's many articles from autumn 1914 in which Kautsky seemed to tie himself in knots, not exactly in order to defend the new opportunism, but to excuse it, to cut it as much slack as possible, to avoid burning bridges within the party. Could it be that Kautsky, Karl Kautsky, was an opportunist and a philistine? Lenin expressed his fury in letters: 'I hate

and despise Kautsky now more than anyone, with his vile, dirty, self-satisfied hypocrisy' (Lenin 1960-68, 35:167).

I have told the story of Lenin's experience in the opening weeks of World War I in such detail in order to bring a home a fact that needs to be explained, namely, that Lenin took almost no time at all to arrive at the basic positions that would guide his political activity until the outbreak of revolution in Russia in early 1917. The three most prominent themes in Lenin's wartime program are already evident. The first is the insistence on using the war crisis as an opportunity to foment socialist revolution in Europe. The second is the interpretation of the wartime split in the socialist movement in terms of the prewar framework of 'opportunism vs. orthodoxy'. This interpretation found practical form in the demand for a new socialist international that would be opportunist-free. Finally, Lenin becomes almost obsessive about a new form of opportunism that he calls *kautskianstvo*, named for its most emblematic representative, Karl Kautsky.

I believe that behind Lenin's unhesitating adaptation of his wartime platform is something I call his *aggressive unoriginality*. Lenin did not have to arrive at new ideas: he could work perfectly well with the ideas he had, ideas that he shared with most other orthodox Marxists (or at least so he claimed). 'Aggressive unoriginality' is a phrase that can be applied to Lenin's outlook and rhetoric from 1914 to about the middle of 1919. In this paper, I will restrict most of my comments to the pre-revolutionary period, 1914-1916, although I will also glance ahead at later developments. I mean three main things by the phrase 'aggressive unoriginality'.

### **Lenin is *not* polemicizing with orthodox Second International Marxism.**

If you pick up and read Lenin's writings after 1914, you get the impression of a wholehearted rejection of the Second International and in particular of its main theoretical representative, Karl Kautsky. One reason for this misleading impression is Lenin's attacks on 'Kautskyism,' a term which most readers naturally understand to mean 'the system of ideas set forth in the writings of Karl Kautsky.' 'Kautskyism' is a somewhat misleading translation of *kautskianstvo*, which, as can be seen, is not an '-ism' word. And indeed, a careful examination of what Lenin means by this word shows that it does *not* mean Kautsky's prewar ideological outlook. Very much to the contrary: Kautsky's alleged *repudiation* of his prewar outlook—in deed, if not in words—is the archetypal manifestation of *kautskianstvo*. For Lenin, Kautsky is a *renegade*.

Thus, for Lenin, Kautsky's behavior was emblematic of a general phenomenon which might be defined as 'talking the revolutionary talk but refusing to walk the revolutionary walk'. As such, many people who did not particularly agree with Kautsky on ideological issues were held by Lenin to be guilty of *kautskianstvo*—for example, Lev Trotsky and even non-Marxists such as Arthur Henderson.

After 1914, even as he violently attacked *kautskianstvo*, Lenin never tired of recalling the days when 'Kautsky was still a Marxist,' that is, up to about 1909. A detailed examination of these comments shows that they are almost all complimentary. Lenin explicitly endorses Kautsky's pre-1909 writings on subjects as various as the coming era of war and revolution, opportunism, nationality policy, agricultural and peasant policy, and even dialectics. He often cites 'Kautsky-when-he-was-a-Marxist' as an authority in order to convince his audience — even when this audience is made up of militant Bolsheviks for whom Kautsky was a bitter political foe. Lenin does not change his mind on this topic: the invocation of Kautsky as an authority is a constant feature of Lenin's pronouncements from 1914 to 1920.<sup>1</sup>

**The ideas that underpinned Lenin's political platform after 1914 came directly from Kautsky and other orthodox writers.**

In previous writings, I have emphasized the negative conclusion that Lenin is not engaged in 'rethinking Marxism' or repudiating his own earlier admiration for Kautsky's writings. But Lenin's solidarity with Kautsky and other Marxist writers goes further. *The ideas most important to Lenin after 1914 are also taken directly from Kautsky and others.* In other words, Kautsky's prewar writings continue to be extremely influential for Lenin, and Lenin's political outlook in the years after 1914 cannot be understood apart from this fact.

The continuing influence of Second International orthodoxy should not be limited to Kautsky. True, Kautsky's role is vastly important and overshadows everybody else. Nevertheless, Lenin insists that he is building on an *widespread orthodox consensus*. Very often mentioned as an indicator of consensus is the Basel Manifesto of 1912 (as discussed below).

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<sup>1</sup> See my remarks in the forthcoming symposium on Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* in *Historical Materialism* and Lih 2008. I have compiled an extensive database of Lenin's post-1914 comments on Kautsky's pre-1914 writings, which can be obtained from me at [larslih@yahoo.ca](mailto:larslih@yahoo.ca).



**Lenin himself aggressively emphasized his own unoriginality and he had good rhetorical reasons to do so.**

Lenin himself informed all and sundry that his *current* definition of the situation was based solidly on the prewar consensus and on Kautsky's writings in particular. In October 1914, he wrote his lieutenant Aleksandr Shliapnikov: 'Obtain without fail and reread (or ask to have it translated for you) *Road to Power* by Kautsky [and see] what he writes there about the revolution of our time! And now, how he acts the toady and disavows all that!' (Lenin, 1958-64, 49:24). As we shall see, Lenin himself always remained loyal to Kautsky's vision of 'the revolution of our time'.

Lenin insists upon his own ideological indebtedness in an aggressive fashion not only to bring out the heinousness of the renegacy of Kautsky and others, but also to show that he, Lenin, is not just some solitary nut but rather an orthodox Marxist whose platform rests on the consensus of the most learned socialist writers. Of course, the fact that Lenin had rhetorical motivations for his stance of aggressive unoriginality is not a reason to doubt his sincerity and conviction. Lenin was not lying when he affirmed his solidarity with Kautsky — or, if he was, more proof is needed than merely his desire to persuade his audience.

Two comments before proceeding. First, when I speak of Lenin's 'unoriginality,' I do not mean to say that he slavishly took all his ideas from elsewhere. I make no assumption here about the actual source of Lenin's outlook or any particular part of it. What I do assert is that central aspects of Lenin's outlook are *shared* with Kautsky and others, and that Lenin himself insisted on this.

Second, today's admirers of Lenin want him to be original and picture him as seeing through the unrevolutionary Marxism of the Second International. Lenin's own self-image is very different. Lenin's subjective perception is important in itself, but, as it happens, Lenin's self-image is also an objectively accurate one. People who would like Lenin to be a profound 'rethinker' of Marxism may perceive my argument as an attack on him. This is not the case. If Lenin's ideas are good ones, they are good ones, regardless of whether or not he shared them with writers such as Kautsky. And conversely, if they are bad ones, the endorsement by socialist authorities does not make them any better.

As we have seen, in October 1914, Lenin advised his party comrade Shliapnikov to re-read Kautsky's 1909 book *Road to Power*. Lenin took his own advice, judging from an article published in December 1914 entitled

'Dead Chauvinism and Living Socialism' (Lenin 1960-68, 21:94-101). In this article he cited chapter and verse to demonstrate the excellence of Kautsky's analysis. I am going to cite the relevant passage *in extenso*, since it is (or, in any event, should be) central to any analysis of the historical context of Lenin's wartime platform. As scholarly 'value added', I have inserted page numbers to the specific passages quoted by Lenin (the references are to the English-language translation by Raymond Meyer).<sup>2</sup>

For decades, German Social-Democracy was a model to the Social-Democrats of Russia, even somewhat more than to the Social-Democrats of the whole world. It is therefore clear that there can be no intelligent, i.e., critical, attitude towards the now reigning social-patriotism or 'socialist' chauvinism, without a most precise definition of one's attitude towards German Social-Democracy, What was it in the past? What is it today? What will it be in the future?

A reply to the first of these questions may be found in *Der Weg zur Macht [The Road to Power]*, a small book written by K. Kautsky in 1909 and translated into many European languages. Containing a most complete exposition of the tasks of our times, it was most advantageous to the German Social-Democrats (in the sense of the promise they held out), and moreover came from the pen of the most eminent writer of the Second International. We shall recall the pamphlet in some detail; this will be the more useful now since those forgotten ideals are so often barefacedly cast aside.

Social-Democracy is a 'revolutionary party' (as stated in the opening sentence of the pamphlet), not only in the sense that a steam engine is revolutionary, but 'also in another sense' [*Road*, 1]. It wants conquest of political power by the proletariat, the dictatorship of the proletariat. Heaping ridicule on 'doubters of the revolution,' Kautsky writes: 'In any important movement and uprising we must, of course, reckon with the possibility of defeat. Prior to the struggle, only a fool can consider himself quite certain of victory.' However, to refuse to consider the possibility of victory would be 'a direct betrayal of our cause' [*Road*, 11]. A revolution in connection with a war, he says, is possible both during and after a war. It is impossible to determine at which particular moment the sharpening of class antagonisms will lead to revolution, but, the author continues, 'I can quite definitely assert that a revolution that war brings in its wake, will break out either during or immediately after the war' [*Road*, 14]; nothing is more vulgar, we read further, than the theory of 'the peaceful growing into socialism' [*Road*, 21]. 'Nothing is more erroneous,' he continues, 'than the opinion that a cognition of economic necessity means a weakening of

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<sup>2</sup> Kautsky 1996 (this edition has been recently re-issued). A contemporaneous English translation is available on the Marxists Internet Archive ([www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org)).

the will... The will, as a desire for struggle,' he says, 'is determined, first, by the price of the struggle, secondly, by a sense of power, and thirdly, by actual power' [*Road*, 26-7].

When an attempt was made, incidentally by *Vorwärts*, to interpret Engels's famous preface to *The Class Struggles in France* in the meaning of opportunism, Engels became indignant, and called shameful any assumption that he was a 'peaceful worshipper of legality at any price' [*Road*, 33]. 'We have every reason to believe,' Kautsky goes on to say, 'that we are entering upon a period of struggle for state power.' That struggle may last for decades; that is something we do not know, but 'it will in all probability bring about, in the near future, a considerable strengthening of the proletariat, if not its dictatorship, in Western Europe' [*Road*, 42]. The revolutionary elements are growing, Kautsky declares: out of ten million voters in Germany in 1895, there were six million proletarians and three and a half million people interested in private property; in 1907 the latter grew by 0.03 million, and the former by 1.6 million! [*Road*, 49]. 'The rate of the advance becomes very rapid as soon as a time of revolutionary ferment comes' [*Road*, 51]. Class antagonisms are not blunted but, on the contrary, grow acute; prices rise, and imperialist rivalry and militarism are rampant [*Road*, 60-75].

'A new era of revolution' is drawing near [*Road*, 76]. The monstrous growth of taxes would 'long ago have led to war as the only alternative to revolution... had not that very alternative of revolution stood closer after a war than after a period of armed peace...' [*Road*, 80]. 'A world war is ominously imminent,' Kautsky continues, 'and war means also revolution' [*Road*, 84]. In 1891 Engels had reason to fear a premature revolution in Germany; since then, however, 'the situation has greatly changed.' The proletariat 'can no longer speak of a *premature* revolution' (Kautsky's italics) [*Road*, 84]. The petty bourgeoisie is downright unreliable and is ever more hostile to the proletariat, but in a time of crisis it is 'capable of coming over to our side in masses' [*Road*, p. 88]. The main thing is that Social-Democracy 'should remain unshakable, consistent, and irreconcilable' [*Road*, 89]. We have undoubtedly entered a revolutionary period [*Road*, 90].

This is how Kautsky wrote in times long, long past, fully five years ago. This is what German Social-Democracy was, or, more correctly, what it promised to be. This was the kind of Social-Democracy that could and had to be respected.

The page numbers I have inserted bring out Lenin's simple procedure: he sat down, went through the book page by page, and found something he liked on every few pages. In fact, Lenin's discussion, extensive as it is, underestimates the full overlap between Kautsky's analysis and his own post-1914 outlook. In the final chapters of *Road to Power*, Kautsky

sketches out a scenario of global revolution that he had been developing for a number of years—a scenario that Lenin accepted wholeheartedly and that became even more important to him as the years passed.

An analysis of all the issues contained in this passage would entail a full examination of Lenin's politics after 1914. In this essay I will comment on four major aspects of Lenin's aggressive unoriginality during this period.

### **The General Idea of a Revolutionary Situation**

Both Kautsky and Lenin believed that there is such a thing as a 'revolutionary situation', one that has very different political dynamics from a peaceful situation and therefore requires a very different set of tactics. In *Road to Power*, Kautsky offered four conditions as necessary components of a revolutionary situation: a regime hostile to the people, a 'party of irreconcilable opposition, with organized masses,' mass support given to the party, and, finally, an acute crisis of confidence within the anti-popular regime (Kautsky 1996, 45). Lenin later offered his own four-part definition of a revolutionary situation that, although it differs in details from Kautsky's, is obviously derived from it. Lenin comments, after giving his definition, 'such are the Marxist views on revolution, views that have been developed many, many times, have been accepted as indisputable by all Marxists, and, for us Russians, were corroborated in a particularly striking fashion by the experience of 1905.'<sup>3</sup>

One aspect of a revolutionary situation, as seen by both Lenin and Kautsky, is the idea that the political education of the masses accelerates tremendously. As Kautsky puts it in *Road to Power*:

When times of revolutionary ferment come, the tempo of progress all at once becomes rapid. It is quite incredible how swiftly the masses of the population learn in such times and achieve clarity about their class interests. Not only their courage and their desire to fight, but also their political interest is spurred on in the most powerful way by the consciousness that the moment has arrived for them to rise by their efforts out of the darkest night into the bright glory of the sun. Even the most sluggish become industrious; even the most cowardly, bold; even the most intellectually limited acquire a wider mental grasp. In such

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<sup>3</sup> Compare Lenin 1960-68, 21:214 with Kautsky 1996, 45, 51 (Lenin's 1915 definition in *Collapse of the Second International* has three numbered parts, to which Lenin immediately adds a fourth, unnumbered condition).

times, political education of the masses takes place in years, that otherwise would require generations (Kautsky 1996, 51).

Because of revolutionary situation is so distinct from a peacetime situation, it requires a fundamentally different set of tactics. This proposition underlies the famous distinction made by Kautsky in his 1910 polemics with Rosa Luxemburg: a 'strategy of attrition' vs. a 'strategy of overthrow.' Kautsky explained that the first tactic (the standard SPD activity of energetic socialist enlightenment and organization) was appropriate to a normal, non-revolutionary situation, whereas the second (mass political strikes and other non-parliamentary means of pressure) was appropriate to a genuinely revolutionary situation. Kautsky added that, while at present Germany was still in a non-revolutionary situation, nevertheless a revolutionary crisis could be expected very soon (Grunenberg 1970).

These points were taken up and emphasized in some very revealing polemics by Bolshevik writers in 1910-1911. I shall discuss Kautsky's concrete prediction of an imminent revolutionary crisis in the next section. Here I shall look at how Bolshevik writers endorsed Kautsky's contrast between tactics appropriate to a revolutionary situation vs. those appropriate to a non-revolutionary situation.

Both Kautsky and Luxemburg were supporters of the general Bolshevik strategy of relying on peasant rather than liberal allies in the upcoming democratic anti-tsarist revolution. Menshevik writers were therefore glad to see the sharp dispute between Kautsky and Luxemburg and were quick to claim that Kautsky was finally moving away from his quasi-Bolshevism. Iulii Martov made this argument in an article published in Kautsky's own journal, *Die Neue Zeit*. Martov regretted that during the revolutionary year 1905, after the tsar had granted basic political freedoms in October, 'the idea of the possibility of a "strategy of attrition" entered nobody's head.' Instead, the workers embarked on the doomed uprising of December 1905 and met a bloody defeat. But today (Martov continued), in 1910, even hardened Bolsheviks like N. Lenin admitted that 'up to now we "spoke French", but now the time has come to "speak German"' — that is, switch from the impatient revolutionary methods of the French to the patient, long-term methods of the Germans.

Martov glossed Lenin's metaphors: not 'speak French,' but speak 'Blanquist' (that is, conspiratorial putschism). Not 'speak German,' but speak 'the universal [*allgemeinmenschliche*] method of Socialist work'

(Martov 1910, 910-13).<sup>4</sup> Thus Martov and other Menshevik writers maximized the clash between Kautsky and Luxemburg. They pictured Kautsky as *rejecting* the Blanquist ‘strategy of overthrow’ in favor of the universally applicable ‘strategy of attrition.’

Martov's reading of Kautsky was directly challenged in *Die Neue Zeit* by Julian Marchlewski, a Polish Social Democrat associated with the Bolsheviks. Marchlewski pointed out that Kautsky himself used Russia in 1905 as a situation in which the ‘tactic of overthrow’ was appropriate. Therefore, ‘Martov has messed up [*verballhornt*] Kautsky's train of thought — he [Martov] wants the “strategy of attrition” to be applied always and under all circumstances. This is opportunism pure and undefiled. And it is truly a hair-raising misunderstanding for him to call on Kautsky for support’ (Marchlewski 1910, 101). This particular ‘hair-raising misunderstanding’ of Kautsky is still widespread today.

Marchlewski went back to Lenin's actual comment (made in summer 1909) about ‘speaking French’ vs. ‘speaking German’ and showed that Martov had distorted Lenin's point. Martov incorrectly implied that Lenin was conceding that ‘speaking French’ had been a mistake. Lenin's actual point was that basic strategy had to correspond to the nature of the existing situation. In Lenin's words:

During the revolution we learned to ‘speak French,’ that is, to introduce into the movement the greatest number of rousing slogans, to raise the energy of the direct struggle of the masses and extend its scope. Now, in this time of stagnation, reaction and disintegration, we must learn to ‘speak German,’ that is, to work slowly (there is nothing for it, until things revive), systematically, steadily advancing step by step, winning inch by inch.<sup>5</sup>

On the basis of this passage, Marchlewski draws a highly significant conclusion about Lenin, Kautsky, and the concept of a revolutionary situation: ‘As you can see, Lenin says here in concise words that tactics must be applied in an exact way to the situation; he recommends, if you will, the same thing as did Kautsky [a year later]: application of the “strategy of overthrow” and the “strategy of attrition” at the correct time’ (Marchlewski 1910, 102).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Although in quotes, Martov's words are a paraphrase of Lenin's argument. Martov also attacked Rosa Luxemburg for urging the SPD to ‘speak Russian,’ that is, to abandon its own correct tactic in favor of a tactic renounced in Russia itself even by extremists such as Lenin.

<sup>5</sup> July 1909 (see Lenin 1960-68, 15:458; Lenin 1958-64, 19:50).

<sup>6</sup> Lenin explicitly endorsed Marchlewski's critique of Martov (NB: Marchlewski wrote under the name of J. Karski).

### The Looming Revolutionary Situation and the Role of War

Starting at least as early as 1902, in his book *Social Revolution*, Kautsky had insisted that class antagonisms were sharpening — *not* softening, as argued by revisionists — and that a revolutionary crisis was brewing, both in Europe and on a global scale. In his 1909 book *Road to Power*, he tied the onset of a revolutionary situation to the increasingly probable outbreak of war. In his 1910 dispute with Luxemburg, he tied the onset of crisis even more tightly and explicitly to current political developments in Prussia.

For Lenin, writing in 1910, Kautsky's prediction of an imminent political crisis was a crucial and overlooked aspect of the Kautsky-Luxemburg dispute. Lenin pointed out that 'Kautsky said clearly and directly that the transition [to a strategy of overthrow] is *inevitable* during the further development of the political crisis' (Lenin 1958-64, 19:367). Lenin therefore minimized the significance of the clash between the German party's two honorary Bolsheviks: they both believed that a fundamental turning point comparable to Bloody Sunday in January 1905 was in the works. The only disagreement was whether this turning-point would occur 'now or *not just yet*, this minute or *the next minute*' (Lenin 1958-64, 20:18).

In a 1912 article, Lev Kamenev—one of Lenin's closest lieutenants at this time—also stressed Kautsky's prediction of a looming revolutionary crisis. In an effort to further minimize the significance of the clash, he added:

It is possible, even while agreeing with Kautsky in his analysis of existing objective conditions, to see at the same time that the propaganda and agitation of his opponents on the left, and their critique of the insufficient initiative of the leading elements of the party—that these things not only reflect the growing mood of the masses, but also that they are *a necessary element of the preparation of the masses for the coming 'great battles'* (Kamenev 2003, 670).

Accordingly, Kamenev divided the SPD left-wing into two tendencies: 'the advocates of a more active, mass-oriented tactic that reflects the mood of the lower classes [*nizy*]' vs. 'the careful leaders of the party, defending the old ways and not wanting to leave them until a switching over to new rails was dictated by the class enemy of the proletariat'. When this article was reprinted in 1922, Kamenev appended the following comment to the passage just quoted: 'Alas, they did not want to leave these old ways even when the class enemy issued a direct challenge to the proletariat. We thought better of them than they deserved' (Kamenev 2003, 671).

Thus, even in 1922, Kamenev does *not* say that Kautsky was wrong and Luxemburg was right in their 1910 debate. Kautsky was right about the objective situation: the 'strategy of overthrow' was not applicable in 1910. Kautsky was also right about the impending revolutionary situation. But with hindsight, the Bolsheviks could see that Luxemburg was right *about Kautsky* — that is, her suspicion that Kautsky would *never* switch rails was well-founded.

Looking back in 1917, Lenin used Kautsky's idea of two strategies and used it to critique Kautsky's own inability to switch from 'speaking German' to 'speaking French.' In this respect, Kautsky was a representative of a whole stratum of people addicted to routine and to conditions of legality:

Speaking historically and economically, [these people] do not represent a *special* stratum, they represent only a *transition* from an outlived phase of the worker movement, from the phase of 1871-1914 — a phase that gave much that was valuable, especially in the art, so necessary for the proletariat, of slow, consistent, systematic, organized work in broad, very broad, fashion — *to a phase* that is new, one that became *objectively* necessary from the time of the imperialist war, opening an *era of social revolution* (Lenin 1958-64, 31:171-2).

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In Lenin's view, the outbreak of war created a revolutionary situation almost by definition—and once again, Kautsky is a primary authority. Writing in early 1916, Lenin is outraged that Kautsky is now denying the need for revolutionary action, especially since 'the one denying revolutionary action is the very same authority of the Second International who in 1909 wrote a whole book, *Road to Power*, translated into practically all the major European languages and demonstrating the *link* between the future war and revolution' (Lenin 1958-64, 27:109-10).

In late 1918, in his masterpiece of aggressive unoriginality *Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, Lenin claimed that the link between war and revolution was a commonplace among all prewar Marxists:

Long before the war, all Marxists, all socialists were agreed that a European war would create a revolutionary situation... So, the expectation of a revolutionary situation in Europe was not an infatuation of the Bolsheviks, but the *general opinion* of all Marxists (Lenin 1960-68, 28:289, 292).

Besides Kautsky's writings, Lenin's major piece of evidence for this assertion was the Basel Manifesto of 1912. This manifesto was issued by an emergency conference convened by the Second International in Basel, Switzerland in November 1912, for the purpose of protesting against the



growing likelihood of war. In an impressive show of unity, the conference unanimously passed a manifesto that committed the socialist parties to use the outbreak of war to advance revolution. 'Let the governments remember that, given the present condition of Europe and the mood of the working class, they cannot unleash a war without danger to themselves' (Riddell 1984, 89).

According to Lenin, the official socialist parties failed to act on the solemn commitment they had made at the Basel conference. In so doing, they betrayed the whole history of the Second International, for the Basel Manifesto was nothing more than a summary of

millions and millions of proclamations, newspaper articles, books, speeches of the socialists of all countries [from] the entire epoch of the Second International, 1889-1914... To brush aside the Basel Manifesto means to brush aside the whole history of socialism. The Basel Manifesto does not say anything *special*, anything *extraordinary*. It provides only and exclusively that *by means of which* the socialists gained the following of the masses: the acknowledgement of 'peaceful' work as a *preparation* for the proletarian revolution (Lenin 1958-64, 27:102).

In other words, Lenin and his fellow-thinkers represent continuity with the outlook of the Second International. The leaders of the official socialist parties are the ones who are 'brushing aside the whole history of socialism.'

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### **The Continuity of 'Opportunism'**

'Opportunism' had always been the great enemy of what Lenin and others called 'revolutionary Social Democracy.' The opportunists were sincere and committed socialists, but unlike the orthodox Marxists, they believed more in class collaboration than class conflict as a way to achieve socialism. The lesson Lenin drew from the support given to the war by the official parties was not the existence of a strong opportunist wing in the Second International. He knew that already. What surprised and shocked him was the revelation of just how powerful opportunism had become.

His full explanation of the collapse of the Second International goes something like this: All during the history of the Second International, there has been a fight between revolutionary Social Democracy and opportunism. All prominent Marxists had realized that opportunism was a strong and growing internal threat to the integrity of Social Democratic parties. Kautsky in particular was one of the foremost fighters against opportunism, and his analysis remains useful today. But very few realized

just how far the rot had gone until the crisis of 1914 revealed it. The 'social chauvinism' and 'social patriotism' now current is merely the present-day expression of this age-old opportunism. Opportunism was a malignant cancer that has destroyed the official parties of the Second International, but its triumph will not be long-lived. The immediate task of those who remain loyal to revolutionary Social Democracy is to found a new, opportunism-free international.

Thus Lenin. Even when Lenin has condemned the old international root and branch, even when he insists on the necessity of creating a new international, he is explicitly operating with the traditional concept of opportunism. As he remarked in 1915, 'hardly a single Marxist of note can be found who has not acknowledged many times and on a variety of occasions that the opportunists are truly hostile to the socialist revolution, a non-proletarian element' (Lenin 1958-64, 26:113).<sup>7</sup> In the spirit of aggressive unoriginality, he is happy to give Kautsky his due credit in fighting opportunism in the past. Even the project of splitting Social Democracy if opportunism becomes too powerful is buttressed by Kautsky's authority.<sup>8</sup>

The political thinking behind this wager on anti-opportunism is expressed in the following passage from Kautsky's *Road to Power*, one that Lenin directly cites in his article of December 1914 discussed earlier:

The more the Social Democratic Party maintains itself as an imperturbable power in the midst of the perturbations of authority of every kind, all the higher will its authority rise. And the more it persists in irreconcilable opposition to the corruption of the ruling classes, all the greater will be the trust placed in it by the great masses of the people in the midst of the general decay that today has laid hold even of the bourgeois democrats, who are completely abandoning their principles in order to win the government's favor.

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<sup>7</sup> Many of the ideas put forth by Lenin and his associates about the social roots of opportunism — for example, a 'labour aristocracy' bribed by gains from imperialism — were also widely bruited before the war. For further documentation of Bolshevik aggressive unoriginality on the nature of imperialism, see Riddell 1984, 82-3 and 461-2.

<sup>8</sup> 'This same Kautsky wrote 15 years ago, at the beginning of the Bernstein affair, that if opportunism changed from a mood to a tendency, a split would be on the order of the day' (from 'Dead Chauvinism and Living Socialism', Lenin 1958-64, 26:102). Lenin also credits Kautsky with the idea of changing the party's name from Social Democracy to Communist (Lenin 1958-64, 26:95 [December 1914]). Other Lenin comments on Kautsky and opportunism are quoted below.

The more *imperturbable, consistent, and irreconcilable* the Social Democratic Party remains, all the more readily will it get the better of its opponents.

To demand that the Social Democratic Party participate in a policy of coalition or alliance now, when the dictum about the 'reactionary mass' has become reality, is to expect the Party to commit political suicide. To want the Social Democratic Party to link itself with bourgeois parties through an alliance policy now, at the very time when those parties have prostituted and utterly compromised themselves; to want the Party to link itself with them in order to further that very prostitution—is to demand that it commit moral suicide (Kautsky 1996, 89-90; the italicized words are those directly cited by Lenin).

In this Kautsky passage from 1909, we see foreshadowed — no, not foreshadowed, but described in detail — Lenin's political strategy in 1917. To compromise with 'opportunism', to cooperate with bourgeois parties, is to commit moral and political suicide. To stand forth proudly as an uncompromising party of irreconcilable opposition to the existing system is the path to receiving mass support.

### **Fighting Doctrinal Innovation**

Lenin indulged in his usual share of doctrinal polemics in the period 1914-1916. People often think of Lenin as breaking new ground in these polemics. What Lenin himself says he is doing, however, is defending established doctrine against newfangled distortions. I believe his self-image as a defender of orthodoxy is an accurate one. Three issues stand out among the polemics of this period. I list them in the order of the appearance of the innovations, not the order in which Lenin responded to them in print.

#### *1912: Kautsky on the state*

The polemic against the Second International in Lenin's *State and Revolution* (1917) fall under two categories: *forgetting* or overlooking vital Marxist points about the state and actively *distorting* Marxist theory. The accusation of forgetting applies mainly to the actions of the official socialist parties after the outbreak of war and thus is a typical example of aggressive unoriginality.

Lenin provides exactly one example of theoretical *distortion*, namely, an article Kautsky wrote in 1912 in a polemic with Anton Pannekoek (Kautsky 1912). A full analysis of Lenin's critique would be out of place in this essay. A couple of points need to be made. First, this post-

1909 Kautsky article is much more crucial to Lenin's critique than anything written by Kautsky *before* 1909 — so much is clear from the text of *State and Revolution* itself as well as from Lenin's various mentions of his book elsewhere.<sup>9</sup>

Further, and most importantly, Lenin is not critiquing Kautsky's orthodoxy from the point of view of some new, more radical understanding of Marx. On the contrary, he is affirming standard prewar Marxist orthodoxy and claiming (on dubious textual grounds) that Kautsky's 1912 article rejects this orthodoxy. According to Lenin, Kautsky argues or implies in his 1912 article that officials (whether of party or state) will *never* be subject to genuine democratic control, that officials will *always* be 'bureaucrats, that is, privileged persons detached from the masses and standing above the masses,' that existing bourgeois parliamentary institutions do not need to be democratically transformed, that a socialist revolution will achieve no more than 'a government willing to meet the proletariat halfway,' and that fully democratized proletarian class rule is not a necessary 'foundation for the socialist reconstruction of society' (Lenin 1960-68, 25:483-91). If Kautsky did indeed believe any of these things, then we can say that he had indeed become an out-and-out opportunist who rejected what he himself had written many times earlier.

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Lenin's picture of the long-term 'dying away of the state' is also in line with prewar orthodoxy. 'Under socialism, *everybody* will administer in turn, and will quickly become accustomed to the idea that no one administers' (Lenin 1960-68, 25:488). The idea behind Lenin's well-known epigram was almost a cliché among prewar Marxists and even among non-socialist democrats (Lih 2006). Modern-day readers of *State and Revolution*, unfamiliar with the real outlook of the Second International on these matters, are likely to misinterpret the thrust of Lenin's polemic. For Lenin, Kautsky's 1912 article was the smoking gun that proved that Kautsky had *abandoned* certain key tenets of his earlier 'revolutionary Social Democracy' and now openly sided with the opportunists on this question.

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<sup>9</sup> For documentation, see note 1. Lenin was scandalized by Kautsky's article as soon as it appeared. In a 1912 letter to Kamenev, Lenin called it 'arch-opportunist' and demanded a 'principled rebuff' to Kautsky (Lenin 1958-64, 48:87). In other words, Lenin's dislike of this article was *not* caused by any re-evaluation of Kautsky after the 1914 'betrayal'.

*1914-1915: Kautsky on 'Ultra-Imperialism'*

The historical context of Lenin's polemics with Kautsky about imperialism is set forth very clearly in *The Socialists and the War* by William English Walling. This encyclopedic book by an American socialist was published in May 1915 and represents an invaluable contemporaneous survey of disputes within the international socialist movement.

Walling introduces Kautsky as follows: 'While [Kautsky] represents the orthodox Marxian view, he does not pretend to leave the Marxian doctrine intact on war or on any other matter. Indeed, he has done more than any other living writer to *develop* that standpoint, and this is why, no doubt, he is known as the world's leading Marxian.' Walling then points out that in his latest articles on imperialism, Kautsky is breaking new ground: 'Kautsky here renounces the widely prevalent Socialist belief (often seen in the following documents) that capitalism necessarily means war, or that permanent peace must wait for Socialism. He takes the contrary view' (Walling 1915, 16-8).

As a typical expression of the standard Marxist view, Walling gives excerpts from articles by a prominent American socialist, Morris Hillquit. In articles published in 1914-1915, Hillquit makes the following assertions:

The Socialists [as opposed to bourgeois pacifists] realize that under existing conditions wars are inevitable. *The Socialists assert that wars are bound to become more frequent and violent as the capitalist system approaches its climax ...* The clash might have come somewhat earlier. It might have been delayed somewhat. But in the long run it was inevitable. It is idle to place the blame for the monstrous crime on any particular nation or government, to seek the aggressor. Capitalism has made this war, and all the nations are the victims.<sup>10</sup>

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Walling comments that 'if we wish to know what the Socialist thought on war was becoming immediately before the present struggle, we must look to Kautsky and [Otto] Bauer. If we wish to know what it *actually was*, we must look to Hillquit' (Walling 1915, 21).

Lenin remained loyal to socialist thought as 'it actually was' and resisted Kautsky's innovative speculation about the possibility of 'ultra-imperialism'. Kautsky now argued:

From the purely economic standpoint, it is therefore not excluded that capitalism may yet experience a new phase, namely the *transposition of the*

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<sup>10</sup> These excerpts from Hillquit are from articles published in 1914-1915 (Hillquit's emphasis); they can be found in Walling 1915, 22-3.

*policy of the cartels to the realm of foreign policy*—in other words, a phase of ultra-imperialism, which naturally we would have to combat as energetically as we combated imperialism, but the danger of which would take a different form, not a world arms race and threat to world peace (Salvadori 1979, 189).

Lenin's hostility to Kautsky's new ideas about ultra-imperialism meant that his 1916 book, *Imperialism*, became an exercise in defending Kautsky-then against Kautsky-now. As he explained in a preface to this work written in 1920, 'Special attention has been devoted in this pamphlet to a criticism of the international ideological trend of *kautskianstvo*... The views held by Kautsky and his like are a complete renunciation of the very same revolutionary principles of Marxism which he championed for decades, especially in his struggle against socialist opportunism (Bernstein, Millerand, Hyndman, Gompers, etc.)' (Lenin 1960-68, 22:192).<sup>11</sup>

#### *1916: Right of National Self-Determination*

In 1916, Lenin was involved in two major disputes over the national question, particularly over the right of self-determination and of secession. In each case, he pictured himself as fending off attacks on the official recognition of the right of national self-determination by the Russian Social Democratic Party, as stated in its program of 1903. In each dispute, he reaffirmed his solidarity with Kautsky's prewar writings and used him as an authority to rebut his opponents.

In 1903, at the Second Party Congress, the main opponents of Point Nine of the party's 'minimum program' — the recognition of the right of national determination — were Polish socialists who rejected the idea of separation from Russia as reactionary bourgeois nationalism. In 1913-1914, the same dispute arose once again and Lenin waded in with a polemic aimed particularly at Rosa Luxemburg. Lenin repeated his basic point that

if we do not put forth and emphasize in our agitation the slogan of the *right* to separation, we play in the hands not only of the bourgeoisie of *oppressing* nations, but also of its feudalists and its absolutism. Kautsky put forth this

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<sup>11</sup> The Second International Marxist quoted most extensively and favorably in Lenin's *Imperialism* is Rudolf Hilferding, the Austrian author of *Finance Capital* (Hilferding 1910). In the wartime writings of Lev Kamenev and Nikolai Bukharin, Hilferding is also praised for his 'brilliantly' prophetic analysis (Kamenev 1922). For Bukharin's use of Hilferding to refute Kautsky's theory of 'ultra-imperialism,' see Bukharin 1915, 86-8, 92-3.

conclusion against Rosa Luxemburg a long time ago, and it cannot be disputed (Lenin 1958, 25:275).<sup>12</sup>

These words were written in 1914, before the beginning of the war and Lenin's break with Kautsky. In 1916, when preparing his 1914 article for republication, Lenin was aware that his invocation of Kautsky as an authority might lead to misunderstanding. He therefore commented in a footnote: 'We ask the reader not to forget that Kautsky up to 1909, up to his excellent book *Road to Power*, was a foe of opportunism, to whose defense he turned only in 1910-11, and completely decisively only in 1914-16' (Lenin 1958-64, 25:259).

In 1916, a group of Polish socialists returned to the attack. Their manifesto, drafted by Karl Radek, emphasized their *discontinuity* with the prewar Second International: 'The self-determination formula was left to us as an inheritance from the Second International... The policy of defense of the fatherland has brought results in the World War that very clearly show the counterrevolutionary nature of the self-determination formula' (Riddell 1984, 350-1).

In response, Lenin emphasized *continuity* with prewar polemics. He argued that the critics of Clause Nine in 1916 were making exactly the same mistake made by the critics back in 1903. In each case, the 'theoretical kernel' of the debate was that a dismissive attitude to the right of national self-determination was a form of 'economism,' a Russian form of opportunism that downgraded the urgency of democratic revolution (Lenin 1960-68, 22:326).<sup>13</sup>

In fall 1916, Lenin was forced to respond to yet another attack on Clause Nine, this time from left-wing Bolsheviks such as Nikolai Bukharin and Iu. Piatakov. Again recalling the 1903 debates, Lenin called Piatakov's position 'imperialist economism.' Once again, Kautsky was used to buttress Lenin's contention that a democratic war for national self-determination was still possible in the imperialist age:

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<sup>12</sup> Lenin refers to Kautsky articles from 1895 and 1908.

<sup>13</sup> Later in this article on national self-determination, Lenin refers to 'the resolution of our Party in 1913 giving a precise '*antikautskianskoe*' definition (that is, one that does not tolerate purely verbal 'recognition') of the content of the issue' (Lenin 1958-64, 22:358). This comment dramatically underscores the gulf between *kautskianstvo* (revolutionary words without revolutionary deeds) and Kautsky's ideas, since, as we have seen, the 1913 resolution was defended by Lenin precisely by invoking Kautsky's pronouncements on national self-determination.

Up to the 1914-1916 war, Karl Kautsky was a Marxist, and many of his major writings and statements will always remain models of Marxism. On August 26, 1910, he wrote in *Die Neue Zeit*, in reference to the imminent war: 'In war between Germany and England the issue is not democracy, but world domination, that is, exploitation of the world. That is not an issue on which Social-Democrats can side with the exploiters of their nation.'

There you have an excellent Marxist formulation, one that fully coincides with our own and fully exposes the *present-day* Kautsky, who has turned from Marxism to defense of social-chauvinism. It is a formulation (we shall have occasion to revert to it in other articles) that clearly brings out the principles underlying the Marxist attitude towards war. War is the continuation of politics. Hence, once there is a struggle for democracy, a war for democracy is *possible*. National self-determination is but one of the democratic demands and does not, in principle, differ from other democratic demands (Lenin 1960-68, 23:35).

We have finished our brief survey of Lenin's aggressive unoriginality in the years 1914-1916. Lenin vehemently claims that his own definition of the current situation is based solidly on the prewar consensus of revolutionary Marxists, especially as expressed in the writings of Karl Kautsky. The key themes in his political platform—the underlying idea of a revolutionary situation, the assertion that the world war had create a revolutionary situation, the obligations of the socialist parties to oppose the war and to work for revolution, the causes and consequences of their failure to meet these obligations—are all firmly anchored by him in this prewar consensus. Attempts by Kautsky and others to move away from the consensus are met by Lenin with a firm rebuttal.

Somewhat different expressions of aggressive unoriginality characterize both the revolutionary year 1917 and the first year and a half of power. At the end of 1918, in his book-length polemic against 'renegade Kautsky,' Lenin uses this kind of rhetoric to describe his differences with Kautsky on the issues of bourgeois vs. proletarian democracy, international revolution, and peasant policy. During 1919, Lenin began to realize that certain key Bolshevik assumptions were not panning out. Among these were assumptions about international revolution, peasant policy, economic 'steps toward socialism,' and proletarian democracy. Of course, Lenin does not reject his earlier outlook. Indeed, he makes as little cognitive adjustment as possible. Nevertheless, he ruefully realizes that day-to-day policy can no longer be premised on the expectation of immediate



revolution in Europe, of steady 'steps toward socialism,' and the like. This period of Lenin's activity might be called 'reluctant originality.'<sup>14</sup>

We will conclude by addressing the following paradox. How is it that Lenin, standing almost alone and taking on the entire socialist establishment, emphasized his own unoriginality? The answer to this natural query is that Lenin saw his task as the one shamefully forfeited by socialists such as Kautsky, namely, devising the new *tactics* called for by the long-predicted revolutionary situation.

It is the ABC of Marxism that the tactics of the socialist proletariat cannot be the same both when there is a revolutionary situation and when there is no revolutionary situation... When Kautsky was still a Marxist, for example, in 1909, when he wrote his *Road to Power*, it was the idea that war would inevitably lead to *revolution* that he advocated, and he spoke of the approach of an *era of revolutions*... But in 1918, when revolutions did begin in connection the war, Kautsky, instead of explaining that they were inevitable, instead of pondering over and thinking out the *revolutionary* tactics and the way and means of preparing for revolution, began to describe the reformist tactics of the Mensheviks as internationalism. Isn't this apostasy? (Lenin 1960-68, 28:289, 283).

This was Lenin's self-appointed task: 'pondering over and thinking out the *revolutionary* tactics and the way and means of preparing for revolution' in the new yet long-predicted revolutionary situation— not just for Russia, but for Europe as a whole. He had the strength of will (or foolhardiness, or conceit?) to move beyond his previous focus on Russia and assert a claim to European leadership because he felt that the leaders who *should* have worked out these new tactics had failed to do so. He had the courage to take on the entire socialist establishment precisely *because* he felt that he, and not they, represented the prewar consensus of Marxist socialism.

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<sup>14</sup> Lenin's adjustments during this period will be described in more detail in my forthcoming biography of Lenin from Reaktion Books.

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*MEDIA, ARTS, AND CULTURE*

## **Ipsographing the Subject or, The Contradictions of Twitter**

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### **#Briefing**

Twitter (<http://twitter.com>) is a 'microblogging' program that US programmer and entrepreneur Jack Dorsey launched in 2006. It is similar to earlier 'Web 2.0' applications like blogs, podcasts, and social networks like Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>): the service is free to use, and with it a user can send short text messages of up to 140 characters in length. The brevity of Twitter's message capacity has prompted its description as a 'micro-' blog service; however, as corporate media and communications scholars have recently learned, it is the combination of soundbite-ready brevity, adaptability to portable devices, and broadcast reach that have distinguished Twitter's specific contribution to the Web 2.0 mediascape. It's like a digital telegraph system, except that your telegraph can be broadcast, not just sent to one recipient. Twitter messages, or 'tweets,' tend to be much shorter than average blog posts; they can be sent from computers, mobile phones, and other portable digital devices; and—depending on how a user sets one's account—tweets can be either reserved only for one's private circle of contacts, or published to the publicly available Web. The service has a strong bias towards public tweeting: the user who would only let 'approved' people follow one's tweets is advised that 'you WILL NOT be on the public timeline.' For users who leave their tweeting public (the default setting), all messages are displayed and archived at a web address unique to the user (for instance, my Twitter page is [twitter.com/sonicfiction](http://twitter.com/sonicfiction)). In addition, message topics are also flagged by keyword and 'hash tags:' tagging a topic with # as a prefix (e.g. #IranElection) links it to all other messages that include the same tagged topic.

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The use of tagged topics and keywords makes tweets searchable by topic, and aggregates tweets into what the Twitter home page calls 'trending topics.' For example, at the time of writing, #IranElection has returned as a trending topic after several weeks on the topic sidelines. The display of aggregated topics is new to the Twitter home page as of late 2009; just a few months ago the home page only showed a short description of the service and a login prompt. The aggregator now both documents and develops trending topics: as more commercial advertisers, especially spammers, exploit the service, trending topics frequently show up as nonsensical keywords in unrelated tweets; for example, a recent rash of pornographic spam tweets included 'H1N1' to attract attention.

On any given day, Twitter's three lists of trending topics (sorted by minute, day, and week) show items that seem to confirm the service's reputation as trivial and self-indulgent. Right now, for instance, trending topics include the rappers Jay-Z and Kanye West, the TV shows *Heroes* and *Gossip Girl*, and anecdote-inviting topics like 'Pirate Day,' 'whatnottowear,' and 'inmyhood.' Then again, current topics also include Qaddafi, IranElection, and Sydney.

#### **#Paradox of form: Filter and feed**

Perhaps the mainstream media's surge of interest in Twitter this past year has had to do with its functions as both a news filter and a news feed. The trending topics that appear on the home page (and as a sidebar on the user's page) represent a kind of filter by aggregating tweets on the most popular topics among users. And yet clicking on any of these topics, or searching a topic by keyword or tagged phrase, yields a feed of results that is anything but filtered. I find that the page of tweets on any given trending topic makes for vertiginous reading: sorted by time posted, the tweets compose a kind of cento, a tissue of short quotations—quips, reports, retorts, SMS abbreviations, Internet links, and 're-tweets': tweets deemed worthy of relaying by other Twitter users. (See Okáčová 2009 for an introduction to the obscure cento genre.) As if the abrupt show of heteroglossia wasn't enough, the site automatically updates to show how many more tweets on a topic have been posted since you started looking. Clicking this announcement prompts a cascade of newer tweets, and if the topic is hot enough, it becomes impossible simply to read all the incoming posts—never mind undertake anything like vetting or fact-checking.

So herein lies a paradox of Twitter: the same aggregators that filter the hottest topics also feed those topics with anything and everything

posted about them. Or, to put it in tweet-friendly short form: Twitter's feed counteracts its filter. I recently made the mistake of scanning the 'H1N1' topic when it re-emerged as a trending topic about a week ago. The resulting deluge of wisecracks, cellphone dispatches from classrooms, links to international media stories, and unsupported speculations was maybe the most unhelpful and anxiety-inducing encounter I've had with mass media since September 11, 2001. Suffice to say, I didn't come away feeling any better informed about the issue. Rather, worse—and more confused as well. Celebrity gossip, hot links, and random rants aside, the 'newsworthy' content available on Twitter activates at once the technological and the postmodern sublime: its interface performs a kind of real-time information overload, as extant posts pastiche perspectives on a topic, and new posts pour down to displace them; while the content and source of these posts demands a critical reading defied by their sheer volume. While Twitter's homepage invites us to 'discover what's happening right now,' its content requires us to problematize 'what's happening' as not an empirical event, but a negative dialectic question: *Is it happening?* (Lyotard 1993, 254).

#### **#Dialectic of function: Trivia versus traction**

Twitter's feed function (with its high turnover of new posts and the textual disposability that it suggests) and its frequent filtration of entertainment topics point to a related Twitter paradox: its reputation for both inconsequential trivia and political praxis. This paradox frames the majority of Twitter's coverage in — and adoption by — the corporate news media. Early reports about Twitter as a new social-media service tended to characterize its brevity as faddish (and vaguely symptomatic of 'digital-native' youth), and its content as trivial — until tweets from Mumbai in November 2008 and Iran earlier this year began dramatically contradicting the triviality of tweets, and commanding substantial global audiences, prompting news programmers to recognize in Twitter's previously ridiculed brevity an eminently economical source of soundbites. Tweets have since quickly made their way into regular reporting on CNN and other news channels and programs.

While the same concerns about filtration, overload, and veracity obtain, the use of Twitter in the Iran election in the summer of 2009 represents a dramatic rejuvenation of the 'borderless' idealism that popularized the Internet in the 1990s; for the same reason, it also provided the corporate news media with an ideally hegemonic narrative about new media and neoliberal globalization, in which 'ordinary' (read: Westernized

and middle-class) Iranians became militant citizen journalists, risking (and in too many cases giving) their lives to expose a repressive state apparatus in the name of democracy. The Iran election (which as I said recurs as a Twitter topic, even if it has dropped from the corporate news radar) thus gave new clout and traction to the public perception of Twitter as something more than yet another Web 2.0 application: a program whose strengths are design simplicity and cross-platform adaptability, resulting in what is essentially broadband telegraphy: simultaneously peer-to-peer and broadcast communication, from anywhere or anything online or satellite-linked.

### **#Dilemma of Twitteracy: Corruption or creativity?**

Woven into the debate over Twitter's triviality versus its efficacy is a perennial and familiar discourse of new media as a threat to language, memory, and cognition. In early 2009, British neuroscientist Lady Susan Greenfield argued that social media like Twitter 'are devoid of cohesive narrative and long-term significance,' and hypothesized that 'the mid-21st century mind might almost be infantilised, characterised by short attention spans, sensationalism, inability to empathise and a shaky sense of identity' (quoted in Wintour 2009, ¶2-4). Such speculations aren't just tricky to substantiate, they also reproduce a line of media criticism that includes complaints about e-mail composition (declared 'awful' by *Time* magazine in 1994 [Elmer-Dewitt 1994, ¶4]) and reaches back through Western history: to Swift's 1712 *Proposal for Correcting the English Tongue*, in which he anticipated complaints against text messaging (in chauvinistic terms that suggest something of the bias behind his modern-day counterparts): 'This perpetual Disposition to shorten our Words, by retrenching the Vowels, is nothing else but a tendency to lapse into the Barbarity of those Northern Nations from whom we are descended, and whose Languages labour all under the same Defect' (26). And, further back, to the anonymous 'Advice' published for what in 1682 was the relatively new print industry, bemoaning (this time in gendered language)

the innumerable insolences of that Presse [in] softening our Language, and so to confound the rules of spelling, that the weake and ignorant may justify their involuntary slips from such voluntarie errors as you commit; or from a more generall ground whereby now of late days, Libertie of writing is become as reasonable, as libertie of beleiving [sic]

and worship: And so there should remain no such thing as true and false spelling in the English Tongue. (Swift 1712, 8)

And, ultimately, to the fourth-century BC story of Theuth, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where the Egyptian god is blamed for inventing a new medium only useful for forgetting: 'You, who are the father of writing, have out of fondness for your off-spring attributed to it quite the opposite of its real function. Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful' (quoted in Postman 1992, 4).

David Thornburg documents this tradition of hostility to new media in education, from defenses of bark against chalk slates in 1703, defenses of slates against paper in 1815, defenses of pencil against ink in 1907, defenses of nib pens against disposable ballpoints in 1950 (quoted in Anderson 2009).

In all cases, the once-menacing new medium later becomes the established norm against which to criticize new technologies; and this discursive pattern recurs in most Western systems of cultural production (see McCutcheon 2007 for a short history of this pattern in the music industry). And in most cases, the argument against new media is based on a specious premise of profound, *potential* social and psychological harm that masks the economic interests advancing the argument. (In this respect, the music industry is a more transparently mercenary exception.)

Opposing this ancient line of argument, other scholars and critics point to the creative opportunities that new media afford. Summarizing the findings of the recent Stanford Study of Writing (<http://ssw.stanford.edu/research/research.php>), Clive Thompson suggests that social media like Twitter foster rhetorical savvy, audience awareness, and editing skill among their users: 'online media are pushing literacy into cool directions. The brevity of texting and status updating teaches young people to deploy haiku-like concision' (1992, ¶8). And they can apparently teach obscure literary genres, too: one blog has posted a 'cento' comprised of selected comments on a Youtube video (Rutherford 2009). Following Thornburg, contemporary distance-education theorists like George Siemens and Terry Anderson counter the pedagogical antagonism to new media with a theory of connectivism, which recognizes the sociocultural and educational values of network-building, including identification, cross-pollination, altruism, and autonomous organization (Anderson 2009).

So the case that tends to be made against Twitter today is a familiar one, sharpened perhaps by the recent financial woes of print media. Hence

the *National Post*'s recent editorial complaints about 'young people [...] now fill[ing] cyberspace with sentences that are poorly punctuated' (Fulford 2009, A13) and about the 'Facebook generation's love of run-on sentences' (Wallace 2009, A12). Ostensibly part of a special section for National Punctuation Day, these columns are really about promoting and protecting the print industry from its digital nemesis—which is, at the same time, a junior member of the corporate business establishment. It is in this economic context that I'll ground my own critical reservations about Twitter and subjectivity, lest any of the foregoing expose me to accusations of techno-fetishism.

### **#Twitternomics: communication as commodity**

There's a concern about subjectivity that tends to get sidelined by traditionally scripted debates over whether Twitter 'infantilizes the 21st-century mind,' even as social media users themselves periodically raise it: I'm thinking of the concern over users' intellectual property — everything from the pictures we post to the 'haiku-like' status updates we publish — and the grey area of copyright, commoditization, and exploitation this property is subjected to when individual users circulate it through—and effectively consign it too —media vehicles owned by corporations. Twitter advertises itself as a small start-up that has yet to turn a profit—a fact that's given its own share of grist to the corporate media PR mill. But a corporation it is, and while its service terms currently attribute all content ownership to the users that post it, such terms are always subject to change, especially where increasing profit is concerned (as Facebook users are perennially learning, between changes to that service's terms and attempts to identify the investors financing its rich data mine).

One significant implication of using corporate services like Twitter for increasingly routine and popular forms of personal and political communication is the default commoditization of any and all communications delivered through such services. Twitter may offer itself (for the time being) as a free service whose only (and itself not inconsiderable) cost is access to online or uplinked hardware. But it entails other kinds of cost, other externalities. Enthusiasts who refute the commodity character of tweets must turn a blind eye to one of its most obvious symptoms: the tide of commercial spam that has washed over Twitter as readily as it has already flooded e-mail. (I have blocked numerous potential 'followers' in freelance marketing and media consultants, pornography vendors, online retailers, and fast-food



franchises; some would-be followers seem to tweet about nothing more than how to automatically follow large numbers of Twitter users.)

The technological parameters of Twitter also convey its commodity character (though perhaps more subtly than Facebook's matching of advertising to personal profile content). Twitter's textual economy (i.e. its 140-character limit) normalizes for communication the neoliberal ideology that fiscal austerity is the only way to run a public service. Not that there's any limit to the number of one's tweets, or the capacity of other social media applications to distribute vastly larger forms of communication and content; 'Woofertime' (<http://woofertime.com>) has recently emerged as a 1400-character-minimum 'macroblog' answer to Twitter. But Twitter's technological formalization of the soundbite as a popular currency for peer and broadcast exchange does overdetermine content in certain ways, as suggested by the fresh attention being paid in its wake to the purportedly endangered practice of paying attention. Mike Elgan's article (2008) on 'attention control' exemplifies this argument, while Cory Doctorow's tips for 'writing in the age of distraction' (2009) provide a model resource for retaining a focused work schedule for writers of all kinds. I say 'purported' to disclaim making any empirical or statistical claim, but anecdotal observation and conversations with many colleagues these days do tend to support the notion that the proliferation of information and communication technologies, social media, and other online and uplinked applications and devices is significantly impacting the social and psychological processes of cognitive concentration and focused attention.

### **#Twitter in public space: performing documentation, documenting performance**

Let me share one anecdote from my own social life, a once-respectable calendar of club and party nights sharply transformed (and indeed matured) by the domestic responsibilities of parenting. Until this past summer, the last time I'd gone out for a proper night of dancing at a club was (alas) five years ago. At the same club, in fact. This unplanned constancy of venue maybe helped to dramatize the difference I saw in the crowd's forms of social performativity. That earlier club night had taken place right on the cusp of 'Web 2.0'; cell phones were already well on their way to becoming the twenty-first century's Swiss Army knife, but Twitter wouldn't yet have been a glimmer in Jack Dorsey's eye, and the iPhone was still being incubated in an Apple R&D vat somewhere. Flash-forward to 2009, and what was quite visibly different about the dance crowd in this

club was how frequently, even compulsively, clubgoers seemed to be checking their cell phone or PDA. It was like texting had replaced the smoking that had been banned shortly before I stopped clubbing. (Prior to this, I could recall only one dance event where I had noticed cell phones in frequent use: a rave in 2001 where a web page projected text messages sent to it by partygoers—not all that different from the way Twitter users now tweet en masse about specific events, except displayed on one big screen.)

While similarly informal and unscientific, other kinds of studies and evidence corroborate my impression. Browse Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com>) for social events, for example: the *de facto* public depository of amateur photojournalism today houses snaps of every kind of social occasion, from club nights to pride parades to Burning Man and beyond, into countless *demimondes*. You will soon see portable digiphenalia ubiquitously, conspicuously, and sometimes self-consciously showcased by the photo subjects who own and use them. Or consider this midsummer Facebook update from a friend who's a new(ish) father: 'Dear dads at the park: get your nose out of your blackberry and play with your kids. It's shameful that other children are asking me to play with them as you won't. Losers.' (Ironically, he sent this via his iPhone.) The user-friendliness of personal hardware and the multilateral accessibility of social media are together creating new modes of performing documentation and documenting performance that reconfigure not only the distinctions between asynchronous and synchronous communications (recall the real-time 'chat'-like rapidity with which new tweets appear on any hot topic, reframing the screen record as a live stage) but also, and more significantly, the already-changing divisions between public and private life.

### **#Towards a critical vocabulary for social media: ipsography of the subject**

To be sure, Twitter and iPhone alone are not driving these dramatic changes in the way personal media interact with public performance. And once upon a time, the pocket notebook and pencil may well have seemed like a similar public nuisance. But the apparent swiftness and pervasiveness with which versatile networked devices (like the iPhone) and robust, virtualized communication applications (like Twitter) have infiltrated public space today demands that we attend to the dialectical, paradoxical, and chiasmic contradictions of these technologies (as I have tried to do in the reflections above), and that we develop a critical and

theoretical vocabulary adequate to thinking through the changes, challenges, and limits they represent. To this latter end, I'd like to propose two related terms towards such a vocabulary. First, I'd like to rescue from obsolescence the word *ipsography*: the process of self-recording, the recording of the self. This word ably connotes the compulsive documentation of the self with an application like Twitter, the public recording of private practices, and of course the durable hegemony of liberal individualism that underwrites it.

And yet — and here is the final contradiction Twitter has got me thinking about — this very self that is so compulsively recorded is a self both divided and distributed. This self is divided, in the unevenly divided attention it pays to the virtual ICT environment, on one hand, and the concrete, corporeal space that it — or its double — inhabits at any given time. A division of subjectivity between practices of representation and processes of being present, perhaps (and while poststructuralist theory holds that being present is itself a representational practice, it also acknowledges the multiplicity and provisionality of the 'self' modeled here). And this self is distributed, of course, not only between its virtual and 'real-world' milieus, but more radically — that is, with far less user-end control — within the virtual milieu, where the self is not only an aggregate of its representations, but also their potentially infinite redistributions: archiving, syndication, re-tweets, linking, paraphrase, plagiarism, etc.

Exit, then, the constructed, twentieth-century subject, and enter the connected, twenty-first-century *dubject*: a self recording and recorded, a self dubbed and doubled, a self spaced, between cyberspace and real time. Connoting both the *subject* of critical theory — the complex of social forces articulated and reproduced through an individual body—and the *dub* of Jamaican recording-industry science (Davis 2004) — the differentiated duplication of a track to emphasize its multiple spatial and sonic possibilities — the *dubject* seems to me a fitting title for the increasingly familiar figure of today's mediatized *flâneur*, no longer alone in the crowd, but transacting through the looking-glass of a technology like Twitter with its other selves and their distributed social circles, the glow of that teeming world in the strobe-lit darkness of the party making faintly visible the hand that holds it.

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REVIEW ESSAY

## **Social Science and the Afghan War** Canadian Perspectives

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Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang. 2007. *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar*. Toronto: Penguin Group. ISBN 9780143055372. Paperback: 20.00 CAD. Pages: 304.

Warnock, John W. 2008. *Creating a Failed State: The US and Canada in Afghanistan*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing. ISBN 9781552662625. Paperback: 21.95 CAD. Pages: 150.

There is a growing consensus among policy makers and international relations specialists that the western-led military mission in Afghanistan has reached an impasse. After eight years of conflict, the political, economic and military objectives of western states have yet to be achieved. The Taliban is inflicting major losses on NATO forces, and the most recent Presidential election was mired by fraud and corruption. Civilian casualties are rising, and there is a growing fear within NATO of replicating the Soviet failure in Afghanistan. While the Obama administration is currently debating a Pentagon request for tens of thousands of additional troops, public opinion in the US and other NATO countries is polling against both the current mission and the plans for a 'surge.' At the time of writing, it is unclear if the Obama administration will expand the war against the Taliban, or reconfigure the mission to focus more on aid and counter-terrorism operations.

The current debate on Afghanistan in the US is not new for Canadians. Since 2005, Canada has been fighting a counterinsurgency war in Kandahar. Prior to that, Canada participated in the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 and in NATO-led ISAF missions beginning in 2003. Canada has spent tens of billions of dollars on a 'whole-of-government' approach to nation building and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. This strategy has been implemented through a 'Provincial Reconstruction Team' in Kandahar, where the Department of National Defence (DND), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA),

and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAIT) jointly operate military, developmental and diplomatic projects. According to Moens (2008), this intervention has triggered a 'revolution in Canadian foreign policy,' most notably a rapid increase in defence spending, a militarization of Canadian security doctrine, and a new alignment with US foreign policy. Given these changes, the war in Afghanistan has become a flashpoint in Canadian politics and media. There is an ongoing public debate on the goals, methods, failures and achievements of Canada's mission.

This debate has also emerged in the social sciences. Starting in 2007, there has been a proliferation of scholarship on Canadian foreign policy and the war in Afghanistan (e.g. Bell 2009; Nef and Robles 2008). This paper looks in detail at two important books by Stein and Lang (2007) and Warnock (2008). These books utilize different methods to examine the crisis in Afghanistan. The first is structured around a liberal theory of international relations and foreign policy decision-making, while the second is shaped by the methods of Marxism and critical political economy. These different approaches lead to very different assessments of the mission and to opposite conclusions on how Canada should proceed. While the former lends itself to a strategy of tactical reorganization, the latter marks out an anti-occupation position.

*Unexpected War* by Stein and Lang offers a detailed narrative of Canada's role in Afghanistan since 2001. The book is structured around a series of interviews with Canadian policy makers such as Paul Martin, John McCallum and Bill Graham, who were key decision-makers in the early stages of the war and in the lead up to Canada's relocation to Kandahar. Based upon these interviews, the book presents an inside account of the conflict.

The narrative is highly engaging. Stein and Lang reveal the internal confusions of the Chretien and Martin governments, the fierce competition between DFAIT and DND, the extraordinary influence of General Rick Hillier, and the outside pressures of the Bush administration. According to the authors, it is this mix of government uncertainty, bureaucratic infighting, personality politics, and external influence that shaped and directed Canada's role in Afghanistan.

The book's discussion of Operation Apollo in 2001, for example, reveals a welter of contradictions inside the state. While Canada offered naval units and JTF2 commandos to the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom, cabinet decisions were made on the assumption of an 'early in, early out' scenario. The DND, however, viewed the emerging 'war on terrorism' as a new opportunity for both re-equipping the military and

redefining Canadian foreign policy. To this end, Canadian officers based at US Central Command in Tampa Bay, Florida, passed on requests from US military personnel for a combat deployment in 2002. Cabinet approved this deployment, which committed 800 combat troops to Kandahar on a stabilization mission, even though the request for this mission emerged outside the normal channels of inter-state diplomacy.

As the authors reveal, this was not the only time that DND officials engaged in mission prodding. In Summer 2002, DND officials briefed cabinet members on the merits of extending the mission in Kandahar instead of joining the ISAF operation in Kabul. This briefing was presented as a tip-off on a forthcoming US request to stay in Kandahar. However, when Minister of Defence John McCallum visited Washington in January 2003, Donald Rumsfeld requested Canada's leadership of ISAF. McCallum and Rumsfeld struck an informal agreement: Canada would not join the US in Iraq, but would instead command the ISAF/NATO mission in Kabul. The tacit agreement was that Canada would oversee and manage the Afghan theater as American forces left for the Gulf. Canada's role in ISAF would also be to mediate any potential conflicts with Europe.

For Stein and Lang, Canada's role in Afghanistan became less clear in December 2003 after Paul Martin assumed the Prime Ministership. Martin viewed the mission as a legacy of Chretien and was more interested in charting his own course in 'failed states' such as Darfur and Haiti. However, after ruling out a Canadian role in BMD, a consensus emerged in cabinet, DFAIT and DND to make a recommitment to Afghanistan. As compensation to the Americans, Canada would participate in the NATO effort to expand PRTs throughout the country. These PRTs would combine defence, developmental and diplomatic functions in a single setting, and test the '3D' strategy of the International Policy Statement, Canada's new foreign policy doctrine. Unfortunately, the delay in making this decision left Canada with only one option for deployment: Kandahar. In a 'classic case of bureaucratic dithering and bickering' (134), Canada was forced to establish a PRT in the Taliban homeland.

Canada's PRT was designed around four elements: the deployment of 1,000 infantry and JTF2 commandos to Kandahar; a command responsibility over Kandahar multinational headquarters; the implementation of aid and development projects through CIDA; and the establishment of a 'Strategic Advisory Team' within the Presidential Office of Hamid Karzai. The goal of the PRT was to stabilize Kandahar militarily in order for aid and development projects to succeed. The Canadian mission

was expected to end in 2007, after which Canada would assist in 'troubled spots' such as Darfur or Palestine.

As Bill Graham recalls, 'We were probably drinking too much of our own bathwater' (186). Despite gung-ho rhetoric from military officials, Canada was unprepared for the conflict that ensued. Canada ignored intelligence on the growing strength of the Taliban insurgency, took few precautions in turning over detainees to torture in Afghan jails, utilized counterinsurgency methods that alienated the population, and allocated funds for military purposes at a level ten times higher than that for development. Despite these trends, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper claimed ownership of the war and succeeded twice in extending the mission with Liberal support.

Stein and Lang close their book with a critical assessment of Canada's 'unexpected war.' First, they identify key contradictions in the 3D strategy, in particular, the bureaucratic rivalries between DND, DFAIT and CIDA. Second, they highlight continental relations as the primary concern of policy makers:

The Canada-U.S. relationship framed every major recommendation that Canada's military leaders made to their minister. Afghanistan was never the subject but only the object, the terrain in which the Canadian Forces operated as they struggled with an assertive Bush administration. Afghanistan could have been anywhere. It was no more than a spot on the map (262).

Nevertheless, Stein and Lang argue for a mission extension. They acknowledge ongoing problems of warlordism, corruption, civilian casualties and torture, yet argue that Canada must stay the course to support a UN-sanctioned mission, to preserve NATO as an alliance, to 'build schools and clinics,' to enhance democracy and women's rights, and to prevent civil war and terrorism. To meet these challenges, Canada must 'reconfigure its military and its development assistance program, as well as the way its departments work together outside Canada' (297). Political leaders must 'speak clearly to the public' and explain why 'we are there for a generation' (297).

For Stein and Lang, this commitment is warranted as a positive example of liberal internationalism:

When Canada commits to rescue failed and failing states, its political leaders are asking for an extraordinary act of imagination, one that asks Canadians to accept that they share a common fate, a destiny, with people who live halfway around the globe. Those in Britain who led the anti-slavery movement in the nineteenth century made this heroic leap, and saw their own humanity bound



with the humanity of slaves. When Canadian soldiers go to Kandahar – or to Darfur or to Haiti – Canadians must be able to make this same leap (302).

To emphasize their point, Stein and Lang end their book with a quote from an Afghan named Farid, who told John Manley that, 'Afghanistan is your child. If you do not support a child, teaching it how to walk, it cannot stand on its own two feet. Afghanistan is your child' (304). Through such metaphors, Stein and Lang stake their case for a generation-long war.

This paternalistic conclusion is one of many problems. For example, the liberal methodology of interviewing key decision-makers has mixed results. On the one hand, it offers a unique understanding of personality politics inside the state. On the other hand, the interview material is not compared to other evidence on the background to the conflict, the motivations of western policy in Central Asia, and the course of events in Afghanistan since 2001. The liberal approach is *idealist* in that it focuses on *ideas of individuals in power* as the main determinant of foreign policy. Left out of the analysis are *material* factors such as geopolitical rivalries, economic interests, and the history of western foreign policy. The authors ignore these structural variables and instead develop their narrative largely on the basis of interviews with powerful politicians. The final product, while informative in many respects, offers little more than a 'great leader' understanding of the conflict.

The book is also limited by an uncritical acceptance of the 'war on terror.' Not mentioned is the history of US intervention in Afghanistan since 1978, when the Carter administration first provided funds to the mujahideen. The authors also leave aside the connection between 9/11 and the history of US foreign policy in the Middle East, as well as the political motivations of al-Qaeda (Mohamedou 2006). The historical narrative is also quite narrow, and ignores the civil war period of 1992-1996 and the crimes committed at the time by our current allies in Afghanistan. More importantly, there is little information on the wider context of state building and reconstruction in Afghanistan since 2001. Left out, or glossed over, are troubling issues such as the external manipulation of state-building assemblies in 2001 and 2002; the reconstitution of the Northern Alliance militias; the repression of women's rights by fundamentalists in the new Afghan Parliament; the growing restrictions on civil liberties; the imposition of an externally-devised neoliberal development plan; the manipulation of aid as a weapon of counterinsurgency; the sectarianism of the occupation; the Karzai government's role in drug production and distribution; and the systematic

use of torture by American and Afghan forces (Kolhatkar and Ingalls 2006; Johnson and Leslie 2008; Rashid 2008). As a result, the book does not make a convincing argument for mission extension.

Lastly, there is a problem with the notion of 'unexpected war.' A comparative analysis of Canadian foreign policy might show similarity between Canada's current role in Afghanistan and its recent roles in Haiti, Iraq, Serbia and Somalia. Each of these cases demonstrates a militarization of Canadian foreign policy, an alignment with American objectives, a commitment to neoliberal economics, and an opposition to popular governments and insurgencies. In the field of international political economy, these conflicts are often viewed as part of a *single war* against the Global South.<sup>1</sup> Given Canada's rank and position in the capitalist world system, it is hardly surprising that Canada has been engaged in a military occupation of Afghanistan, a coup d'etat in Haiti, and constant war in the Middle East. These are the primary fronts of the 'new imperialism' (Harvey 2003), in which Canada plays a rather consistent and considerable role. For this reason, the theory of 'unexpected war' is not the best guide for mapping Canada's role in Afghanistan.

*Creating a Failed State* by John W. Warnock offers such a map.

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Warnock argues that western foreign policy before and after 9/11 *created* the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan. The evidence for his book is drawn from a systematic survey of recent scholarship on American foreign policy, Afghan history, and global political economy. The book also references key reports by think tanks and human rights organizations based in Afghanistan and the west. As a result, the book offers a convincing framework and set of evidence. It begins with the war in 2001, which killed up to 3,400 Afghans (16). Warnock recapitulates the story of how the US employed the militias of the Northern Alliance, whose 'boots on the ground' complimented US air power (12-13). He also covers the offers of negotiation by the Taliban and the violations of international law by US and NATO forces.

Warnock investigates 'failed states' discourse as a pretext for western intervention. States such as Afghanistan and Haiti are 'failures' not because they have been ignored by western powers, but because of economic and military domination *by* western powers. Warnock demonstrates how the current failure of the Afghan state results, in part, from an externally driven, free-market development agenda of privatization, liberalization and government austerity. Warnock also

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<sup>1</sup> I need to thank Adam Hanieh for this formulation of a 'single war.'

critiques the role of NGOs, which created a property bubble in Kabul and pursued development plans outside the reach and influence of the state.

After setting this framework, Warnock reviews the history of Afghanistan. He examines the social structure of the country, the movement towards liberal democracy across the twentieth century (particularly in the 1960s during the 'New Democracy' movement), and the rise of the urban left and communist parties. The 1979 Soviet invasion is described as an attempt to leverage control in Central Asia and to stop the feuding amongst Afghan communists. Warnock emphasizes, however, that US aid to the mujahideen began prior to the Soviet invasion. Over the period of a decade, the US provided more than \$7 billion through CIA channels. This aid was used to fund the military activities of Afghan mujahideen and foreign fighters. More than one million Afghans were killed in the war, and the state and national infrastructure destroyed. After the fall of the Soviet-backed government in 1992, the mujahideen fought a civil war for control of the country. Thousands more died in this conflict, which only ended after the Taliban imposed order on most of the country in 1996.

It would be mistaken to ignore the geopolitical interests of the United States in the Middle East and Central Asia. Warnock describes how US foreign policy since the Cold War has been to maintain hegemony in the context of growing competition from Europe and Asia. The United States has articulated a new military strategy based on 'preventative warfare,' and has begun the process of encircling China and Russia with military bases. In the context of shifting power relations in the world economy, the energy resources of the Middle East and Caspian Sea basin have been imbued with new significance. The western strategy is to maintain leverage over hydrocarbon distribution networks in the Middle East and Central Asia, so as to limit or shape the development paths of China, Russia and other competitors. Warnock suggests that the decision to wage war in Afghanistan was likely made in the summer of 2001, when the 'Six plus Two' negotiations involving the US, Russia and the six neighbouring countries of Afghanistan failed to gain agreement from the Taliban for a power-sharing deal with the Northern Alliance and a new pipeline in the country (83). Whether or not this claim is true, Warnock makes a strong point on the geopolitical and economic conflicts at the heart of the war. In his view, the war is inextricably linked to the agenda of western imperialism: the effort to expand NATO into new territories, gaining control over key resources, and preventative action against China and

Russia. The war, in other words, is a conflict over power and resources in Asia and the wider world system.

After establishing this framework, Warnock turns to the occupation of Afghanistan, depicting the violence and corruption at the centre of the state since 2001. He describes the way in which the Bonn Process imposed a highly centralized Presidential system under the control of Hamid Karzai, whose main base of support was the militias and religious fundamentalists of the Northern Alliance. Warnock describes how the new Afghan constitution and the Political Parties Law restricted the role of secular, democratic parties in elections and Parliament. He also demonstrates how Karzai incorporated factional warlords into the highest echelons of the state, and supported policies that limit the rights of women (126). He emphasizes that:

the reversal of the general trend towards the liberation of women began when the US government gave massive economic and military aid to the Islamist mujahideen rebellion between 1978 and 1992. They expressed no concern for the plight of women during the Islamist Rabbani government from 1992 to 1996. They supported the Taliban until 2001, hoping that they could provide a stable government and allow the construction of the oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Sea basin to the Arabian Sea. Only when this joint effort with the Unocal consortium failed...did they show any concern for the status of Afghan women (149).

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Warnock dedicates one chapter to Canada's role in Afghanistan. Canada supported the Bonn Process of establishing a client state, and played an instrumental role in facilitating NATO's entry into the conflict. Canada expanded operations in Afghanistan in order to replace US forces leaving for Iraq, and worked at the centre of the Afghan state through a 'Strategic Advisory Team.' Canadian aid policies have had little effect on development and reconstruction, and Canadian Forces have been implicated in civilian casualties and the transfer of detainees to torture. The war in Afghanistan thus marks a complete 'integration and subordination' of Canadian foreign policy to US empire-building (171).

According to Warnock, the solution for Afghanistan is not an increase of foreign forces or a redoubled aid and humanitarian effort in support of the occupation. Instead, what is needed is a 'broad peace settlement that includes the countries that neighbour Afghanistan' (176). In other words, Canada must support a withdrawal of foreign troops in conjunction with an international peace agreement between Pakistan, Russia, Iran, India, the Central Asian states, and key stakeholders in

Afghanistan, including the Taliban. Canada must support democratic and secular parties in Afghanistan, and reject 'the neoliberal development plan imposed on [the country]' (179). To achieve these goals, the Canadian left must reinvigorate the anti-war and global justice movements and build support for an 'independent foreign and defence policy' in Ottawa (185). While Canada 'share[s] the responsibility for the tragic situation that exists today in Afghanistan,' it can still effect positive change through peaceful development efforts (186, 183). Through such methods Canada can work against the logic of state failure.

In making these arguments, *Creating a Failed State* offers a counterpoint to *Unexpected War*. It is framed by the insights of Marxist political economy and thus considers a wider set of variables for explaining the war and occupation. Yet it shares one key weakness: the theorization of Canada as a *dependency* of the United States. There is a tendency in both books to overlook Canada's independent interests in the new imperialism. While Canada is highly integrated economically with the United States, recent scholarship has established the independent set of economic relations through which Canada articulates to Europe, Asia and increasingly the Third World (Klassen 2009). Foreign control of has declined since the 1970s, and Canadian MNCs have expanded into North America and Europe. Recent studies of directorship interlocks also indicate the existence of an independent corporate elite with effective control over the national economy (Carroll 2004; Carroll and Klassen 2010). In this context, it would be an analytic mistake for the left to view US-Canada relations solely in terms of dependency, and a political mistake to advocate 'independence' in matters of foreign policy, when such independence would merely express the singular interests of Canadian capital and the state it controls. As many in the global justice and anti-war movements argue, any movement against capitalism and war must address Canada's own brand of secondary power imperialism. By locating the impetus to war and militarism not just in Washington but also in the boardrooms of corporate Canada, it might be possible to devise more effective strategies of international solidarity. At the very least, such an analysis would orient the left towards a structural critique of Canadian capitalism and a socialist or anti-capitalist politics. In the long term, this kind of consciousness and organization will have to be nurtured to avoid wars of empire. In the meantime, John Warnock's *Creating a Failed State* offers a good point of departure.

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REVIEW ESSAY

## The Political Economy of Food

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Albritton, Robert. 2009. *Let Them Eat Junk: How Capitalism Creates Hunger and Obesity*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing. ISBN 978-1-894037-38-9. Paperback: 21.95 CAD. Pages: 259.

Miller, Sally. 2008. *Edible Action: Food Activism & Alternative Economics*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing. ISBN 978-1-55266-280-9. Paperback: 22.95 CAD. Pages: 191.

Robert Albritton and Sally Miller have both written engaging analyses of the global agriculture/food system and its alternatives. Within this general subject area, the authors take interest in different foci and use different theoretical frameworks in their analyses. The result is two analyses that seem more complementary than competitive, which together offer us a comprehensive understanding of the global capitalist food regime and many food movements and initiatives producing alternatives to it. Albritton is a renowned political economist and Professor Emeritus in the Department of Political Science at York University who offers us a Marxist analysis of one of the central contradictions of our time: why are so many in the West over-fed and over weight to the point of obesity while many more of the rest are malnourished and starving to death? His project delivers a critical analysis of the global food regime, how it is organized to leave half the world's population malnourished (either underfed, overfed, or fed predominantly junk food), and how it is a major contributor to the killing of the planet through its dependence on petroleum and the extensive use of arable land for the production of non-food crops and products, such as tobacco, cotton, and ethanol. The purpose of his project is not to explicate the myriad of alternative food movements and initiatives and the messy work they undertake in trying to make change. This is where *Edible Action* comes in. Miller is a popular educator whose academic training in anthropology and environmental studies is complemented by her almost twenty years of experience in the alternative food, agriculture, and co-op sector. She is a gifted storyteller who teaches us about the ills of

genetically modified seeds and foods for farmers and eaters and of the two-headed monster of scarcity and surplus. But the majority of her book is dedicated to delivering a cultural analysis of the multiplicity of food movements and enterprises designing and doing the messy work of implementing alternatives to the global capitalist agriculture/food system.

I don't want to come off as one of those activist-academics who brushes aside a theoretical text as intellectually enlightening but of little practical use. There is a complex relationship between theory and practice that often does not get its due in such generalizations. Some theorists can work with Marx's *Capital* for their whole career, but are unable to explain the ongoing relevance of this classic text in an accessible and effective manner to audiences unfamiliar with it. Albritton is not one of those theorists. His brilliance is not just in his understanding of Marx's magnum opus, but his ability to communicate an analysis of the global agriculture/food system in such a way that it is not unreasonable to think it of interest to engaged senior high school readers, but it is also substantive enough to work well in third and fourth year university and college classrooms of political science, sociology, labour studies, and environmental studies. Adult readers looking for an accessible yet challenging read will also find this book enjoyable. Albritton has written the type of book I looked for in high school and in my undergraduate classes on social theory, labour, and the environment, a critical social analysis that is relevant to my life and that provides me with a framework for addressing some of the 'big questions' of how the world is socially organized, who makes the far-reaching decisions that affect so many, how are those decisions made, who do they benefit and who do they oppress.

Albritton's overarching argument is that the vastly unjust distribution of food across the world and the proliferation of junk food is not an act of nature, nor is it the fault of specific corporations, governments, or individuals; rather, the root cause of the global food crisis is the capitalist agricultural/food system that emerged in the US after World War II and subsequently spread to varying degrees across the globe. He shows how the current underfed/overfed dichotomy is amongst the manifestations of the contradictions and irrationalities of the capitalist (mis)management of agriculture and food provision. He takes seriously the reality of global warming, and explicates the irrationality of the reliance of the capitalist agricultural/food system on petroleum and the extensive use of arable land for producing non-food crops and inputs for the manufacture of ethanol. He closes the book with a decisive argument against the seemingly widespread assumption that capitalism and



democracy are mutually supportive. His second to last chapter elaborates on the basic idea that democracy requires a high degree of equality, and capitalism encourages and produces inequality, as his analysis throughout the book brings home vividly. While neoliberalism points toward individual rights and the individualization of responsibility, Albritton calls for a balance of individual rights and social rights and responsibilities. Students of critical social policy analysis of Western welfare states that have seen a retrenchment of social rights and an emphasis on individual responsibility and risk throughout the last thirty-odd years of neoliberal globalization will be familiar with this sort of analysis. Albritton's point here is that corporations and markets must be made to be more transparent and democratically accountable if we are to address the gross imbalances of distributive injustice that the global capitalist agricultural/food system encourages and exacerbates, and if we are to address global warming and the global food regime's dependence on petroleum, especially in light of peak oil.

For Miller, food is not simply sustenance, it is imbued with many complex meanings and plays a key role in how people from various cultures see and talk about the world. Food is also an inspiration, catalyst, and ally for making social change. In *Edible Action*, Miller has two overarching interests. The first is to explore a number of the ways that food has inspired social change. The second is to explain why food is an excellent catalyst for social change. These dual foci direct Miller's explication of thoughtful practice and critical reflection. A sort of map emerges of these alternative movements and enterprises, particularly those happening in Canada and the US, but also the peasant and landless people's movements happening in Brazil and across much of the majority world. Miller offers some mournful reflections on the significant drop in the number of workers involved in agriculture in Western countries since 1950, the rising number of farmers who commit suicide or sell their land to developers, and the threats posed by genetically modified seeds and food. The majority of her book, however, is focused on the positive movements for change. But, she is not an uncritical cheerleader of food movements and alternative enterprises. It is obvious that she has learned a lot in her almost twenty years of experience in the alternative food, agriculture, and co-op sector. I appreciate her honest discussion of food democracy and the practice of democracy in coops. She describes participatory democracy as time consuming and a lot of work but ultimately worth it. She teaches us that democracy is not about pure agreement but negotiated agreement that is continuously in process. Miller writes about these issues and more

in a highly accessible manner. Her book would work well in first and second year university and college courses on food, coops, social movements, environmental studies, and anthropology. The combination of her vast experience, her orientation to writing as a popular educator, and her gift for storytelling enables her to take us on a journey into farmer's fields, farmer's markets, community gardens, and membership meetings of various coops.

Despite her gift for storytelling, at times the story seems to get away from her. This is certainly the case for her chapter on fair trade particularly. Whereas most of her book consists of narratives about food movements that she has experience with in some capacity, Miller lacks experiential knowledge of fair trade and she does not make up for that by engaging a sufficient amount of secondary sources. There are some factual errors in the chapter as well. For instance, she claims that fair trade started with the production and trade of coffee and chocolate about thirty years ago. This is inaccurate. The genealogy of what is today called 'fair trade' has many threads, from Latin American farmers who sold coffee to fund national liberation struggles to charitable religious organizations acting paternalistically toward folks in formerly colonized territories, but all of these threads stretch back further than thirty years ago. Miller also uses the term 'fair trade organization' incorrectly. In fair trade, this is a technical term that refers to organizations who are members of the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO). The WFTO was previously called the International Fair Trade Association and before that it was the International Federation of Alternative Trade, back in the late 1980s when what is today called 'fair trade' was still called 'alternative trade.' In addition, Miller writes as if TransFair Canada, the national fair trade labelling initiative in Canada, and TransFair USA, the national fair trade labelling initiative in the US, are the same organization. They are not. TransFair Canada, TransFair USA, and other national labelling initiatives are member organizations of the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO). Miller makes no reference to FLO International or the WFTO. She also writes as if fair traders from producers to traders to certifiers to advocates share a common set of values. Arriving at a common set of values amongst a group of people is extremely difficult. Miller writes about this extensively in relation to decision making processes in coops. Needless to say, 'the' fair trade movement is no different. One could argue there are several fair trade movements.

Overall, with the above caveats in mind, I would recommend *Let Them Eat Junk* and *Edible Action*.

*BOOK REVIEW*

Aziz Choudry, Jill Hanley, Steve Jordan, Eric Shragge and Martha Stiegman. 2009. *Fight Back: Workplace Justice for Immigrants*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing. ISBN 9781552662977. Paperback: 15.95 CAD. Pages: 128.

Reviewed by Sheila Wilmot  
OISE/University of Toronto

The ongoing slippery slope of neoliberal capitalist restructuring continues to have a disproportionately racialized and gendered impact on people around the globe. The stark meaning of this is that people are more and more surviving and resisting in conditions of often-profound inhumanity. Along with too many cases of out-and-out war, the various forms of combined economic, political and social attacks all are intertwined, causing large-scale displacement of people and increasingly fragmented and weakened possibilities for working-class power.

The authors of *Fight Back*, who form the Immigrant Workers Centre Research Group in Montreal, offer us a detailed primer on (im)migrant conditions, struggles and rights in this context. The book is based on interviews with some 50 people whose lives have been wholly re-organized by their displacement and migration, varying in form with the different market forces and related state-based immigration programs and policies they encountered when arriving in or in order to depart to Canada and Quebec in different periods.

Before exploring a number of these different socially organizing forces and systems, the authors explain the importance of the Immigrant Workers Centre (IMC) as 'a place of intersection between the traditions of labour and community movements' (12). Founded in 2000 by Filipino-Canadian unionists critical of how union officialdom has often treated workers, given the traditional organizing (limited-to-unionizing) model, the core group is now a mix of immigrant labour organizers and allies, all of whom have a range of experience in labour and community struggles. The IMC carries out individual case work, as well as labour education to increase skills and analysis, and builds union-community relationships, through campaigns 'that reflect the general issues facing immigrant workers, such as dismissal, problems with employers or, sometimes, inadequate representation by their unions' (11).

A key piece of the context for the IMC activity is the historic organization of migration to Canada, spanning over four periods of white-settler colony and nation-state building. Slavery, indentured labour, modern-day displacement in the global South, the dispossession and 'triple exploitation' (31) of Indigenous peoples, and the historic favouring of white migrants have all led to an ongoing 'racialized hegemony that underpins immigration and labour market policies' which plays out in 'contemporary Canadian immigration, labour and other policy frameworks [that] maintain a regime where different categories of workers enjoy deeply unequal rights' (16).

Neoliberal restructuring, starting in the 1970s, has deepened the racialized class character of Canadian social life through the casualization and expanded precariousness of work with new job creation largely in part-time, service sector work in which migrants of colour are over-represented. The late-1960s origin points system for independent immigration, the 1995 \$975 head tax, and the various and expanding temporary worker programs of the last four decades, are all state-organized and market-driven mechanisms that have resulted in the 'commodification of immigrants' (19).

The generalized experiences of immigrant workers, across the various programs that organize migration, are summarized by the concept of 'learning in reverse.' This learning is a process of socialization into the immigrant worker category and experience, involving various degrees of accommodation to poor economic conditions and possibilities, as well as denial of class and social position, educational background, and often of hiding skills and expertise to get access to the low-paid jobs that are generally available to immigrants. It is also about loss through the process of accepting disappointment and injustice, and a self-redefinition to less than one's full humanity. This is fundamentally about survival in a context that also sees major inequities in migrants' access to legal and social rights.

*Fight Back* focuses on two significant and longstanding temporary migrant worker programs in Canada, the Seasonal Agricultural Worker and Live-in Caregiver Programs (SAWP and LCP). The endurance of these programs demonstrates how the labour shortages they are addressing are not temporary, even if the workers are treated as such. The organization of the SAWP on the basis of low-wages, precarity, isolation and vulnerability is a case of 'an explicitly racialized underclass' (60). Yet SAWP workers continue to apply to the program because of few options in their home countries. And, like LCP workers, the remittances to family back home are a huge driving force for workers to endure the multiple harsh workplace

and life conditions, not limited to but involving long hours, no overtime pay and threats of job loss and deportation when they are ill or injured.

The LCP workers are mainly women, who also labour in often quite difficult and under-paid conditions, a reality that is partly socially condoned by the historical undervaluing of this gendered and, in this case, racialized form of work. While its early incarnation – the Caribbean Domestic Scheme – granted permanent residency status right away, LCP workers now must wait until they complete their two-year contracts before making such application. This is a deeply material demonstration of the impact of neoliberal policies of precarity on thousands of peoples' lives. And it plays out in profoundly disrespectful day-to-day forms, in conditions women must put up with, one of whom interviewed graphically described as being 'treated...like an idiot' by her employer (79).

In the face of such inhumanity, (im)migrant workers are living a complex mix of survival, adaptation and resistance. Learning in reverse is accompanied by often-courageous acts to restore and maintain dignity and demand respect from abusive employers. Many different types of organizations have developed to try to support individuals and collectivize this when possible.

What I experienced as breathlessness in the writing style of the book seems to be about the real urgency and commitment of the authors to migrants they interviewed and the complexity of supporting their ongoing resistance in increasingly challenging conditions. What I was not entirely sure about was for whom this book was written, largely because of the not fully explicated theoretical frame. The anti-capitalist, anti-racist working class politics is unmistakable but the full meaning of this for the authors – beyond the 'anti' – is not clear. And some key concepts – such as 'material conditions' – are left unexplained. Given it is such an important primer, a better explicated theory of social organization and change would have been extremely valuable.

*BOOK REVIEW*

G.A. Cohen. 2009. *Why Not Socialism?* Princeton: Princeton University Press. ISBN 978-0-691-14361-3. Cloth: 17.95 CAD. Pages: 83.

Reviewed by Frank Cunningham  
University of Toronto

This book was the last thing published by G.A. Cohen (or Jerry Cohen as he called himself) before his sudden death at age 68 from a stroke in August. It was not the last book written by him, as a version first appeared in 2001 in *Democratic Equality: What Went Wrong?* edited by Ed Broadbent.

This pamphlet-sized monograph (small pages, large type, no notes) is reminiscent of writings in the 1930s and 40s of the Left Book Club in the UK. Like its publications, written by such as G.D.H. Cole, R.H. Tawney, and J.B.S Haldane, we have a renowned scholar producing an accessible, concise work addressing a vital topic from a committed, progressive standpoint: would that more of today's academic star scholars would follow this example. If the holder of the Chichele Chair at Oxford University, previously occupied by Charles Taylor, John Plamenatz, and Isaiah Berlin, can expend energy on this sort of writing, so can they.

To say that the book is accessible is not to say that it is unsophisticated. Again as in texts of the Left Book Club, such as Cole's *An Intelligent Man's Guide Through World Chaos*, Cohen does not write down to his readers. Instead he brings his considerable talents as a philosopher in the 'Analytic' tradition to the task of defending socialism. (Thanks mainly to his first book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford University Press, 1978), Cohen is considered a leading 'Analytic Marxist,' but this designation has a broad and a narrow meaning. Cohen's work is analytic in the sense of close attention to definition and fine-grained argumentation. He is not an Analytic Marxist in the narrow sense of Jon Elster or John Roemer, who attempt to reinterpret Marxism in terms of rational choice theory; though he is not hostile to them and in *Why Not Socialism?* refers to Roemer in defending market socialism.)

The book begins by explicating Cohen's notion of socialism starting with the nice device of attending to the values exhibited by people on a camping trip, where two stand out: a commitment to equality, as in allotting work and food, and a spirit of community. Society-wide socialism is similar in being motivated by and structured to promote these values.

Socialist equality, like left liberal equality, is equality of opportunity (rather than of outcomes), but it differs in compensating for native inequalities of talent as well as those of circumstance. Even this sort of equality of opportunity cannot rule out some unequal distributions, but these are prohibited in the name of preserving community spirit and cooperation.

The remainder of the book defends first the desirability and then the feasibility of socialism. Cohen thinks it almost self-evident that the egalitarian and community values of the campers are desirable motivations. An attempt by one of the campers to corner a market on camping tools or to hoard would be seen by almost anyone to be morally objectionable. Those who think that non- or anti-egalitarian or community values are unavoidable in a large society should at least agree that these attitudes are no less morally deficient there than in the camping trip, so their objection is to feasibility.

Cohen defends the feasibility of socialism by criticizing two main grounds for denying it: that people are by nature selfish and that there are no viable means for organizing an economy on socialist principles: 'while we know how to make an economic system work on the basis of the development...of selfishness [the capitalist market], we do not know how to make it work by developing and exploiting human generosity' (58). Since there are so many examples of people who do not act in entirely selfish ways (he mentions doctors, nurses, and teachers), Cohen turns most of his attention to the second ground. He grants that 'we don't *now* know how to give collective ownership and equality the real meaning that it has in the camping trip story but which it didn't have in the Soviet Union and similarly ordered states' (75-6). However both the welfare state and market socialism hold out promise, and Cohen mainly discusses the latter.

Some enthusiasts of Cohen's 1978 book on Marx see a subsequent rejection of Marxism and a turn toward utopian-socialist moral exhortation. Cohen's evolution, however, was more complex and less dramatic than portrayed. In 1988 he published a collection of essays, *History, Labour, and Freedom* (Oxford University Press) that defended some classic Marxist theses and offered friendly reformulations of others. Here and in the earlier work Cohen saw Marxism as primarily an empirical theory of history rather than a system of values, and, as argued at length in his last major work, *Rescuing Justice & Equality* (Harvard University Press, 2008), he did not think that moral theories could be based on empirical ones (ch. 6). From the late 1980s, when he was writing articles that constituted *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), Cohen maintained that having recognized that the creation of

a revolutionary working-class is not historically inevitable, socialists 'must engage in more moral advocacy than used to be fashionable' with the aim of helping to instill an egalitarian ethic into people's everyday lives (p. 9). In his last book he cites Marx (in 'On the Jewish Question') as offering a superior perspective to that of liberals like John Rawls on the importance of success in such engagement (1-2).

A constant throughout was a steadfast commitment to socialism, and this not just in Cohen's adult career but also his youth. As he explains in *Self-Ownership* (ch. 11), he was raised in a Montreal working-class Communist family and was active in the Communist Party's youth organization. Unless he differed from all other Canadian kids, he almost certainly also went to camp each summer, which would have been a camp run by the left-wing Montreal Jewish community. This would put the story of the camping trip as a paradigmatic example of socialism in a special light. When I first read the story I noted to myself that I must ask my friend about this the next time we saw each other. Sadly, that time will not now come.



*BOOK REVIEW*

Terry Gibbs and Garry Leech. 2009. *The Failure of Global Capitalism: From Cape Breton to Colombia and Beyond*. Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press. ISBN 978-1-897009-32-1. Paperback: 19.95 CAD. Pages: 176.

Reviewed by Adam Belton  
University of Regina

*The Failure of Global Capitalism* is a clearly written and poignant little book that provokes critical thought about the deficiencies and inequality within capitalism beginning with its very title. The book is effectively researched and utilizes a variety of sources building linked arguments that stem from the authors' research both in Atlantic Canada and South America. 'While the central theme of the book is the failure of global capitalism, Cape Breton and Colombia constitute the North-South thread running through the narrative' (15). From this premise, the *impact* of the industrializing global South on the post-industrial global North is adamantly emphasized throughout the text. It is easy to dwell in the relative affluence of our highly developed region of the world and forget the true cost of building and maintaining our economic advantage in the global capitalist system. The true cost of the system is borne on the backs of workers in the global South who have a very clear sense of how global capitalism has intertwined the fates of declining and rising industrial countries in the North and South. Gibbs and Leech summarily claim that the book is actually about 'understanding' the 'connections and the necessity of acting both locally and globally' in order to 'move beyond the global capitalist model' (16).

The discussion of the origins of industrial capitalism in Cape Breton begins with a typical description of how Innis' 'Staples Theory' is applied to coal and steel production in the region – just as it has been repeatedly applied to regional industries across Canada – and advances to the reliance of the liberal economic elite on a supportive state that facilitates the exploitation of local workers. More interesting insights are revealed in the radical socialist tendencies of the unionizing steelworkers (affectionately nicknamed 'Cape Breton Bolsheviks'), and the aggressive anti-union campaigns perpetrated by the elites of private industry, media, and the state (that are paralleled in Colombia's current coal industry, a century later). However, the generalized discussions of the history of Keynesian

economics and subsequent elite-motivated political policy shifts toward neoliberal ideology as *the* global economic system garners criticism given the probable background knowledge of this book's target audience.

Gibbs's and Leech's examples of the degree of (neoliberal) ideologically motivated 'activities' facilitating the shift toward global capitalism in the Colombian context was the most astonishing discovery found in the book. A poignant example recounts how:

two hundred soldiers, police and private security personnel forcibly displaced residents from the small Afro-Colombian town of Tabaco in northeastern Colombia. As bulldozers flattened their houses, church and school, stunned media representatives caught the destruction on film...More than seven hundred people were forcibly displaced to allow for the expansion of the world's largest open-pit coal mine, El Cerrejón (47).

As Gibbs and Leech reference this example throughout the book, it serves as a reminder of the brazen audacity of capitalism to forcibly consume anything it desires based on the growth imperative. Also – given Nova Scotia Power's closure of the last Cape Breton mine in 2001 – Cape Bretoners are now reliant on coal extracted at El Cerrejón and other global mines and must feel a double burden wondering if the continuation of their community's livelihood as a regional coal producer might have averted the displacement of a whole community. Perhaps the authors do not touch on this point because they know that under global capitalism's need for growth, Tabaco would have not survived in any event.

The authors identify neoliberalism's local political collaborators in the murder of 1,165 union leaders in Columbia between 1994 and 2006, while the concurrent imposition of structural adjustment policies have dramatically reduced oil royalties and increased environmental degradation. The authors also present alternatives to global capitalism such as Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution and the self-sustainable community of Las Gaviotas. Unfortunately, this section of the book had the tendency to 'wander' into tangential topics – such as neoliberal policy changes in the global coffee trade affecting Columbian coffee prices – that did not emphasize the interconnected regional social relations inherent in the use of Columbian coal in Cape Breton as effectively as in previous examples.

This book concludes by making the argument that capitalism not only reinforces current global economic disparities, but it is the root of them and requires them to function. The strength of the book in elucidating this argument has consistently been that the relative wealth of the global North is inseparably linked to the impoverishment of the global South. The

only way to resist future ecological and economic disasters is to fundamentally change the global economic order in favour of a more sustainable system (including dramatic reductions to individual consumption levels): 'Consequently, the only response to the unsustainable model of global capitalism is for us to wage a revolution within ourselves. First, we must revolutionize the way we think. And then we must revolutionize the way we live' (136). While this statement effectively expresses the ethos of critical theory, it was disappointing that basic conceptual terminology – such as 'periphery' – and primary references to Marx make such a late appearance (first appearing in the conclusion), seeming to be almost an afterthought. A more apparent Marxist analysis throughout the book would have added theoretical explanations to augment the research on how global capitalism functions; although critical theorists such as William I. Robinson and Vandana Shiva were effectively utilized nonetheless.

I would likely recommend this book to people with an intermediate knowledge of globalization and North-South political economy to receive the full benefits of its high-quality, regionally specific research. I would also recommend this book for instruction as a case study as part of a wider set of readings in global political economy (in conjunction with Theodore H. Cohn's *Global Political Economy*, for example). Even though the book does not reveal groundbreaking proclamations about the future of contemporary capitalism, it does excel in its specific subject matter.

*BOOK REVIEW*

Roberto J. Gonzalez. 2009. *American Counterinsurgency: Human Science and the Human Terrain*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press. ISBN 097940574-2. Paperback: 16.95 CAD. Pages 134.

Reviewed by Ryan Toews  
York University

*American Counterinsurgency: Human Science and the Human Terrain*, by Roberto Gonzalez, presents a scathing critique of the uses of the social sciences and social scientists (with some emphasis on his own discipline of Anthropology) by the US military in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In particular, Gonzalez examines the concept of the 'human terrain' and the practices derived from it that have come to play a significant role in the US led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. The human terrain is 'the human population and society in the operational environment (area of operations) as defined and characterized by sociocultural, anthropologic, and ethnographic data' (Jacob Kipp, cited in Gonzalez 2009, 25). As Gonzalez notes, this concept implies the extension of conflict from a geographic plane to a sociocultural one where victory depends on the military's ability to control the population. The practices associated with the human terrain include, most significantly, the introduction of 'human terrain teams.' These are five person teams combining military intelligence officers with civilian academics (both an area studies specialist and a cultural analyst with a background in either sociology or cultural anthropology) who are embedded in combat brigades to provide brigade commanders with relevant socio-cultural knowledge and to do socio-cultural research on the people under occupation. Other applications include a socio-cultural mapping of the areas under US occupation (an application known as Map-Human Terrain or MAP HT) and the modeling of behaviour of communities under occupation in order to predict the sites of resistance and opposition. This new interest in the 'human terrain' reflects, Gonzalez suggests, a shift in power within the Pentagon after the departure of Donald Rumsfeld to a 'small band of warrior-intellectuals' (Gonzalez, citing the *Washington Post*) centered around David Petraeus (currently Commander, US Central Command) all of whom hold PhDs in social science disciplines.

Gonzalez argues that the 'human terrain' has been mobilized for two reasons. The first reason was to build domestic support for an unpopular

war by emphasizing a new approach to counter-insurgency that is more knowledge-based, humanitarian and designed to 'win the hearts and minds' of Iraqis and Afghans. Consequently, Gonzalez notes that following the introduction of human terrain teams to Iraq and Afghanistan, there was a significant amount of uncritical media coverage that celebrated the shift in US strategy as leading to both more winnable but also to 'gentler' counter-insurgency campaigns. The second reason was to gather badly needed intelligence in order to win the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Gonzalez's analysis of the human terrain and its operationalization in the US military – the Human Terrain System (HTS) covers a wide range of issues; the parallels between its contemporary usage and American methods in the Vietnam war; its current and potential effects on both the American occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan and on the social science disciplines themselves (and especially his own, Anthropology); to the role of private military contractors in its operationalization. Gonzalez challenges the claim of HTS proponents that their participation is humanitarian, focused on cross-cultural training for US soldiers and on figuring out local social needs.

Gonzalez does not, it seems, need to look too hard to find other human terrain advocates describe HTS as producing a more efficiently lethal 'information-based military;' enable it to 'weaponize' culture; manipulate 'cultural leverage points;' or to rent the 'tribes' of Iraq. Gonzalez's own analysis is based on a survey of the existing military literature on the 'human terrain,' project proposal requests, budget justification documents, reports from military contractors, job descriptions for the human terrain team positions, and interviews with current and former HTS employees. From this, he convincingly argues that HTS is about compiling social and cultural knowledge to improve targeting, and to develop the military's capabilities to manipulate behaviour.

Gonzalez's critique of the HTS is in large part based on a concern that social scientific and anthropological research will be used to determine who to militarily target. This, he notes, is a gross violation of the ethical responsibilities of social scientific research. The researcher cannot guarantee that the subjects will not be harmed by the research produced. Nor can the researcher ensure the voluntary participation of the research subjects when the research occurs in the presence of soldiers and where the researcher is also likely armed.

Gonzalez raises other objections to HTS as well. He argues that it is bad social science in that it uses an objectified and dehumanized conception of people and culture – a human terrain – as well as an

antiquated and discredited colonial anthropology. It is also an acceptance by social scientists of a role as technicians for empire. This, he notes, is a return to the historical role of anthropology as a service to colonial administrators. In addition, citing C. Wright Mills, he warns of a social science that is instrumentalized for those in power and which eschews any notion of social responsibility. This leads Gonzalez to call for a decolonized social science to be more publicly engaged and to challenge American foreign policy and to demilitarize American society.

It is undoubtedly important for academics to be publicly engaged as he suggests, but this is not, of course, a new idea, and American left intellectuals have sought to influence public opinion. This has not ended American imperial ambitions or prevented academics from actively participating in it. There is an opportunity that he misses here to think more concretely about how the university can be organized as a concrete site of resistance to imperialism. Furthermore, while he compares HTS to the CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support) and Phoenix programs of the Vietnam War, and discusses the origins of the 'Human Terrain' (which interestingly has its roots in the American government's response to the Black Panthers), as well as its antecedents in British colonialism; the history of the relationship between the social sciences, and the American military during the Cold War or of the post-Vietnam doctrinal conflict within the US military over counterinsurgency are, for the most part, absent. Including this would show not only the ways in which HTS represents a significant shift in the relationship of the military and the social sciences, as Gonzalez does effectively, but would also identify the important elements of continuity. Nonetheless, this is an important and timely book and a useful tool in the hands of academics trying to make sense of and challenge the militarization of social science knowledge.

*BOOK REVIEW*

Sean P. Hier, Daniel Lett and B. Singh Bolaria, eds. 2009. *Racism and Justice: Critical Dialogue on the Politics of Identity, Inequality, and Change*. Halifax: Fernwood. ISBN: 978-1-55266-301-1  
Paperback: 34.95 CAD. Pages: 269.

Reviewed by Amanda Glasbeek  
York University

In *Racism and Justice*, editors Sean Hier, Daniel Lett and B. Singh Bolaria have collected together 14 essays (plus an Introduction), divided into three sections ('Essentialism, Identity, and Difference,' 'Racism, Inequality, and Change,' and 'Multiculturalism, Anti-Racism, and Justice'). Each of the three sections is prefaced by a strong introduction, along with very useful summaries of each individual essay that follows. The essays themselves are short and contain only the most basic references and few footnotes. The best word to describe this collection is *eclectic*. Drawing on scholars from Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia, the anthology offers essays on a wide range of topics, from the Sydney Cronulla Beach riots (Jock Collins and Carol Reid), to Jim Crowism and lynching in the United States (Meir Amor), to the 'geneticization of identity' (Robert Carter) to the politics of public apologies and racial redress (Graham Dodds). Equally eclectic is the range of political and sociological viewpoints represented in the anthology, from critical realism (Adam Molnar), to debates with Orientalism (Peyman Vahabzadeh), to an ethics of infinite possibility and its implications for solidarity work (Mohamed Abdou, Richard J.F. Day and Sean Haberle). This wide-ranging and eclectic nature of the book is both its strength and its weakness.

According to the editors, *Racism and Justice* has two general goals. The first is to 'critically assess the current state of knowledge about racism, justice and social change in Canada and beyond' (17). In this, the collection is a clear success, producing a lively debate about how to conceptualize race and racism as well as how best to confront it. For example, the opening two chapters immediately draw the reader into a debate about essentialism or the idea that there is some core essence that defines discrete groups of people. The first essay, by Rita Dhamoon (25-41), draws on critical race theory as a form of 'post-essentialist social critique' in order to force new considerations of how we come to know what we think

we know about race. This essay is followed by Alicja Muszynski's defense of essentialism, or at least a caution against going too 'post-al' (42-53). For Muszynski, it is 'ironic that just as landmark gains are realized for previously excluded groups, academics have deemed that their status as groups is no longer relevant, in effect pulling the rug out from under them' (47). It is rare for an edited collection to invite such divergent opinions, especially on something so personally, as well as politically, relevant to so many of us. This is more than an academic debate: it is a political tension that has clear implications for social activism and the conceptualization of justice.

But, this political tension also leads to a somewhat uneven read and it is difficult to find a narrative thread or political project in the book. This problem reflects back on the second goal of the anthology, namely to confront the challenges of a 'post-racial' order. By 'post-racial,' the editors do not mean 'racelessness' but, instead, a 'future-oriented politics of possibility...that simultaneously confronts the forces of continuity and change' (9). Post-raciality centres on a paradox in which a 'social-justice infrastructure' that has enabled dramatic social change coexists with the persistence of racism.

It is not clear that this paradox is either as new or as complex as the editors suggest. The essay by Charles Ungerleider, tellingly entitled 'Racism, Justice, and Social Cohesion in Canada' (173 - 188) seems the only evidence that there even exists a 'social-justice infrastructure' from which the paradox would unfold. Ungerleider offers a whiggish history of anti-discrimination practices in Canada, from a problematic past of interning Japanese citizens and barring Jews entry as they fled Nazi Europe to a more sunny contemporary situation where many forms of structural racism have been eliminated through the sheer political will of the Canadian state. Ungerleider places great importance on the fact that Canada was an early signatory to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and from which time the institutional infrastructure designed to confront racism and to equally distribute citizenship rights has grown progressively and, seemingly, satisfactorily. While we must continue to fight racism where it rears its ugly head (as in the aftermath of September 11, 2001), Ungerleider nonetheless concludes that Canada is distinct in the world for embracing such a diverse population and managing, through this institutional infrastructure, to maintain a functional social cohesion.

This kind of essay is odd in a collection dedicated to racism and justice, and its inclusion seems to simplify, rather than complicate, the debate about contemporary forms of racism or, even, post-raciality. And,



many of the other contributors do not seem to share in the idea that we have arrived at a post-racial moment. For example, in one of the stronger essays in the collection, Alana Lentin (189-206) takes as obvious the fact that Western states assume a 'Janus-faced attitude' (205) toward racism, so that they are both the enforcers of anti-discrimination policy and culpable in ongoing and systemic racism. Lentin offers a very different history of the formation of international anti-racist policies, arguing that the focus of UNESCO policies on cultural difference has depoliticized racism and allowed modern states to be both racist and anti-racist at the same time. Her focus is on the resultant anti-racist organizations to emerge in Western States and she offers a neat categorization between those organizations that are state-oriented (appealing to the state to fulfill its promise of true democratic citizenship) and those (more radical, if less successful) that set themselves against the state itself. The work of these various anti-racist groups, along with their differing degrees of popular and institutional legitimacy, argues Lentin, plays an important role in defining what constitutes racism to begin with.

Given its focus on sociological knowledge about racism and the debates that the collection welcomes - as well as the ones that it will no doubt engender - *Racism and Justice* is a good choice for any sociology course that wants to draw its students into the field and offer them some rich theoretical and empirical materials from which to form their own views. Certainly, the book will encourage readers to engage in 'critical dialogue on the politics of identity, inequality, and change' --- as the editors hope it will.

*BOOK REVIEW*

Jasmin Hristov. 2009. *Blood & Capital: The Paramilitarization of Colombia*. Toronto: Between the Lines. ISBN 9781897071502. Paperback: 29.95 CAD. Pages: 320.

Reviewed by Henry Veltmeyer  
St. Mary's University

From a socialist or activist social change perspective this is a very good book indeed on a very important topic. As noted on the jacket we Canadians are all too familiar with '*la violencia*' in Colombia – a long history of violence and a protracted class war misrepresented by many scholars (not this author fortunately) as a civil war or as political disputation among different factions of the elite or 'political class' – shedding the blood of generations of Colombians in different sectors of society. In the political imaginary and image constructed in the media the perpetrators of this violence generally are those caught in the crossfire of drug traffickers and FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), an army of national liberation (and social justice and transformation), the only one that survived the repression of the state in pre-neoliberal times. However, as the author documents at length on the basis of careful research, this image has been manufactured for ideological and political ends. The reality is quite otherwise. Most of the violence, in fact, has been perpetrated by the paramilitary and regular armed forces of what the author describes as the Colombian state's 'coercive apparatus,' and the victims of this violence for the most part have been activists and supporters of all sorts--lawyers, human rights activists, workers, peasants, students and others in the popular sector, deemed to be sympathetic to FARC.

A deconstruction of the recent history of political violence as a matter of 'blood and capital' is very welcome. What is particularly relevant in the author's approach and analysis is the digging up and finding the roots of the violence in the repressive or coercive apparatus of the state, penetrated by paramilitary forces and other agents of the propertied and capitalist class, truly a ruling class in the Colombian context. Coercive state power, as the author reconstructs it, is operated largely in the interests of capital, and wielded by those who have taken it upon themselves, or are armed mercenaries working for, and paid by, different elements of the

dominant class. This includes the paramilitary forces of the political reaction, who are, moreover, well connected to the political establishment, reaching well into the government itself – virtually a clandestine arm of the state’s repressive apparatus. The connections between the paramilitary and members of the government, the judiciary and armed forces in fact have been well documented, but the author adds to this documentation a very sharp class analysis of the political dynamics involved. The author’s analysis of these links is timely and important, but what is of even greater importance is the connection that the author makes between the paramilitary and the economic interests behind them: the connection of blood to capital.

The book is organised in the form of seven chapters, each focused on a critical dimension of the capitalist (and narco/proto-fascist) state in the workings of its repressive apparatus. I would judge the book to have originated in a doctoral dissertation – it bears the marks of a carefully crafted theoretical frame and careful research. But fortunately it has been carefully reconstructed to provide an exceedingly well-written and very readable non-academic treatment that is accessible to any interested or informed reader. Needless to say, the author’s ideological slant is anti-capital, making the book of particular interest to those with socialist leanings or persuasion. Notwithstanding this slant, the analysis is scrupulously ‘objective’ in its concern to present all of the relevant and normally ignored ‘facts,’ and for all that deeply ‘political’ in its implications – and the clear understanding that the book provides of the state under conditions of a violent class struggle, capitalist development and neoliberal globalization.

The book deserves to be widely distributed and needs to be carefully read. Would that this readership reaches beyond the Canadian and international Left to affect a change in government policy towards Colombia.

*BOOK REVIEW*

Fuyuki Kurasawa. 2007. *The Work of Global Justice: Human Rights as Practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-67391-4 Paperback: 29.99 CAD. Pages: 256.

Reviewed by Elaine Coburn

CADIS-Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales

Kurasawa's work first came to my attention in a chapter that wonderfully balanced political economy and a postmodern sensitivity to culture: a well-written, creative analysis of cultural life within the dependent Canadian economy (Kurasawa 2003). I then lost sight of Kurasawa's work until stumbling across this title. Happy with my (re)discovery, I ordered the book. Backcover praise by Craig Calhoun and Nancy Fraser, whose writing I admire, seemed to justify my anticipation. Against such high expectations, how does the book fare?

Kurasawa explores global justice from a 'critical substantivist' perspective. He refuses normative philosophizing 'from above' that derives abstract principles to guide human behaviour without adequate attention to actually-observed human relationships. Such normative philosophizing tends to formalistic studies of institutionalized human rights and is often unduly optimistic about how human rights may be made secure through formal institutional changes. He likewise rejects mindless empiricism 'from below' insofar as such approaches pretend to observe and describe from a 'neutral' normative standpoint. By documenting seemingly endless numbers of human rights abuses (4-11) such empiricism may induce a morally irresponsible form of 'stoic fatalism' (xii). Against overly formalistic studies of jurified human 'rights', Kurasawa's substantive critical theory of justice defines a new object for engaged research, that of 'socio-political and ethical action' (195), while retaining a normative edge, asking, 'what these struggles should accomplish and how the existing world order can be organized in an emancipatory fashion' (8)?

Kurasawa argues that global justice does not just 'happen'; it is the consequence of ongoing *labour*. Together, five central practices constitute the work of global justice: bearing witness, forgiveness, foresight, aid and solidarity (17). Each is fraught with tensions and contradictions, implying certain 'tasks' but also associated 'perils'. For example, bearing witness is

complicated by the difficulty of 'expressing the inexpressible' of atrocities like the Holocaust and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. How can the fundamentally uncommunicable nature of such tragedy be overcome, allowing 'bonds of similarity' between those offering testimony and broader civil society (37-40)? Ideally, a balance is achieved in which atrocity victims are seen neither as totally alien 'others' nor simply like any other human being. Similarly, supplying aid in situations of humanitarian disasters requires work if a (Christian) Westernizing paternalism is to be avoided. Aid providers must exercise their 'moral imagination', based on an empathetic imagining of how providers would themselves like to receive aid (putting oneself in the aid receivers' shoes) while recognizing the limits of such empathy given the historical, social and cultural distance between aid providers and recipients (138-9). Each of the five practices constituting global justice is explored in this way. Ultimately, Kurasawa insists upon the 'dialogical, public and transnational' (209) character of ethically and practically successful attempts to bear witness, achieve forgiveness, etc., while recognizing how difficult this dialogue is.

Kurasawa's willingness to tackle the large, important topic of global justice, with both a practical and critical sensibility is admirable. Yet, the text has major weaknesses. In his earlier work, I appreciated Kurasawa's sensitivity to culture *and* his grasp of political economy. Here, the political economy dimension is unsatisfying. The reader is reminded generically of 'asymmetries of power within national and global arenas, which enframe the socio-political production and reception' (31) of global justice practices. Near the conclusions, Kurasawa suggests that some of these power asymmetries are associated with specific, concrete historical relationships, including 'neoliberal capitalism' and 'neo-imperialist unilateralism' – but these are never defined and certainly not explored in any detail. Likewise, there are passing, underdeveloped references to 'structural violence'. At one point, Kurasawa suggests that 'democratic control of production' (207) is necessary against such 'global threats' as neoliberal capitalism. But, these structures are gestured to, rather than explored and explained as specific, material arrangements that contribute to global injustice.

At worst, 'democratic control of (the mode of) production' appears as just one element in a long list, on par with personal efforts to practice a non-paternalistic, non-patronizing form of aid. Thus, for example, Kurasawa leaves unquestioned the ways in which 'aid' is *systematically*

perverted, not so much because of personal prejudice and paternalism, as because of enormous inequalities across the world capitalist system. Bill Gates may adjust his attitude continually but this will not address the underlying problem of a single billionaire deciding the health priorities for Africans. Nor will a properly empathetic attitude do much to alter a situation in which aid priorities are decided by Western donors rather than as an expression of the democratic will of those aid-givers seek to help. Ultimately, 'aid' will only cease to be paternalistic when it is no longer 'aid' but rather democratic redistribution grounded in the right of all human beings to access resources and services needed in order to live healthy, fulfilled lives. Within capitalism, attitude adjustments matter less than structural efforts to encourage truly democratic change e.g., by funding developing countries overall budgets, rather than providing 'targeted' aid directly but undemocratically to communities. Vague, underspecified references to 'structural violence' cannot substitute for considered analysis of the possible within but also beyond capitalist political economies.

Kurasawa's book is careful, thoughtful and sincere and he tackles a question of major, enduring importance: how to labour for worldwide social justice. His emphasis on human justice as labour is a welcome corrective to legally-inspired approaches reducing human justice to top-down declarations of equality and rights. But, if the question is crucial, the answers he proposes are unsatisfactory. They focus too much on individual attitude changes and not sufficiently on hard analysis of the possibilities for progressive social change within and beyond the historically specific moment of neoliberal capitalism. But, perhaps I came to the book with unfairly high expectations?

### Reference

Kurasawa, Fuyuki. 2003. "Finding Godot? Bringing Popular Culture into Canadian Political Economy." In *Changing Canada: Political Economy as Transformation*, ed. Wallace Clement and Leah Vosko. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

*BOOK REVIEW*

Judy Rebick. 2009. *Transforming Power: From the Personal to the Political*. Toronto: Penguin. ISBN 978-0-14-316946-8. Paperback: 24.00 CAD. Pages: 277.

Reviewed by Tammy Findlay  
University of British Columbia

I often use Judy Rebick's books for teaching. They are clearly written, present primary research in unique ways (such as through dialogue and personal narratives), are suited to popular and academic audiences, and most importantly, they inspire a sense of hope that change is possible, and that ordinary people drive that change. Her recent book, *Transforming Power*, continues in this tradition. It is about alternatives and process.

Rebick highlights visionary over 'anti' movements, and the creative over the reactive. For her, the greatest strength of a movement like the World Social Forum is 'the way they make you feel as if another world is possible. Because so much of the problem in society is that sense of powerlessness, that feeling that nothing we do makes any difference' (23). Overcoming widespread cynicism and hopelessness then, is key to revitalizing the Left. But for fundamental change to occur, Rebick argues, it requires shifting from a preoccupation with policy outcomes, to focusing on political process and social relationships.

To make this case, the book guides readers through several locations (including Porto Alegre, Brazil; Venezuela; Bolivia; Palestine; USA; and Canada) and a wide range of themes: bottom-up change, participatory democracy, racism, colonialism, religion and spirituality, open source software, environmentalism, indigenous and community-based knowledge, organizing, food politics, leadership, power, militarism, community development, market-based strategies, constitutional reform, and electoral politics. Even though it covers a lot of territory, it is all linked together through the emphasis on a diversity of tactics that prioritise democratic processes.

This is why the book spends considerable time discussing Barack Obama and his campaign. The appeal of Obama is not his policy positions (which are far from radical), but in the procedural values that his leadership style embodies. Obama's emphasis on hope, unity, consensus-building and grass roots mobilization, Rebick suggests, is shared with

Bolivia's Evo Morales and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. In advancing this argument, she also makes an important intervention into debates about representation, noting that, '[f]rom my perspective, the victory of a black man who presents as a consensus-builder and not a polarizer is just as much of a feminist victory as the victory of a woman who represents the political establishment' (94). This observation embraces the history of feminists as pioneers in thinking about questions of process.

In fact, in the search for new strategies, Rebick draws from the past, reclaiming the Second Wave feminist notion that 'the personal is political.' She says that

the problem goes beyond patriarchal modes of functioning to our very notions of power. The Left has always seen power as being located in the state and in the corporations. The way to change the world was to get state power and make changes to state and economic structures. The women's movement, anti-racist groups, and the environmental movement introduced the idea that we must also change our personal behaviour if we want to change the world (131).

This means, for example, that people reflect on racism and colonialism in social relationships, and that they engage in leadership that empowers, rather than controls others. To initiate these conversations, Rebick starts by implicating herself, and sharing her own personal struggles throughout the book.

She also gives readers the opportunity to extend the dialogue beyond the book and to keep track of the people, places, movements and debates through the website. In the 'continuing Epilogue' at [www.transformingpower.ca](http://www.transformingpower.ca), we can find links to more information, post comments to the blog and read updates. So when I found myself wondering what Rebick would say about the departure of Van Jones (the Special Advisor for Green Jobs, who figures prominently in the book) from the Obama Administration, the answer was close at hand.

There are places in the book that do raise some questions. When Rebick says that sectarianism on the Left is waning, that the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas is dead, and that Milton Friedman and free market capitalism have been wholly discredited, it makes me hope that her optimism isn't just wishful thinking. Also, reflecting on Second Wave feminism, Rebick believes that '[w]e ended up challenging the men, but not sufficiently the way power is practised' (95). It would be interesting to know how she would compare the Second Wave's conceptualization of



power with the Third Wave, and to what extent the politics of Third Wave feminism have influenced her thinking on democratic process.

The larger question, not only for Rebeck, but for the project of participatory democracy more broadly, has to do with the tension between local control and the offloading of responsibility. This can be seen in her discussion of Porto Alegre, where child care was identified as a community priority. Rebeck explains that the

PT [Brazilian Workers' Party], being socialists, believed in state-run child care, but they couldn't afford it. Community groups stepped forward and offered to house the child-care centres for a fraction of the price it would cost in the public sector...This compromise began to build trust (40).

Here, the contradiction is clear between community control of social services, on the one hand, and shifting the costs and responsibility onto community (usually women), on the other. These debates over public versus community-based services are happening right now in the child care movement in Canada.

Overall, *Transforming Power* is a rousing endorsement of tactical diversity, and a welcome challenge to put democratic process at the centre of progressive politics. As Rebeck tells us, 'Democracy, it turns out, is the biggest enemy of neoliberalism, for a system that redistributes wealth from the poor to the rich by definition cannot be a democratic system' (39).

*BOOK REVIEW*

Göran Therborn. 2008. *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?* London and New York: Verso. ISBN 978-1-84467-188-5. Hardcover: 30.00 CAD. Pages: 194.

Reviewed by William K. Carroll  
University of Victoria

In the Introduction to this collection of three previously published essays, Göran Therborn proposes three toasts in celebration of Marx, first to the proponent of emancipatory reason and freedom from exploitation and oppression, second to the historical materialist approach that attends to the present as history and to the materiality of power, and third to Marx's 'dialectical openness in comprehending the contradictions and conflicts in social life' (ix). In the ensuing pages, however, Therborn falls short of fashioning an analysis of recent and contemporary left-wing theory and practice adequate to the second toast.

Therborn writes as a prominent left intellectual, for a left readership. The book is intended as 'a map and a compass' – an effort to grasp the 'seismic shift' between the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries – a shift punctuated by China's turn to the market and the collapse of the Soviet system, which have cast doubt on both socialism and its chief integrative theory, Marxism.

At the outset, as he takes up the global politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Therborn strays significantly from the Marxist concern with the materiality of power, erecting an abstract schema of intersecting 'parameters' – states, markets, and social patterns – to depict the 'social space of modern politics' (4). In this schematization, which curiously resembles the pattern variables that undergirded Talcott Parsons's functionalist sociology, capitalism is a system of markets, social patterns and states, rather than a mode of production centred upon the capital/labour relation. This grand-theoretic strategy sacrifices material relationality, but enables Therborn, a master essayist, to embark upon the first of several omnibus surveys, in this case, of the changing global political landscape. Along the way, he defends a certain state centrality against exaggerated claims of globalization and registers, as a major (new) left success, the shift, in social patterning, from deference to irreverence; yet he also notes the decline of collectivist, class politics in favour of individualism, a process through

which 'the Marxian dialectic has lost most of its force' (34). On the next page, he aligns the World Social Forum with 'antimodernist protest' – an interpretation that fits his verdict on the Marxian dialectic better than it fits reality.

In another survey, Therborn reconnoiters world geopolitics, with each region claiming a few paragraphs. Although not without some keen insights, these passages, and in fact much of the book, suffer from a tendency to gloss and to stylize, which of course is inevitable as one tries to encapsulate, say, Southeast Asia in three short paragraphs (55). The resulting 'map' is, I think, of limited value analytically or strategically. Most egregiously, in his effort to differentiate the 21<sup>st</sup> from 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Therborn misinterprets a central claim of historical materialism. He sees the neoliberal privatization of the world as a blow against the Marxist social dialectic of a cumulative contradiction between capitalism's socialization of the productive forces within a system of private appropriation. Marx never claimed that this contradiction would be manifested in a contest between state ownership and the 'private sector'. His point, operating at a deeper level ontologically, was that capitalism creates increasingly socialized, interdependent practices *within the commodity form*, the chief manifestation being the development, in his day, of the world market, not the social-democratic nanny-state. Despite this confusion and its deleterious effects on the analysis, Therborn offers an intriguing vision of 'trans-socialism' that retains the insight in his first toast to Marx and extends dialectics to gender and ethnic struggles while trumpeting a moral discourse of human rights and antiviolence and a commitment to universal pleasure.

In Chapter 2, the focus shifts to an assessment of Marxism as the critical theory and practice of a modernity caught between its emancipatory and exploitative moments. In a somewhat meandering essay, Therborn reviews the debates that fueled and surrounded the Frankfurt School and other genres of Western Marxism. He concludes with a defense of Marxism as an interpretation, critique and analysis of modernity that is unsurpassed, yet that paradoxically no longer seems to offer any ready solutions. In the circumstances, the task for theorists inspired by Marx 'will be to look at what is currently happening to the venerable couplet of the forces and relations of production on a global scale and their conflictual effects on social relations' (110).

The final essay bids farewell to dialectics (or does it?), with a survey of radical social theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century North. Restricting discussion to 'the North' bolsters Therborn's thesis that the dialectic of capitalism is in

recession – the temptation is to read the decline of unions in Europe and North America as an historical verdict on the working class. Largely ignored are developments in South America. Therborn seems innocent of the influence of Marxist thinkers like Michael Lebowitz within the Bolivarian process, yet he recognizes in the Indigenous socialism of Evo Morales ‘a new trail for Marxism in the Andes’ (128). In attempting to unpack the Marxian dialectics of capitalist modernity, he resorts to another schema, complemented by a narrative that casts both postmodernism and neoliberalism as challengers to left-wing thought. The various responses are grouped eclectically under the rubrics of ‘Europe’s theological turn’ (Dubray, Badiou, Žižek, Hardt and Negri, Eagleton) and ‘American futurism’ (Jameson, Wright, Roemer, Harvey, Arrighi, Wallerstein). Among the trends are displacements of class (Laclau and Mouffe’s embrace of ‘antagonism’), exits from the state (the turn to civil society), the return of sexuality (queer theory), and the strengthening of critical political economy (Wallerstein, Glyn, Brenner). That the last of these seems to run counter to the first two evokes no reflections from the author.

The book’s closing passages catalogue contemporary left positions, again by constructing a two dimensional space in which Marxism and non-Marxism lie orthogonal to socialism and capitalism. Here, post-socialist Giddens jostles with social-democratic Korpi, post-Marxists Laclau and Mouffe, and neo-Marxists Žižek and Negri. Despite ‘a resilient [Marxist] left’ whose intellectual production surpasses that of the new left, Therborn discerns a permanent severing of the ‘classical Marxist triangle’ that linked politics, social science and philosophy. In the circumstances, the most adequate intellectual stance devolves to ‘a certain *defiant humility*’ (180).

As I have intimated, the book suffers from a travelogue approach to its subject matter that relies on serviceable yet superficial typologies. Therborn does not demonstrate the decline of the Marxian dialectic; nor is it clear that ‘the classical Marxist triangle’ ever existed as an accomplished reality, as distinct from a persistent challenge. But Therborn’s failure to attend even gesturally to another dialectic, grasped by ecological Marxists (Burkett, Foster, Harvey, Kovel, O’Connor, Nigel Smith etc.), is possibly the biggest lacunae of all in this engaging and thought-provoking book.

*BOOK REVIEW*

Mark P. Thomas. 2009. *Regulating Flexibility: The Political Economy of Employment Standards*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. ISBN 978-0-7735-3528-2. Paperback: 32.95 CAD. Pages: 248.

Reviewed by Bryan Evans  
Ryerson University

Thomas has made an important contribution to the literature on labour policy and its correspondence to capitalist economic development. He skilfully applies a political economy analysis to the specific case of employment standards regulation in Ontario, though this is situated in a larger global context. That he chose to deal with employment standards regulation, the effective 'collective agreement of the unorganized', is itself commendable and long overdue. This is particularly so given the relative paucity of analysis afforded this vitally important area of employment law. What makes Thomas' work immediately significant is that his subject matter is politically and practically so central to our working lives. The aggressive pursuit of flexibilization strategies by capital, begun in the 1980s, will continue as the restructuring of work progresses through the 'recovery' from the Great Recession. And, of course, it is not just employment standards regulation that is tattered but the entire Keynesian era legacy regulatory regime that remains. We need only consider the inadequacies of public pensions and the debate respecting Employment Insurance. However, the case of employment standards legislation presented by Thomas is of more general significance as it deftly illustrates the interlinked relationships between the forces leading the neoliberalization of the state, public policy and broader economic transformation. Thomas' theoretical and methodological frame could easily be applied to the full range of public policies that were at one historical moment intended to provide some modest degree of protection and redistribution but have been transformed by design and/or neglect.

In this context of a broad and incremental erosion of post-war policy interventions designed to regulate and mediate class relations, the case of employment standards takes on much greater importance as precarious employment continues its expansion. Employment standards legislation establishes a floor of minimum protections regulating working

hours, minimum wages, vacation time, equal pay for equal work, and a host of provisions governing the employment relationship of domestic and home-based workers. As the labour market restructures, these minima are becoming increasingly important. He situates the origins of labour flexibilization within the general crisis of capitalism in the 1970s. At that time, organizations such as the OECD promoted such strategies as a policy framework that would lead to reduced unemployment, increased productivity and low labour costs. In concrete terms, labour flexibilization entails enabling capital to approach labour as simply another factor in the production process by allowing employers to grow and shrink their workforces at will and at minimal cost. In this respect, Thomas provides the reader with an important conceptual lesson – flexibilization is not deregulation. Rather this is more accurately characterized as re-regulation, as the power of the state to develop and implement public policy is, in this case, used to promote market-oriented regulation. The outcome of this re-regulation of labour markets and employment arrangements is to curtail social protections and to expose workers to the discipline of market forces. Thomas captures one of the noted paradoxes of neoliberalism here. Rather than weakening the state, the process of neoliberal restructuring requires a strong state as it is by and through the state that neoliberalism is animated and advanced.

Thomas' political economy theoretical frame presents employment standards regulation in historical perspective. The evolution of employment standards in Ontario is rigorously documented by Thomas who scoured the archives for primary sources. The Ontario Employment Standards Act (ESA) was enacted in 1968 essentially as an amalgam of already existing minimum standards that had been put in place in 1940s and 1950s including hours of work, paid vacations, minimum wages and equal pay for equal work. But the Act included some new provisions such as a legislated overtime premium rate. In sum, the ESA was a century in the making and was ultimately a compromise resulting from the countervailing pressures from organized labour and the women's movement who had struggled for a legislative comprehensive minimum floor on the one hand and the arguments of the employer community, on the other hand, that such interventions undermined their ability to compete. It was these latter arguments that tended to capture the attention of political and bureaucratic policy makers. Ultimately even at its inception, the ESA ensured a significant degree of flexibility for employers given the number of exemptions it explicitly allowed and substantive provisions that either trailed or did little more than reflect prevailing business human

resources practices. The economic priorities of business sat well with the economic development ambitions of the Ontario state and together they would trump any movement toward standards too favourable to workers. However, this is not to detract from the fact that the period of the 1970s, 80s and early 90s (which included minority governments propped up by New Democrats and the NDP win in 1990), allowed for some substantive building of the ESA including new standards.

In the case of Ontario, according to Thomas, the abrupt rupture with this model arrived with the 1995 election of the Progressive Conservative Party led by Mike Harris and the start of its Common Sense Revolution. In 1996, one of the earliest interventions of the new government was to amend the ESA in several fundamental ways. The minimum wage was frozen at \$6.85; the wage protection program was eliminated thus effectively empowering employers to evade responsibility for unpaid wages and severance pay; and the time limit in which a worker can file a complaint was shrunk from 2 years to 6 months thus effectively disenfranchising workers from the protections provided by the Act, as historically most complaints were filed after the worker had left the job. In 1999 the Conservatives announced the second phase in their assault on the ESA stating that their intention to carry out a fundamental review and overhaul of the ESA in an effort to 'modernize' the legislation that the government viewed as ideologically driven and a case of over-regulation. The social protections embedded through the ESA became cast as 'red tape' serving to impede business competitiveness. The end result was a sweeping and fundamental re-writing of the ESA to better align it with the business competitiveness priorities of neoliberalism including expanding maximum working hours from 48 to 60. The Common Sense Revolution was neither hesitant nor apologetic.

Thomas has made a significant contribution with *Regulating Flexibility*. It is a must read for any one interested in the neoliberalization of labour policy. Equally important is the skilful way Thomas weaves together how the various social and political forces, and the imbalance of power between them, is understood and acted upon by the state. What Thomas has done is introduce a radical analysis of public policy and public administration that calls for some greater application to other areas of labour policy but also other policy fields.

# Connections, Capitalism, Control

## Call for Session Organizers

Society for Socialist Studies (SSS)  
Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences  
Concordia University, Montréal  
31 May - 03 June 2010

The theme of the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Montréal in 2010 is “Connected Understandings,” offering an opportunity for the Society for Socialist Studies to consider what “connected understandings” might mean for the left today.

We are pulled into a celebration of digital media and its implications for education, community involvement, and social change. Issues of concern to those on the left remain: issues of access, ownership, and control.

We face dis-connections, as a combination of academics and activists, meeting at a university as part of a congress of scholarly associations.

What are the implications of being part of the largest gathering of anglophone academics, meeting in the largest city in a francophone province? We are meeting twenty years on and forty kilometres away from the confrontation between the Canadian military and the Mohawks of Kanésatake. Connections and understandings seem particularly tested in these contexts.

What do these possibilities of connections and disconnections mean in terms of projects on the left, within Canada and around the world? The Society for Socialist Studies invites proposals for sessions addressing any aspect of the theme of “Connections, Capitalism, Control.”

Proposals may also be submitted for any and all topics in which you have an interest and are willing to chair. Please remember that all SSS sessions must be open to paper proposals from SSS members and others. Sessions cannot be closed or already full at the time the Programme Committee receives the session proposal. If you wish to organise an invited roundtable, please contact the Programme Committee chair directly.

A note on joint sessions: you are encouraged to coordinate sessions that could be run jointly with other organizations. Please make sure that you submit the full information to both (them and us) and meet the deadline of each. Also, please make it clear to all parties which organization will be in charge of scheduling your joint session.

If you are interested in organizing a session at the 2010 SSS Annual Meetings, please submit your proposal through the Open Conference System <<http://ocs.sfu.ca/fedcan/index.php/sss2010/>>. We will begin posting sessions available in a call for papers on 15 December 2009. Early submissions will be much appreciated.

Please contact Chad D. Thompson, Programme Committee Chair  
<[chad.d.thompson@gmail.com](mailto:chad.d.thompson@gmail.com)> if you have any questions.



## Twenty Years After Oka Reflections, Responses, Analyses

### Call for Submissions

In the summer of 1990, a long-standing dispute between the Mohawk of Kanehsata:ke and the town of Oka, Québec came to a head over the town's decision to expand a golf course further into 'The Pines'. That decision resulted in the erection of barricades by the people of Kanehsata:ke, an assault on the barricades by provincial police, and a 78-day stand-off between the Canadian military and the people of Kanehsata:ke and their supporters. This confrontation was broadcast around the world, generating debate about the relationship between First Nations and the Canadian state, about issues of colonialism and gender, and about national identity in Canadian, Quebecois, and First Nations contexts.

Two decades later, what is the meaning of Oka? *Socialist Studies: The Journal for the Study of Socialist Studies* invites reflections on, and scholarly considerations of, the impact and legacy of these events, for inclusion in a special issue of the journal to be released on 31 May, 2010. Further information about the journal is available at the website:

[www.socialiststudies.com](http://www.socialiststudies.com)

Submissions are welcome in a variety of forms. Those interested in contributing should contact Chad D. Thompson, Co-Editor, at [chad.d.thompson@gmail.com](mailto:chad.d.thompson@gmail.com). The deadline for scholarly articles (to be sent out for peer review) is 31 January 2010; the deadline for other contributions is 15 March 2010.

# Socialist Studies / Études socialistes

The Journal of the Society for Socialist Studies / Journal de la société d'études socialistes

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## Call for Papers

### **Rosa Luxemburg's Political Economy:**

### Contributions to Contemporary Political Theory and Practice

A Special Issue of

*Socialist Studies: the Journal of the Society for Socialist Studies*

Fall 2010

Since her assassination, Rosa Luxemburg has been treated as an icon while her political and theoretical work is largely forgotten, neglected, or rejected. Recently, though, David Harvey used her ideas on capitalist expansion to explain the new imperialism. Other elements of her work are promising for socialist studies and the left, today. Her analysis of mass strikes in Russia in 1905, for example, may cast new light on workers' struggles in China. Luxemburg's critical discussion of nations' right to self-determination inform, or ought to inform, contemporary Latin American struggles against imperialist domination. Her writings on mass strikes, parties and trade unions, like her better-known writings on 'social reform or revolution', offer insights into the role of (weakly) organized labour in political change. Although Luxemburg didn't engage much with women's issues directly, her work and its reception nonetheless have an important gender dimension. In particular, feminist women scholars have been quicker to recognize Luxemburg's contributions to socialist political economy than their male colleagues.

This call invites articles on Luxemburg's political economy, assessing her contributions to socialist debates in light of current political challenges. Papers may consider the implications of her work for contemporary anti-imperialist struggle, the dynamics of worker organization and progressive political change, and feminist scholarship within the left, or any other topic concerning Luxemburg's theoretical and political contributions to socialist political economy and political struggle. In keeping with the *Socialist Studies* mandate, perspectives from all disciplines are welcome.

Deadline: May 30, 2010. Please see: [www.socialiststudies.com](http://www.socialiststudies.com) for information about submissions (word count, format, etc.).

Contact:

Ingo Schmidt: [ingos@athabascau.ca](mailto:ingos@athabascau.ca), special issue coordinator

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## **Instructions to Authors**

*Socialist Studies: the Journal of the Society for Socialist Studies* is an interdisciplinary journal with a focus on describing and analysing social, economic or political injustice, and practices of struggle, transformation, and liberation across the world. The Journal seeks to make a major contribution to scholarly and political debates among the progressive left in academic, policy and movement circles by publishing original research of high standards.

The Journal's scope is intentionally wide-ranging, inviting submissions from varied disciplinary perspectives. The Journal includes core theoretical and empirical research papers, with occasional special issues principally devoted to particular themes. In addition, the Journal publishes shorter notes and comments, as well as book reviews.

The aim of the Journal is to publish original research and contributions. Manuscripts will be considered only if they have not already been published, and are not currently under consideration for publications, elsewhere.

Manuscripts should not contain substantial elements of material published or accepted for publication elsewhere. If an article has an ISBN or ISSN number it is considered to have been published, regardless of where it has been published.

If considered suitable by the editors, the manuscript will be refereed by two anonymous referees. The review process is 'blind': authors and referees do not know the identities of the others. In the event of disagreement amongst referees, the manuscript will be sent to a third referee. As a result of the peer review process, the editors may recommend revisions.

Authors will be notified that a submission is being sent out for review within two weeks of receipt. Normally, the first round of review will take one month. In exceptional cases, this process may take longer if there are difficulties identifying potential reviewers. Reviewers are recruited by the editorial board based upon their familiarity with the topic at hand.

The Journal rigorously enforces a word limit of 8000 words for peer-reviewed articles.

Complete instructions for submissions can be found at the journal site, [www.socialiststudies.com](http://www.socialiststudies.com) under the 'Submissions' tab.