


EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

WHITHER THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT: MODELS AND PROPOSALS

Notes and an Erratum. We are moving beyond the 75th Anniversary period in the life of S&S. The Anniversary Celebration in New York, on October 14 last year, was by all accounts a rousing success and an important moment for us. Part of the re-dedication to our work at this milestone is a campaign for 75 new subscribers, initiated by Editorial Board member Jerry Meyer. As of this writing (in early January 2012), we are about halfway to that goal. We are asking each reader of the journal to think of *one* person who should receive a trial sub; to send us the name and contact information, and \$36.00 (the special introductory rate), so that we can bring that person on board. We are a small but growing community of people who understand that building societies responsive to and run by the 99% cannot be accomplished without systematic study and recuperation of our theory and history — in a word, ongoing development of critical and revolutionary social thought in the Marxist tradition. Moreover, that the print form, as well as multiple electronic ones, is essential for that project. If you know of others who should be part of this, please don't let the opportunity pass for us to reach out to them.

And the erratum. From reader/contributor Arthur DiQuattro:

I think your editorial is great in trying to resolve ambiguities about U. S. political and military policy in Afghanistan (“Editorial Perspectives: Afghanistan: The Deep Structure of a Complex and Adverse Moment,” October 2011). But just a minor point regarding your footnote #1. It was not [Henry] Kissinger who chortled “We gave them [the USSR] their Vietnam,” but rather [Zbigniew] Brzezinski, in a letter to [President Jimmy] Carter.

DiQuattro supplies the text of a January 1998 interview, in which Brzezinski, who had been Carter's National Security Adviser, states that he wrote to Carter: “We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war . . . a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire.”

I stand corrected. The fact that it was so easy to confuse a Republican Secretary of State with a Democratic presidential adviser itself speaks volumes about the convergence between the two Parties, perhaps especially when it comes to foreign policy. Also, I doubt that we should rely on Brzezinski for our understanding of the causes of the demise of the Soviet “empire.” But I am glad to set the record straight on the attribution.

The Occupy Wall Street movement that began last fall at Zuccotti Park in New York City, and then spread across the country, has rekindled, with some urgency, the debate about left strategy, and about the direction the movement should take. By the time this text appears in print, the discussion will have become fused with the political debate that always surfaces in the United States in a Presidential election year. Let’s start with two affirmations: first, everyone who lives in the shadow of today’s world capitalist crisis has a right to give “advice” to Occupy. In my own conversations with activists (mainly in New York), I have found very little of the old “hey, *we* are the movement” attitude: everyone understands now that people with varying experiences and different degrees and styles of participation have a right to speak in the “general assemblies” of our time; that youth is not a guarantee of creativity and freshness of vision, any more than age is a guarantee of wisdom and experience. Second, yes, many of the things we will be saying, and hearing, have been said and heard before. That, too, is good, not bad. If some of us are reminded of debates on the left in earlier times — the 1960s, say, or even the 1930s — that does not mean that we are necessarily spinning (or reinventing) our wheels.

With this in tow, I want to consider the range of positions that are circulating within today’s activist movement. Without attempting anything like a systematic survey, I want to suggest that there are essentially three positions in play — three models of the society that oppresses us, and against which we are organizing. I will call this society “capitalist,” recognizing that that term means different things to different people, and that one of the three models (described below) may not even use it. Each of the models, in turn, has its own unique brand of proposals concerning how the movement should proceed: the relation between electoral and extra-electoral forms of struggle, for instance, or between long-range and short-range goals.

Each of the models, of course, has numerous variations within it. Listening to the discussions, the first impression received is one of immense and random variety. The most common view, I believe, uses a two-model approach to organizing the cloud of ideas: these are the first two, of the three enumerated just below. My contribution is to add a third model to the toolbox. It

should go without saying that more than one of these models can coexist within a single consciousness.

The three models may be labeled 1) Reformist; 2) External/Revolutionary; 3) Internal/Revolutionary.

The Reformist model sees contemporary capitalist society as having gone off the rails in crucial respects. Its description of the crisis, and the forces leading up to it, relies on metaphors and concepts such as “feeding frenzy,” “excessive polarization,” “loss of equilibrium between public and private,” and so on. We need impassioned and energetic forces, such as Occupy, to drive a new political momentum for balance, for reining in excesses, eliminating harmful externalities, generating the “shared prosperity” that is the “foundation for political democracy.” The movement should focus on reforms: fair taxation, government (public) responsibility for job creation in the last instance, full funding for health care, education, child and elder care, ecological sustainability. Issues concerning *systems* — of property, wealth, power — take back seat to the task of achieving measurable goals. The practical consequences of this model are fairly straightforward: pursue specific reforms, in concert with established forces (trade unions, reform movements, community organizations, the activist base of the Democratic Party).

The second model, External/Revolutionary, today constitutes the main alternative to the Reformist position within the left debate. In this view, capitalism is a complete and self-contained system of domination, which reduces subaltern classes and groups — the 99% — to a state of complete powerlessness and exteriority. The system is “theirs,” not “ours.” It is imposed on us, and we are outside in relation to it.

For a crude analogy, imagine chickens inside a coop (this is the single-syllable word for an animal enclosure; not “co-op”), controlled by farmers for their own benefit. The only course of action for the chickens is to destroy the coop (and the farmers therefore), and to go elsewhere; to live in the wild. There is no way the coop system can be “reformed.” It works perfectly well on its own terms, and if the farmers could be persuaded to give the chickens more grain, they would still have enough left for themselves, including the chickens they kill and eat, for the system to be viable. Asking for more grain for the chickens, therefore, only has the effect of pacifying them, weakening their resolve to destroy the coop altogether.

Some implications follow immediately. Long-range goals (elimination of the coop) are separated from and counterposed to short-range ones (more grain for the chickens). The long-range vision is also separated from development within the existing system: life in the wild, “beyond the coop,” is an unknown quantity, unrelated to the existing (“coop-italist”?) social reality.

This is clearly related to the passivity of the chickens within the coop; there is truly nothing there that develops, or can be developed.

(I think you see where this is going.)

The third model, Internal/Revolutionary, is the one that is, I believe, least understood, and it is the one that comes from the Marxist political economy tradition. In it, the system is not imposed on the subaltern class from outside (like a coop imposed on chickens). Rather, the system *is constituted by* the conflictual–symbiotic relation between exploited and exploiting classes; this system is a system of *production*, and as such is not independent of the whole complex of knowledges and practices surrounding production (the forces of production, or humanity’s “metabolism” with the natural world). (Here, as we can see, the coop metaphor begins to break down; chickens are not productive, they are produced.) The system, moreover, is *capitalist* in a more precise sense: it is not just any system of exploitation, or surplus extraction, but rather the highest link in the chain of such systems, which came into existence (not teleologically, but entirely as a result of human actions over a long period) when earlier and simpler links had become progressively inoperable. This system’s coopitalist “farmers,” therefore, face a crucial dilemma, one that may even be described as a core contradiction: they need to empower their “chickens” for purposes of high-productivity production, but they also need to *disempower* them in order to keep them under control. The disempowerment dimension relies on the fact that the farmer–chicken relation is *valorized*: it takes the form of market relations that mystify the underlying reality, making it seem eternal, inevitable, natural. This means, also, that the farmers have to *sell* grain to their chickens, when their own chicken-disempowering behavior makes that increasingly problematic. There is much more, of course, and it will clearly “burst asunder” the integument of the coop analogy.

Now the key feature of the system, thus understood, is that it is inherently incomplete. The classical text for this is *Capital*, I, chapters 6 and 7. Labor power is, always and necessarily, a special commodity, never subject to full valorization like other commodities. Its value is always the outcome of the balance of class forces (“balance” here in the sense of “relationship” or “correlation,” with no implication of “equilibrium” or any sort of inherent equality or consistency). For present purposes, this means that reforms — all of the proposals emanating from the Reformists as enumerated above, plus undoubtedly many more — are not only “good things” from the standpoint of the 99%; they represent changes in the balance of forces. They are *empowering*. Empowerment of the exploited is inherently problematic: capitalism must vigorously oppose it, even when it is entirely warranted in terms of general productive development or some superior social–philosophical ethic.

From the standpoint of the Internal/Revolutionary model, therefore, reforms have two features that the Reformist model does not perceive. First, they are inherently unstable. To switch to yet another animalistic metaphor, reforming capitalism is like taming a wild mountain cat. With enormous popular pressure, militant mobilization and deeply democratic organization, we can impose reforms, knowing that the system must, in its very nature, fight against them, the way the wild cat resists being restrained. The system's drive to release its inner nature then provides the basis in experience for the popular movement to raise the bar: more thoroughgoing measures, including Keynes' "more or less comprehensive socialization of investment" and other forms of encroachment on private capitalist prerogatives, become politically viable — still within the framework of capitalism, which increasingly looks like a highly trussed-up wildcat. The cat (one more metaphor clearly bites the dust here) will undoubtedly, at some point, force a decisive confrontation in the political arena, using all military, cultural and ideological powers available to it; this is, therefore, a revolutionary perspective on reforms.

The second aspect of reforms (not available to reformist thinking) is, to reiterate, their necessarily and inherently empowering quality. When working people get jobs, education, reliable access to health care, secure retirement, and in general a standard of living consistent with a principled relationship to work (*i.e.*, one coupled with rational understanding of both forces and relations of production), they are strengthened, socially. These are building blocks being put into place, for the decisive moment at which the working class achieves the actual capacity to replace the ruling and social-upper classes, and take on the management and direction of production and the rest of social organization for itself. Reforms, and the struggle to achieve and defend them, are the workshop creating the objective basis for socialist revolution, fully understood: not the moment of transfer of political power, not even the crucial dismantling of capitalist class apparatuses (as decisive as these moments are), but the actual assumption of power by the associated workers. One gets a sense of just how massive an undertaking this is, and how little its precise forms can be predicted or planned.

I won't try to outline the nature of proposals forthcoming from the Internal/Revolutionary model; I think the point has been made. (Also, I promise: no more animal metaphors!) Let me close with the obvious: there is a possibility of a grand alliance between the Reformist and the Internal/Revolutionary views. This coalition has the potential to capture the breadth of vision, and political muscle, inherent in the Occupy movement. By contrast, the External/Revolutionary model leads to a blind alley: it is an isolating and utopian stance that would divide working people, and ultimately demoralize us. Its vision of the future is vague and underdeveloped, and vulnerable

to “pragmatic” criticism; its opposition to struggling to meet real needs of working people in the present, owing to fears of “co-optation” and “betrayal,” threatens to disqualify its adherents from genuine claims to leadership.

Of course, there is always the possibility of co-optation and betrayal on the part of reformist politicians in leadership positions. The revolutionary implications of current struggles never emerge automatically, and much depends on how the Internal/Revolutionary forces frame their participation in the alliance. The matter was well put by an old mentor of this writer, the radical editor and activist Will Weinstone: life is, to be sure, a school for socialism, but there’s no such thing as a school without teachers.

Now, within the grand alliance, the Reformists will think that Internal/Revolutionists are ideologically blinkered dreamers, with their talk about capitalism, socialism, the system, revolution; but their energy, devoted in all demonstrated sincerity to the common battles for reforms, will be appreciated. The Internal/Revolutionists, to the contrary, will smile at the naivete of the Reformists, for whom reforms are their own end entirely, and who think that capitalism (or whatever they choose to call it) can be “humanized.”

Can it be humanized? How far can the stick bend without breaking? Our watchword, for the future, should be: let’s find out.



IN THIS ISSUE

Our last issue (76:2, April 2012, “Designing Socialism: Visions, Projections, Models”) laid out a range of views on a series of questions about the nature and workability of socialist social organization. Here, we begin with a fascinating recounting of recent Chinese discussions: “*Guojinmintui*: A New Round of Debate in China on State Versus Private Ownership,” by Fusheng Xie, An Li, and Zhongjin Li.

The devil (and the angels!) are in the details, but what emerges is a sense that China today is concretely and hotly contested terrain. The opposed ideological forces at work reflect the reality of a highly complex social formation, regarding which, it appears, two errors are possible: 1) looking at certain organizational–political forms, in particular state ownership, and simplistically equating these with “socialism”; 2) considering the existence of market relations and class differentiation, both of which have a long history in China (longer than we in the “West” may fully grasp), and treating these as equivalent to “capitalism.” In the various positions described by the authors, we see familiar elements, especially in the contest surrounding

“free market” ideology; but we also see uniquely Chinese characteristics. “*Guojinmintui*,” which means, literally, expanding state sector/shrinking private sector, is a reassertion of socialist values, even as the nature of the social relations *within* the expanding state sector is increasingly highlighted. The shift away from unbridled privatization and market-based development is significant, especially in view of the world capitalist crisis, which gives new life to Marxist currents of thought. The outcome, as always, is uncertain, but the temptation of clichéd affirmations or dismissals should be avoided. This article can usefully be read in the context of both the special socialism issue, mentioned above, and our special issue on China (73:2, April 2009), edited by Barbara Foley and Bernard H. Moss.

The current Great Recession and its relation to new aspects of capitalist finance are recurrent topics of interest in *S&S*. Another recent special issue, “Capitalism and Crisis in the 21st Century” (74:3, July 2010, edited by Justin Holt and Julio Huato), comes to mind. In the current issue, Fletcher Baragar and Robert Chernomas contribute to this research with their paper, “Profits from Production and Profits from Exchange: Financialization, Household Debt and Profitability in 21st-Century Capitalism.” The data are very useful, and show clearly the rising importance of household debt and of financial channels involving the working class. The questions: how are these trends to be conceived — as essentially elaborations of long-existing structures of exploitation, or as representing a qualitatively new form of exploitative social relations? What are the implications for the power balance between financial and non-financial capital, in both the short run and the long run? Finally, what does financialization imply for the eventual trend in the profit rate overall? Baragar and Chernomas show that these questions do not have simple answers.

In the current crisis of the Eurozone, and in particular the abrogation of democracy and imposition of financial dictatorship in Greece, it may seem strange to be reminded of the earlier political crisis in that country based on the uprising of youth at the end of 2008. The study by Spyros Sakellariopoulos, “On the Causes and Significance of the December 2008 Social Explosion in Greece,” lays out an analysis of Greek society and tensions within it that clearly bear upon the current crisis and possibilities. Understanding any country depends on close confrontation between its internal situation, which is quite unique, on the one hand; and the wider regional and world context in which that country exists, on the other. Sakellariopoulos’ study provides useful information on both aspects, for the period leading up to the present-day European quagmire.

As Marxist research explores new features and qualities in capitalist societies, certain writers and schools usually attempt to define entirely new “capitalisms”: Pentagon, consumer, finance, crony, etc., represent the long

list of adjectives defining new sub-species. Now, “Cognitive Capitalism,” the object of attention of the “post-workerist” school in France, comes under the scrutiny of political economist Guido Starosta. As with the case of financial circuits involving workers, the question here is whether the emergence of new, high-tech products providing cognitive services constitutes a challenge to core Marxist accounts, in this case the classical law of value. Starosta argues that the new features of present-day IT commodities, while undoubtedly real and deserving of attention, cast doubt more upon crude understandings of Marxist value theory, than upon that theory itself.

Finally, the Review Article by Victor Devinatz, “Struggling Against U. S. Labor’s Decline Under Late Capitalism: Lessons for the Early 21st Century,” reviews a large literature, seeking a way forward for labor. His conclusion, for a “bottom-up social unionism” that may “offer the best route for true union movement revival,” resonates well with the tentative, but highly encouraging, steps toward unity between unions and the Occupy movement — one of the most exciting features of the new social activism gripping the United States at this writing.

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