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EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

YEAR NAMING, MILLENNIAL TRANSITIONS, AND ENGLISH: A TRIVIAL OBSERVATION, AND PREDICTION

I will offer no excuses! At the present portentous historical moment (this essay appears at the height of a critical presidential election in the USA), when so much could be (and is being!) said about deepening recession, sharpening contradictions in the neoliberal offensive worldwide, the burgeoning left challenge in Latin America and elsewhere, and much else; and when the need for serious work at the frontiers of Marxist theory is greater than ever; I am going to write about — a trivial peculiarity of English-language usage! I will not even try to dredge up an inevitable quote from Marx to cover my folly. (But then, when *don't* we live in a portentous historical moment?)

The only justification that seems possible would run along these lines. 1) The contents of the current issue of S&S (see “In This Issue,” below) are sufficiently challenging to warrant something a bit more light-hearted in the front matter. 2) The observation/prediction referred to in this essay’s title, however inconsequential it might be, is, to my knowledge, original, although some readers may bring previous instances of it to light. And, most important, 3) it is time-dated. As you will see, my argument can only take the form of a (falsifiable) prediction during this first decade of the third millennium CE, and that decade is rapidly proceeding to a conclusion. So it is, as they say, now or never.

The trivial peculiarity in question refers simply to this issue: *how do we name years, in English?* The numerical form is uncontroversial: 1066, 1917. Over two millennia, the verbal equivalents have been: “ten sixty-six,” “nineteen seventeen.” But the recent Y2K transition created a fascinating divergence from the customary pattern: instead of “twenty hundred,” we say “two thousand.” I present an explanation for this, in the form of two Principles: Inertia, and Economy. (I have no idea what linguists, let alone William Safire, would think of all this.)

The Principle of Inertia, as its name suggests, states that a customary usage will tend to be continued. The Principle of Economy trumps the Principle of Inertia when, and only when, a usage becomes possible that is more economical — has fewer syllables — than the existing one.

Consider, first, the years 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901. The established form is “eighteen ninety-eight,” “eighteen ninety-nine”; with the turning of the 20th century, this usage, following Inertia, continues: “nineteen hundred,” “nineteen oh one.” The alternative, which uses the fourth- and third-digit names “thousand” and “hundred,” would be (for 1900) “one thousand, nine hundred.” This however requires two additional syllables, and therefore Economy and Inertia both dictate sticking with the established form.

This form therefore persists — until we reach the more recent transition: 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001. But now something remarkable happens. The customary form for 2000 is “twenty hundred,” but the alternative — “two thousand” — has one fewer syllable! Economy therefore kicks in, and the change is made. And so we speak of “the year two thousand.” Once Economy has done its work, Inertia takes over once again: after a year of “two thousand”-ing, we continue with “two thousand one” for 2001 (with or without a Space Odyssey). Note that “twenty oh one” is the same length, but for Economy to reassert itself, it must produce a form with fewer syllables, not an equivalent number. Note also that “twenty one” is not viable; it confuses the year 2001 CE with the year 21 CE.

And so we go, through our decade, with custom dictating “thousands”: this text is being written in the year “two thousand eight.” But a bit more than one year from now, another remarkable shift will occur. When we reach 2010, Economy will rear its head for a second time: “twenty ten” trumps “two thousand ten” by one syllable, and — here is the prediction — *the indicated shift will occur*. In about a year and three months, we will revert to the pattern that has existed for two millennia:¹ “twenty eleven” and “twenty twelve” are one syllable shorter than “two thousand eleven” and “two thousand twelve,” etc., and so this usage will come back into vogue.

To complete the picture, there is a third Principle, the Principle of Retroactive Consistency (introduced only now to avoid confusion). If, for example, some future historian refers in a lecture to the momentous years 2008–2013, she will not say: “two thousand eight to twenty thirteen”;

1 This is of course not literally true, because the English language as we know it did not exist at the turn of the first millennium — think of the language of Chaucer, from three to four centuries later — so it is hard to know what Economy and Inertia might have dictated at that time. *Had* the language been the same, however, note that the first-decade diversion would *not* have taken place! “Ten hundred” works just as well as “one thousand.” So our present decade is, logically speaking, the *first* in history to exhibit this English-language anomaly.

Retroactive Consistency will dictate “twenty oh eight to twenty thirteen,” and Economy is neutral in this case. So — perhaps here is a dialectical insight, at last justifying this little editorial speculation — how we name years (such as the current one) is inseparable from context: we say “two thousand eight” going forward, but “twenty oh eight” looking backward!

Can we extend the predictive aspect into the future, beyond the next few years? In Jack London’s *The Iron Heel*, published exactly a century ago, in 1908, a working-class uprising leads to class war in the period 1912–1932, followed by some three centuries of capitalist class domination — the Iron Heel — after which socialist revolution ushers in the age of the Brotherhood of Man, and a new era of year-naming begins, based on the birth of working-class ascension to power, rather than the birth of Christ. So the manuscript recounting these events, composed in 1932 CE, is resurrected and published by a descendant of its author, one Anthony Meredith, writing in the year 419 B.O.M. — the middle of the 27th century, in our reckoning. The Revolution, then, resets the year counter and postpones the fateful reckoning with “the year two thousand” until what in our terms would be around the year 4230 (Jack London’s date of the imposition of the Iron Heel, plus approximately three centuries of domination, plus exactly 2,000 years B.O.M.) The calendar of the French Revolution, with its Brumaires and Thermidors, would have accomplished the same thing, had it taken hold permanently.

In more prosaic terms, it would seem that — *if* humanity accomplishes the demographic transition, the sustainable energy use transition, and above all the transition to socialism–communism, and therefore lives to tell the tale — future millennial transitions will experience the same first-decade dialectic: “three thousand” trumps “thirty hundred,” but “thirty ten” beats “three thousand ten,” and so on. As for the first *deca-millennial transition*, from the year 9999 to the year 10000, the English language as we now know it dictates a permanent shift: “ten thousand” beats “one hundred hundred” by two syllables, but also in terms of inherent ease of expression. So one imagines year naming from that point on will always use “ten thousand”; the year 10101, for example, will be spoken “ten thousand one oh one,” and not “one-hundred-and-one hundred, and one.” Now there’s a forward prediction that no one now living will ever call me on!

Of course, by that time there may be bionic beings, who have long since abandoned the solar-system–based year for a more appropriate galactic method for demarcating time. And again, this will depend on their ancestors (us) having done their part in transcending capitalism, and class antagonism more generally — the only way, ultimately, to preserve the human timeline, so that year naming remains a practical, or at least aesthetic, concern, and not merely a theoretical one.

IN THIS ISSUE

A purely unscientific observation, based on hard publications, e-traffic, and the flow of submissions to *Science & Society* in recent years and months: we are witnessing a noteworthy resurgence — perhaps even a *renaissance* — of work on Marxist foundations, especially (but not exclusively) in Europe. Some of this activity has arisen in connection with the second *Marx–Engels Gesamtausgabe* publication project — MEGA² — whose current stage of development is outlined in Marcello Musto’s review of the most recent volume in the series, covering Marx’s correspondence in the years 1860–1861. The MEGA² is remarkable for several reasons. First, the sheer enormity of the effort: a projected 114 volumes, offering exhaustive coverage of Marx’s and Engels’ work over their lifetimes, much of which has never before been published, in any language. Second, the obvious fact that this is being done without the advantages deriving from sponsorship by organizations holding state power, in the former USSR and GDR particularly. Third — referring to the downside of the former advantage enjoyed by the first MEGA — the new MEGA is committed to avoiding the tendency of the old one to surround the work of Marxism’s founders with editorial apparatus, elisions, and presentist interpretations that are not inherent in it. Marx and Engels are to speak for themselves, and the rest of us are free to debate all possible interpretations and extensions of their legacy.

The short papers in the “Marx Studies” section of this issue all emanate from this European fount of critical activity. Musto’s review of the 1860–61 correspondence reveals a Marx who was deeply concerned with refuting calumnious allegations affecting his political reputation — perhaps overly so, as Musto quotes Engels and others as suggesting — a preoccupation that may have delayed the development of his mature political economy, eventuating in the first volume of *Capital*, by several years. All of this has been largely inaccessible to English-language readers. Some of Marx’s references in his correspondence — all now part of the historical record — show that he was susceptible to certain deplorable attitudes concerning race, nationality and ethnicity. There are no Gods; only contributors to scientific inquiry. We can, and should, repudiate these unfortunate characterizations; we have the advantage of hindsight, and of course stand on Marx’s (and others’) shoulders in this regard. (What will future hindsight say about some attitudes and conceptions of our own, whose implications we cannot now perceive?)

The section also features Kolja Lindner’s rich review of German debates in political economy, in this case the still-unsettled issue of the relation between money and value, based on work by Jan Hoff. Again, this provides S&S readers without direct access to German a window into a literature that

parallels what has appeared in English, but also contains unique elements. Finally, Guglielmo Carchedi's re-examination of Marx's writings on mathematics, particularly on the interpretation of the derivative calculus, deserves attention, not only because it reveals Marx's interest in this subject — indeed, Marcello Musto refers to Marx turning to mathematics for rest and renewal! — but also for its relation to what Carchedi sees as temporal vs. simultaneist or static interpretations of social reality. Readers will surely find this linkage between a present-day debate in value theory and variant interpretations of the derivative intriguing, whether or not they find Carchedi's case for the link to be decisively proven. Carchedi, we should mention, draws upon the work of our own founding editor, Dirk Struik (“Marx and Mathematics,” *S&S*, Winter 1948).

Articles in the current issue include a study by Thomas Weston of “The Concept of Non-Antagonistic Contradiction in Soviet Philosophy.” The subject is unusual among Marxist scholars in recent times, and the author's serious approach to resurrecting it therefore most welcome. Weston ultimately, and perhaps reluctantly, concludes that all attempts to define the distinction between non-antagonistic and antagonistic contradictions, including the several quite different approaches found in Soviet texts, either fail on logical grounds or reflect momentary and unjustifiable political expediencies. Perhaps the emerging message is that the Soviet legacy, in philosophy but presumably also in all other areas of endeavor, is both in need of rescue from the insufficiencies of an authoritarian and hyper-politicized intellectual culture, but also eminently worthy of such rescue.

Evan Smith's “‘Class Before Race’: British Communists and the Place of Empire in Postwar Race Relations” is a new contribution to a historical research tradition that has been well represented in *Science & Society* over a number of years. I will mention here only the Special Issue on British Communism, edited by Kevin Morgan (Spring 1997), and, with reference to race relations, the article by Marika Sherwood, “The Comintern, the CPGB, Colonies and Black Britons” (Summer 1996). The defining creed of this genre is to avoid *both* hagiographical larger-than-life accolades of the “official” variety, *and* the cold-war top-down view of Communists still common in mainstream historical scholarship. Smith accomplishes this task well, showing the evolution of British CP views on race and colonialism as its members wrestled with the ever-difficult issue of the correlation of race and class categories in a changing political environment.

Finally, we present Hobart Spalding's review-essay on five books on Cuba, Latin America, and U. S.–Cuba relations. In the current whirlwind of struggle in Venezuela, Bolivia and Colombia, it is especially useful to recall the long Cuban battle against the continuing depredations of “el rumbo norte,” as told by Fidel, Che, and others. Fidel's memoir and Michael Löwy's

study remind us of Che Guevara's continuing importance, not only as guerrilla activist but also as revolutionary thinker.

D. L.

Thanks to Barbara Foley for the reference to Jack London's *Iron Heel* and its projection of a new Brotherhood of Man era of year-dating.