
EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF REVISITING FUNDAMENTALS

First, a few marginalia.

We take note of an article that appeared in *Harper's Magazine*, issue dated March 2014: Adolph Reed, Jr.'s "Nothing Left: The Long, Slow Surrender of American Liberals." This piece is one of many recent lamentations/celebrations of the decline of the left in the United States, to the point where "left" is defined as the most "liberal" one can get, and the right has taken complete control over the terms of the political debate. It is also a stinging critique of the Obama Administration, and of the hopes placed in the current U. S. President by some people on the left. I won't address this set of issues here, except to note my sense that the feeling tone of Reed's obituary seems to pass easily between the "lamentation" and "celebration" poles; when you see *no* hope whatsoever, you seem to take some sort of comfort in that fact. Also, that his conclusion — "the crucial tasks for a committed left in the United States now are to admit that no politically effective force exists and to begin trying to create one" — is both obvious to the point of banality, and runs up against what should also be obvious: that nothing is ever created out of nothing.

But I call attention to the passage below, which follows Reed's observation of an emergent "intellectual left that defined itself as liberal rather than radical":

To be sure, this shift was not absolute. Such publications as *New Labor Forum*, *New Politics*, *Science & Society*, *Monthly Review*, and others maintained an oppositional stance, and the Great Recession has encouraged new outlets such as *Jacobin* and *Endnotes*. But the American left has moved increasingly toward the middle.

To misuse Descartes: We are mentioned in a mainstream journal, therefore we exist! It is fun to see that S&S is a blip on Reed's radar screen, and in such excellent company to boot. Of course, the Marxist and revolutionary left can be present in this vision, as a sort of increasingly irrelevant *curiosum*

— *if the underlying reality* of the capitalist social order, in the United States and worldwide, is such that the shift toward the middle, so well described by Reed, is justified! In brief: will a hazy, progressive, Keynesian left solve the core problems? But I said I wouldn't get into this here, and so pull back from the brink (for now).

We take note of the death, at age 98, of Lee Lorch, on February 28 of this year — unusually, for us, as Dr. Lorch was not (so far as I can tell) a contributor to S&S. He is mentioned in Joe Auslander's report (S&S, Fall 1995) of the celebration of the 100th birthday of Dirk Struik, MIT mathematician and S&S founding editor, on September 30, 1994 at Brown University. (Struik passed away in 2000, at age 106.)

Lee Lorch, also a mathematician, was a Communist and civil rights activist in New York City, going back to the 1940s. He was instrumental in the fight to integrate Stuyvesant Town, a housing development on the lower east side of Manhattan owned by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Stuyvesant Town tenants, he and his wife gave their apartment there to a Black family, a move that led to protracted efforts to evict the Lorch family and legal battles that eventually forced Metropolitan to abandon its racist exclusionary policy. In the meantime, McCarthy-era repression and xenophobia forced Lorch out of City College, and other U. S. colleges where he had found work; he eventually took refuge in Canada, settling at York University. The City University of New York finally awarded him an honorary doctorate, in 1990.

There is much more to this scholar-activist's remarkable story.¹ But we just wanted to record the basics, as our recognition of the value, to us, of Lorch's demonstration of the intimate connection between radical activism and systematic knowledge.

This brings us to the main event.

My text is a set of questions put recently by a long-time leftist to the members of a closed email political economy discussion list:

Marx's thought was aimed at understanding the world to change it. (The last Thesis on Feuerbach.) How do we interpret this thought in present-day conditions? In my younger days we Marxists thought that we were working for socialism (admittedly,

1 See <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/nyregion/lee-lorch-desegregation-activist-who-led-stuyvesant-town-effort-dies-at-98.html?hp>

to be interpreted differently in different situations). What are we working for today? For an improved welfare state, improved income distribution? Prospects for socialism seem to be practically non-existent. Furthermore, should we be re-interpreting (revising) Marx's thought in the light of what has happened, or asking questions? For example, we cannot dismiss "bourgeois freedoms" as we did in my younger days. Are people willing to accept the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat today? Should Marxists not be seeking answers to these questions? Does Sraffa's work throw any light on these questions? And so on. You see my drift.

Let me take the elements of this set of questions in order (preliminary responses only, of course; not "discussion enders").

The famous 11th Thesis — "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" — is of such general significance that it does not require interpretation in specific sets of conditions (present-day or any other). This is Marx's argument against the passive, contemplative materialism that gives rise to the paradoxes of the unknowability of the thing-in-itself, Humean agnosticism — and Feuerbach. Knowledge of the inner reality of the world, its laws of change and therefore its possibilities of change, will remain mysterious so long as we conceive of ourselves, our "educated" consciousness, as standing outside of that world and observing it. Note the dual relation: we understand the world in order to change it, but (perhaps even more fundamentally) we change the world in order to understand it. Does this mean that our purposive actions *determine* the truth of the world? How do we keep active, "sensuous" (Marx) materialism from deteriorating into a sort of pragmatist-idealist doctrine asserting that "whatever works is true"? Dialectical sensibility always positions us in an uneasy tension between twin degenerations: in this case, simplistic or pragmatic activism, on one side, and contemplative positivism, on the other. This, like almost everything else that Marxism claims to achieve, is an open research-and-action project. What we lack, often, is the confidence to embrace the incompleteness of our understandings, while at the same time putting them to use.

But the question, in essence, seems to be this: if today we seem to be confined to working for improvements in the welfare state and income distribution, rather than for socialism, is fundamental (socialist) change even possible? Here is a counter-question: Do we think that capitalism *can* incorporate, non-problematically, improvements in the social position of the working class? This is a question for political economy (see "Editorial Perspectives," October 2010, April 2011, July 2012, January 2014). If it can't, then perhaps the two dimensions of change (long-term, to socialism, and short-term, to a more "people-friendly" capitalism) are objectively aligned, in a way that the political consciousness of the present cannot grasp.

Often in these pages I have addressed the problem of the time frame, and Marxists' tendency to compress it; to imagine that the course of maturation

toward revolutionary transformation is shorter than it really is. Of course, the opposite view — socialism will replace capitalism *some day*, but it is not for us to know when that day will come — is also unsatisfactory, a bit like postponing the Coming of the Messiah to some abstract and indeterminate future. What matters is whether we can feel the footsteps of maturing socialism within the crises of the present, as we act to build working-class resistance, and, eventually, politically realistic alternatives. So the right may be winning the discursive battles, as Adolph Reed argues in his *Harper's* essay, but it is not removing the sources of tension and crisis; rather, it is intensifying them. This is not to counter a programmatic pessimism with an equally abstract optimism. It does, however (I think), call into question the view that the prospects for socialism are “practically non-existent.”

Incidentally, regarding: “. . . socialism (admittedly, to be interpreted differently in different situations).” Why “admittedly”? Would we ever want to assume that socialism *should* look identical in different historical conditions?

Should we be “re-interpreting (revising) Marx’s thought” or “asking questions”? Yes. Both. Always. That is what Marx himself would do. That is what Marx would want us to do. That is what all science does, including revolutionary social science.

As for “bourgeois freedoms” and the dictatorship of the proletariat: I don’t remember, in *my* “younger days,” ever encountering a dismissive attitude toward “bourgeois” freedoms on the left (although I suspect some such position did exist in some places and times). The Marxism I absorbed, in the late 1950s and 1960s, always saw the negative personal freedoms associated with the emergence of bourgeois society as a) limited; b) precious. The road to deeper positive freedoms — perhaps summarized as the freedom to become all we can become, both individually and collectively; to achieve the ongoing ennoblement of human life — lies through defense of the negative and abstract-individual-based liberties of the capitalist Enlightenment. Capitalism has always had a hypocritical and ambivalent attitude toward “its own” freedoms, using them against precapitalist classes and polities (monarchies, aristocracies), but immediately attacking and undermining them as soon as they become weapons in the hands of subaltern strata.

One can argue about the use of “dictatorship of the proletariat” as a slogan, but the substance of this idea is central to Marxist understanding: It is the correlate of a complete grasp of the nature of capitalist class power, exercised in the workplace, in the “market,” in finance, in the electoral arena, in schools, churches, communities — *and* in the military, police, courts, prisons. When we have finally transcended all illusions about that power — evident today everywhere from the financial oligarchs to the Big Box retail stores, MTurk, FoxConn, BlackRock, the world-spanning U. S. military machine, the transnational imperialist drive for domination from Ukraine to Libya and

Venezuela, and on and on — we must begin to envision a democratic and organized *counter*-power, with the capacity to enforce the popular mandate against the will of the erstwhile ruling classes, whatever we choose to call that power and whatever people are “willing to accept” at any moment. Are there risks? You bet. Again, let’s use dialectical sensibility and try to find the space between twin extremes: in this case, a cynical “you can’t make omelets without breaking eggs” mentality, on one side; and pacifist–anarchist naivete about horizontalism, complete personal autonomy, “love will see us through,” etc., on the other.

Finally, on Sraffa. This is a reference to Piero Sraffa, the 20th-century Italian thinker, long resident at Cambridge University, who had a major influence on Ludwig Wittgenstein, John M. Keynes, Maurice Dobb and many others. His 1960 *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities* began a revolution in economic theory, often tagged the “Cambridge Criticism” or “Cambridge controversies in capital theory,” a revolution (like the socialist one!) whose future is, at present, uncertain. As an entry in a long-standing debate, I will opine that Piero Sraffa was a Marxist — using what we know of his lifelong political commitments, as well as my (also controversial) definition of a Marxist, namely, a person who sincerely believes that s/he is one. Sraffa’s signal contribution to Marxism is his assertion that Marx’s system of prices of production, revealing the inner properties of a competitive capitalist economy with a completely developed “capital market” (unrestricted flow of capital into and out of the various industries that comprise the economy), can be developed and described rigorously using the tools of economic analysis — a solution to important aspects of the long-standing “transformation problem” in Marxist value theory.² Moreover, that the resulting system of production equations tying together benchmark prices, wages, and profits undermines the “neoclassical” or capitalist-mainstream conception of how markets and prices work. All of this is good. It is serious. It is Marxism practiced as “normal science.” And, as such, it contributes to building solid foundations for the long-term revolutionary project — even if it does not directly provide answers to the political questions with which our interlocutor is mainly concerned.

But in general: yes, ask the questions, especially the fundamental ones. I don’t think we need to worry too much about cultivating a static orthodoxy divorced from reality. When we rethink the foundations, we always do it in the context of the present, and that changes both the questions and the answers.

2 Sraffa’s work brings us to the frontier of value theory proper: the formation of a substance of value based in abstract labor and correlated with the deepest qualities of capitalist social relations, not immediately available to experience. It does not cross that frontier. This, obviously, is a topic for careful development, on other occasions.

IN THIS ISSUE

We begin this time with a study of “Hegel, Imperialism, and Universal History,” by Lucia Pradella, a philosopher from the University of Venice, Italy. The novelty is to look at the connection between Hegel’s political economy and his philosophy of history, as revealed in particular in an under-researched source, his lectures on the philosophy of right, from 1822 to 1830. Hegel anticipated Marx’s core insights into the centrality of labor and of historical evolution, to a greater degree than is usually recognized, as well as developing a de-naturalized and universal conception of the social whole. He also, however, supported European expansionism and affirmation of the ultimate supremacy of the “Christian–Germanic world,” on the basis of a Eurocentric and even racist ideology that undercut the universalist perspective toward which his engagement with political economy led him.

Returning to the question of whether or not there exists a “break” in Marx’s thinking, separating his mature post-1845 work from the early writings focused on alienation, the general nature of human species-being, and normative critiques of the present, Morgan Horowitz examines the standpoint of the “break” theorists, especially Louis Althusser, and finds this standpoint wanting. The early normative commitments, explicit in the *1844 Manuscripts* and other writings of the young Marx, can be shown to be present in his later work as well, and even to serve as the ground for Marx’s mature political understanding. The thoroughgoing humanism of the early work leads to the materialist grasp of social objectivity in the later; this “makes the point, perhaps too often missed, that democracy and communism are inextricably tied together.”

Daniel Gaido and Vella Luparello, in their study of “Strategy and Tactics in a Revolutionary Period: U. S. Trotskyism and the European Revolution, 1943–1946,” examine a little-known current within a relatively small sector of the U. S. left, the Socialist Workers Party, in the period of the defeat of fascism in Europe and the re-emergence of working-class politics in Italy, and in other countries of Western Europe. The positions of the “Morrow–Goldman–Heijenoort tendency,” while not representing the views of anything other than a small group within a numerically minor organization, emerge as quite nuanced and rich in political implication. For those outside of this sector of Marxist thinking, Gaido and Luparello’s recuperation will be of interest, and will perhaps prompt the thought that, if people from within various left parties and organizations had talked to one another more, over the years, regardless of differences, the entire U. S. left might be in a stronger position today.

Under Communications, David Laibman comments on Robin Hahnel's response to his (Laibman's) article-length critique of the "Participatory Economy" conception, developed by Hahnel in association with Michael Albert and concentrated in Hahnel's latest book, *Of the People, By the People*. We are moving closer and closer to genuine dialog, as opposed to mere parallel play, in the long-term "Envisioning Socialism" project that has been featured in S&S over the years. As always, this dialog needs many more participants; readers are encouraged to send in their "two cents." This must become a worldwide conversation, and, needless to say, it is just beginning.

Finally, we are glad to present Jørgen Sandemose's review essay on *In Marx's Laboratory: Critical Interpretations of the Grundrisse*, edited by Riccardo Bellofiore, Guido Starosta, and Peter D. Thomas. This is a wide-ranging critical survey of a wide-ranging book, which originated as a conference at the University of Bergamo, Italy, in July 2008. A selection of the essays was published in S&S, January 2011. There is no way to describe the range of issues and viewpoints in the collection, let alone Sandemose's appraisals, in this space, except to say that, like the articles by Pradella and Horowitz in this issue, they reveal the continuing vitality of research into the sources and genesis of Marx's thinking — which still, like the work of no other thinker before or since, inspires ongoing critical reflection on the problems, crises and potentials of our time.

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