EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

IN THIS ISSUE

We have, this time, a chance pairing — full disclosure: this was not part of some editorial plan! — of two intriguing papers on Chinese agriculture and economic development. They are intriguing individually, and even more so as juxtaposed. The article by Gaofeng Meng on China’s Household Responsibility System (HRS) takes a nuanced and supportive view of this development, which replaced the movement for agricultural Communes in the Mao years. Seeing the HRS as a necessary transitional device — comparison with Lenin’s NEP comes to mind — Meng writes: “The HRS . . . is
well developed, and thus encourages economic growth and the reduction of poverty. It is a viable and real alternative to both full collective ownership under the People’s Commune model and the full individual peasant ownership that the neoliberals advocate.” Meng’s argument is enhanced by his consideration of the work of the British legal theorist Antony M. Honoré, who worked out a complex system of concepts defining property rights in his writings in the early 1960s.

Meng’s study is paired with “Giovanni Arrighi in Beijing: Rethinking the Transformation of the Labor Supply in Rural China,” by Hao Qi and Zhongjin Li. Qi and Li’s work reaches quite different conclusions. Following Arrighi (whose influential article was titled “Adam Smith in Beijing”), they find that the depopulation of the countryside, in which the HRS played a decisive role, was a coerced process in which both market forces and the Chinese state played a role. One reference point for their analysis is the classic work of Sir W. Arthur Lewis on development with unlimited supplies of labor. Qi and Li reject simplistic conceptions of the class character of Chinese economic growth; they argue that “the behavior of the state should be understood in more concrete and historical contexts, through the lens of the internal conflicts among the state and emerging classes, and the external constraints that global capitalism has imposed on the Chinese state and economy.”

British theorist Paul Blackledge wrote for S&S on Alan Shandro’s book, Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony, in our October 2018 issue. Now he contributes an article-length discussion of August Nimtz’ recent two-volume study of Lenin’s Electoral Strategy. Nimtz’ work is definitive in showing that Lenin, consistently through every period of his life and political work, embraced electoral participation by the Bolsheviks, in a manner governed by Marxist principles and entirely within the framework set forth by Marx and Engels earlier. Blackledge, however, sees in Lenin (and in Marx) a more nuanced view of the relation between electoral work and the wider working-class struggle than the one brought forward by Nimtz, who, in Blackledge’s view, sees revolutionary electoral work as “merely a matter of standing in elections with the correct program.” Blackledge draws upon Lenin’s notebooks on Clausewitz in a novel way, as one source for enriching our understanding of Lenin’s view of elections and the electoral arena. A similar, if much more preliminary and telegraphic, discussion appears in the “Marxism in Our Time” essays, in this issue (just below), and in S&S, April 2019.

The final article in this issue is the study of “State Capitalism and the State–Class Nexus,” by Nathan Sperber. Sperber skillfully reconstructs the various currents within Marxism that proposed some sort of state–class
interaction in the 20th century: Lenin’s discussion of “state capitalism” as an early and transitional reality following the Russian Revolution; the later anti-Soviet Union left positions interpreting the nature of the USSR; the use of the concept to describe statist policies in the “Third World” after World War II; the theories of “state monopoly capitalism” among Communist parties and authors; and, more recently, use of “state capitalism” among non-Marxist commentators and academics writing about the developing world, and about China. Sperber notes that, while the issue of class was and is central to the Marxist authors who deploy some version of “state capitalism,” albeit with widely divergent interpretations of 20th- and 21st-century realities, the mainstream commentariat has moved away from this focus in favor of “elite-centric” positions.

Following our “Symposium” among S&S editors concerning the question, “Is the Term ‘Stalinism’ Valid and Useful for Marxist Analysis?” (October, 2018), five new contributions have arrived (from both editors and other readers), and so we have “Round Two” of this Symposium in our “Communications” section. These entries in the debate, of course, have the benefit of prior reading of the ones in “Round One.” The way new wrinkles and perspectives crop up in these new pieces is quite impressive. Our feeling, however, is that this is a good moment to bring this form of the debate to a close. The debate itself, however, will and should of course continue. The variety of viewpoints here confirms our sense that, far from being a retreat into a past that is of no interest to newer generations on the left, the principles involved continue to be central to current movements, and should be studied by young folks (and others) who need to absorb the lessons of the 20th century precisely in order to conquer new territory.

Finally, we are pleased to present Kirk Boyle’s Review Article on “Rereading Jameson.” Fredric Jameson is perhaps the preeminent Marxist literary figure writing today, with work going back a half century. Boyle reviews three new books on Jameson, in the light of the latter’s own prodigious output over recent decades. He also presents his own didactic model of the outward development of Jameson’s projection from the literary text to events, and then to idea-structures leading to “utopias,” or critical images of what-might-be. One senses that the more of Jameson’s oeuvre one has under one’s belt, the more one can get from even as evocative and transparent a summary as the one provided by Boyle; this, however, only enhances the usefulness of the latter’s outsized References list.
THE ELECTORAL ARENA ONCE MORE: 
A FRESH LOOK AT THE “LESSER EVIL” DEBATE

In our last issue, this section pursued the problem of electoral strategy, which is at the heart of current political discussion on the left. While, like everyone else, we urgently seek to figure out Where We Go from Here (the title of Bernie Sanders’ latest book), our remit (certainly not ours alone) is to turn the spotlight of Marxist theory onto the issues: the Trump presidency, its counterparts in right-wing movements in Europe, India, Brazil, and other places, the deepening crisis of world capitalism, the looming ecological sustainability crisis imposed by the irresponsibility of present-day governments and the class forces they represent, and so on. To that end, I argued that left political strategy had to be drawn from a foundation in political economy, specifically the profound transformations in capitalist class structure in the period since Marx and Engels, and (later) Lenin first worked out these connections (see “The Electoral Arena and Evolving Class Structure in Capitalist Societies” [Editorial Perspectives], S&S, April 2019).

Now undoubtedly, as political forces shape up for the 2020 elections in the USA, the old strategic divisions will re-emerge, in new forms. The OurRevolution progressive movement within the Democratic Party will challenge the mainline Dem machine, perhaps through a Sanders, or Warren, or Ocasio-Cortez candidacy. The machine will respond with both mailed fist and velvet glove: use its considerable financial and organizational power to undermine and destroy the uprising on their left, while also cleverly co-opting the left’s vision. So we may well have Hillary Clinton, Michelle Obama, Joe Biden, Andrew Cuomo or someone else emerging from the primaries to challenge the neo-fascist Trump (assuming that the latter has not overplayed his hand and lost control of the Republican nomination, via impeachment or some lesser form of wing-clipping by the Republican mainstream1), and — yet again — the specter of “lesser evil” thinking will reassert itself. This

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1 As always, I need to remind S&S readers that this is being written at the end of 2018, a six-month remove from when it is being read.
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specter, of course, has a long history. Consider Paul Blackledge’s appraisal of August Nimtz’ work on Marx and Lenin and the electoral arena, in this issue. While Blackledge raises some questions about Nimtz’ overall understanding of Marx’s and Lenin’s view of electoral institutions and the role of the left in relation to them, he and Nimtz come together in upholding the classical writers’ opposition to “lesser-evilism.” The latter is defined by Lenin as “the standpoint, accepted by the Mensheviks, that social democrats should support the liberals as the lesser evil against more right-wing forces” (Blackledge, p. 364).

In the U. S. present, we may assume that the Democratic candidate for president will opportunistically seek to capture for his/her cause the energy of the progressive movement, especially its appeal to younger voters. We (I think) know this. We can take it for granted. And — yet again — many on the left will point to the danger of incipient fascism: the rise of the alt-right, extreme-right, racist, misogynist, bigoted, anti-science, anti-reason authoritarians. They will ask what it would mean to the country, and the world, to have a second, this time lame-duck, Trump presidency; what it would mean for the Supreme Court, the environment, etc. etc. And let’s make no mistake: this danger will be real! (Just as it was in 2016.) The argument for voting for the lesser evil cannot be ignored. But also non-ignorable is the counter-perception: there will always be a lesser evil, and the mechanism thus appears to practically ensure that capitalist rule, in its Republican or Democratic forms, will be perpetuated endlessly.

One Marxist contribution on the issue may simply be to advocate a long time-line: let’s start the discussion, this time, in the summer of 2019 (now), not one year later when the presidential campaign is in full swing. But that still leaves open the central question: what should we, as Marxists, be adding to the debate about left and progressive strategy, other than our own two cents concerning the degree of urgency of the right-wing threat, the possibility-cum-probability of a sea-change in consciousness that could reach parts of the Trump base, and so on?

In addition to some thoughts about the role of the electoral arena in reproducing the real illusion of individual sovereignty among working-class people, which is a central mechanism of surplus extraction in late capitalism (see Editorial Perspectives, January 2014), and about the nature of the mainstream political parties, and electoral participation at a stage of capitalist evolution in which both parties have, and must have, an overwhelmingly working-class base (Editorial Perspectives, April 2019), I offer here a few additional thoughts, this time focusing on the “lesser evil” concept.

I begin with a point that should be obvious, once stated, but that seems to arouse deep negative reactions, especially in colleagues/comrades who see themselves as deeply opposed to “lesser-evil” thinking. It is simply this: the
lesser evil is logically equivalent to the greater good. (Never mind the ideological patina surrounding the term “greater good”; we are interested here only in the logical core of the matter.)

First, we need to establish that comparative terms such as “lesser” and “greater” (or the superlative forms, “least” and “greatest”) must involve comparisons that are “quantitative” in some sense. This is not to endorse any sort of Benthamite utilitarianism, or to deny qualitative difference, or to assume (mirroring orthodox microeconomic theory) that there is some sort of political utility function that can be “maximized.” Still, unless we are to embrace a simplistic qualitative binary — there is a single Good (“socialism”) and a single Bad (everything else) — we continue to face the task of evaluating situations, from the class standpoint of the working class, and making relative judgments. What outcomes are most favorable to further advance of our class, and therefore of the conditions for human progress? As between outcomes A and B, we cannot avoid making a determination of preference, from an explicit (but not arbitrary!) moral standpoint.

If this is true, then the italicized statement two paragraphs above holds: the lesser evil is logically equivalent to the greater good. To say that A is “less evil” than B is equivalent to saying that A is “more good” than B. In mathematical terms, to minimize a function is equivalent to maximizing the negative of that function. Moreover, if we make a series of pair-wise comparisons of this sort, until we arrive at some best outcome, Z, then we have, equivalently, maximized the good and minimized the bad. This central logical point must, it would seem, be the starting point for thinking about the “lesser evil” problem.

But in that case, what is the problem with “lesser evil” thinking? We have to imagine that the problem is real, and so we presumably would like to get to the bottom of it.

We can borrow a bit more from optimization theory, and observe that optimization (which encompasses both maximizing things we want, and minimizing things we don’t want) is always constrained. This means that we seek the most desired outcome from the set of attainable ones. The things that limit that set — that force us to distinguish between items that are in it and those that are outside of it — are the constraints. Note that, on the way to the best, we may face a choice between any two outcomes and seek the better of the two; the two outcomes being compared are still in the attainable set, so that the constraints still hold.

It is important to realize that there is no such thing as unconstrained optimization. There may be a mathematical function, such as an inverted parabola, that has a unique maximum, but that only means that the constraints are built into that function, rather than being represented separately
by other equations. The only unconstrained optimizer would be God, a Being who is literally all-powerful. However, even God, while facing no constraints, would not be able to achieve a finite optimum: the very curvature that defines a top-of-the-hill point, for example, represents an ultimate constraint, contrary to assumption.

We can now identify what “lesser evilism” actually does: it takes an existing set of constraints as given and un-challengeable. It says: we must work entirely within present conditions, and find the best outcome on that basis. In politics, this might take the form of “working within the system,” “being realistic,” and so on. In short, in pursuit of short-term “least evil” outcomes, the reformist position fails to ask: what should we be doing to make the constraints less binding, to improve the terms of the tradeoff within which we seek the best possible results? One might speak, as some do, of “overthrowing” the constraints; but that notion must be carefully distinguished from the impossible goal of overthrowing all constraints. It boils down (if I may borrow a phrase from the Manifesto, which I have used many times before) to “taking care of the interests of the future within the movement of the present.” Note that positing a long term, in which the constraints themselves might be challenged, is in its very nature a Marxist intervention into the political debate: for our reformist–progressive colleagues, for whom “socialism” is ameliorative, not systemic, there is no “long term” in a similar structural sense.

Should revolutionary politics, then, be a matter of ignoring the best ("least evil") outcome in the present, and concentrating only on attacking the constraints (existing property relations, e.g.)? This is another place where Marxism can make a unique contribution. The point has been made often: The socialist movement does not develop in an ideological sphere divorced from the actual experience of life and struggle. The best lectures by articulate revolutionary socialists will fall on deaf ears unless they link up with the really existing conditions faced by working people — including those who have succumbed, in the present, to ideological poisoning from the right. It matters that the actual source of the decline in living standards of the millions of working-class Trump supporters (leave aside higher-income strata for the moment) is not Mexicans, Muslims, Blacks, Jews, Democrats, “inside the Beltway” politicians, etc., but rather the capitalist class — more precisely, the rising rate of exploitation that is central to the current phase of world capital accumulation. Those Trump-voting workers’ own experiences can and will reveal that reality, so long as the political forces that are able to point to it are active. By building coalitions that bring together the huge numbers of people who, for now, can only see the options that lie within the constraints — and that may include OurRevolution Democrats, non-electoral single-issue
movements, the progressive trade unions, community-based organizations, and (if we can reach them) former Trump supporters who voted the way they did in 2016 because of justified (but misplaced) anger at their economic and social disempowerment — the foundations can be laid for progressing to an assault on the constraints themselves.

If it turns out that the left is faced, once again, with the need to reverse the momentum toward fascism by joining in a coalition that supports some “lesser evil” (and whoever the political figurehead of this coalition may be, s/he will surely be “lesser,” since s/he will not be perfect), the need to link the within-constraints process to the wider task of addressing the constraints themselves will come to the fore. To abandon the latter is, indeed, reformist, and the real content of “lesser evil” thinking appears there. But, on the other side, simply counterposing socialism to the current “realm of the possible” is also counter-productive; it reduces socialism to a contentless abstraction, something that the hegemonic ideology has always been comfortable with. Voting for a Democrat simply to oust a Republican gets us nowhere, as Lenin’s strictures against the Mensheviks in the Tsarist Duma foretold. But supporting a run within the Democratic Party, such as Sanders’ in 2016, by also building the movement behind that run as both electoral and extra-electoral, and bringing electoral progressives together with much wider forces, is horizon-expanding and therefore revolutionary, not “lesser-evil”-ist.

The question can nevertheless be posed: Could the “lesser” evil actually be the “greater” one? Some have pointed to foreign policy, and wondered whether, at least in certain respects, Trump’s foreign policy in 2016 was actually a lesser evil than Clinton’s. If a “lesser evil” is a “wolf in sheep’s clothing,” then in addition to its true inner nature, we have the outer deception to contend with. But the progressive Dems (who must, I believe, be distinguished from “liberal” Dems, in the usual sense of that term) are not really “wolves” in disguise; they are would-be “sheep”! The analogy wears thin here; they are actually would-be progressive leaders, masquerading as genuine ones. (We don’t really think that Bernie Sanders or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are conscious secret agents of the enemy, do we?) When the ruling class raises the stakes — as it inevitably will — will these well-meaning folk grow into something else? Or will they vacillate, make deals, fall by the wayside? We don’t know. But, in truth, we don’t know that about ourselves either. What truly matters is the existence of a vibrant, militant and independent mass movement behind the individuals who represent that movement, both in electoral institutions and in other places. Then individual leaders who fail to grow with the movement can be replaced by others.

Are the movements against global warming, and against race or gender oppression, properly characterized as single issue movements? What is implied in the term “single issue”? These are, obviously, questions for further exploration.
Whatever we decide to do if, yet again, we have Trump vs. a mainline Dem in 2020, it will involve building for the future, in the electoral arena and also in many places outside. And whatever we do, and urge others to do (or not to do), in the polling place in November 2020, it will come to naught unless it is placed in a solid framework of activism and mobilization.

Marx saw “parliamentary cretinism” (or, we might say, more generally, “electoral cretinism”) as “that peculiar epidemic . . . which holds its victims spellbound in an imaginary world and robs them of all sense, all memory, and all understanding of the rough external world” (quoted in Blackledge, p. 359). It is the electoral arena seen as the world itself, rather than as a partial and distorted reflection of that world (the shadow on the wall of Plato’s cave). Lesser-evilism certainly partakes of that in its parsing of strictly electoral goals. But the opposite attitude that sees all electoral outcomes short of socialist revolution as identical and equally reprehensible also places too much power in the hands of the electoral institutions, and in so doing constitutes yet another form of “electoral cretinism”! If we are truly building the social and class foundations for revolutionary social transformation, we will know how we must act within the electoral arena, and arrive at best-possible estimates of various outcomes, without either expecting the world of these outcomes or mistaking political imaginaries for social realities.

D. L.