

## **The Decline of the Left in the 20th Century**

### **Towards a Theory of Historical Regression: 2001**

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The abandonment of emancipatory politics in our time has not been, as past revolutionary thinkers might have feared, an abandonment of revolution in favor of reformism. Because the revolutionary overcoming of capital is no longer imagined, reformism too is dead. As the task of achieving human society beyond capital has been abandoned, nothing worthy of the name of politics takes its place, nor could it. The project of freedom has now altogether receded from view. For, while bourgeois thinkers like Hegel were no doubt mistaken in their identification of capitalism with freedom, they nevertheless grasped that the question of freedom only poses itself with reference to the capital problematic. Realizing for the first time a “noble savagery” that never was before, contemporary humanity is sunk in the immediacy of “second nature.”

2001 itself arrived late, and now it, too, has slipped into the past. Still, it retains its significance as the moment when the light of freedom was definitively eclipsed, when mankind ceased to be able to discern whether or not night had fallen. For, since 2001, all dimly perceive that we now live, in what the Marxist thinker and critic of the New Left, Moishe Postone, has termed the “time of helplessness.” (Or, as the Spartacist League more colorfully terms it, the “senile dementia of post-Marxism.”) Though time continues to pass, and, indeed, in some sense, continues to intensify, history, the daytime in which the tasks of freedom could be performed, seems to have come to an abrupt, late-afternoon, halt. This has caught most on the Left unawares, though it is possible to

discern a widespread relief, among many, that the task might finally be abandoned, for good and all.

Accumulated into the date 2001, of course, is what precedes it in time, a mass of folly and wasted opportunities that nevertheless may be disaggregated into three constituent moments. Each of these three stages in the “death of the Left” conveniently ends in the digit 9: 1979, 1989, and 1999. Each represents a stage in a process of retrogression that culminates in what is, after all, a crisis far more portentous than the current economic crisis that so dominates our discourse. I speak, of course, of the crisis of the Left, whose prospects for recovery are, at this stage, very grim indeed. Rather than a crisis date in the history of the Left, 2001 is therefore the year in which the crisis of history became unmistakable, when it became clear that what passes for the “Left” today is a “stinking corpse.” It was the year in which the founding of Platypus became a necessity, though, here again, consciousness lagged behind events.

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 was and remains a catastrophe. Since the triumph of the Khomeini-ites the country has been dominated by a regime far more backward and repressive than its predecessor, governed in a manner even more reactionary than the way the country was governed under the Shah. With the Stalinist Tudeh Party subordinating itself to the Khomeini faction, the road to Islamist power was paved with the corpses of betrayed Iranian workers and self-betrayed Stalinist activists, even as the Western Left drowned out all dissent with its loud acclamation for the blow dealt to “American imperialism.” As the Iranian unorganized urban masses and landlord class joined hands under Islamist leadership to crush the Tudeh Party and other Leftists, the Left of the core capitalist states, hopelessly deluded by its sham Third-Worldism, failed almost entirely to

recognize the unfolding catastrophe. As David Greason has observed, prior to the revolution, most had simply assumed that any movement that could topple the Shah would have to come from the Left. The actuality of Khomeini-style Islamism as a reactionary ideology, rather than an authentic “cultural expression” of the masses, was denied, and instead the Western Left acquiesced in the elevation of Khomeini’s mullahs to a dominant position in Iran. Hailed by many as a unifier, the Left was incapable of recognizing in Khomeini a threat no less grave than the Shah himself had been. Substituting for the criticism of capitalism the critique of American imperialism, dominant strands of the New Left rendered anti-Americanism alone into the touchstone of Leftist “thought.” This rendered almost impossible an adequate analysis of the Iranian Revolution — as it did with respect to the Mujahideen “resistance” to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. In place of any adequate analysis of the Iranian Revolution, defeat was transmuted into “victory” by the conjuring tricks of the pseudo-“Left.” It was, of course, an act of self-deception that had, by this time, become almost second-nature, for a Left, even whose anti-Stalinist elements, still, in the temple of their hearts, worshipped the Stalinist idol of the “accomplished fact.” Icons of the New Left like Foucault saluted the Islamic Revolution as representative of a new “spiritual” politics, supposedly free of the “instrumental rationality” operative, in both the East and West, during the Cold War.

Other events circa 1979 that registered the degradation and disintegration of the “Left” were responses to the Solidarnosc movement in Poland, and the Mujahideen “resistance” to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, both of which found support among a disoriented “Left,” with slogans, now forgotten in embarrassment, of “10

million Polish workers can't be wrong!" and "Allahu Akbar!," not recognizing the Right manifesting before their eyes, the Right that they themselves joined.

Around this time, Fred Halliday had a conversation with Tariq Ali, from which he was politically parting ways, in which he told the parable that "God, Allah, called the two of us to His presence and said to us, 'One of you is to go the Left, and one of you is to go to the Right.' The problem is, He didn't tell us which was which, and maybe He didn't know Himself. And Tariq laughed. He understood exactly what I was saying, and he didn't dispute it."

The practice of self-deceit, uncritical celebration of supposed revolts against reification, and the retreat from the project of freedom, was again in evidence in the second stage leading up to 2001, which is the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. As the final, anti-climactic collapse of the failed attempt to overcome capital launched in 1917, the Right-ward fall of the Soviet Union was remarkable in its failure to prompt serious reconsideration on the Left. Instead, it was heralded as a rebirth of freedom. With scarcely a thought respecting the now definitive failure of the trajectory of the October Revolution that conserved, in howsoever degraded a form, the emancipatory impulses of Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, and Lenin, the zombie-philistines of the Left in '89 congratulated themselves on yet another supposed "accomplishment" of '60s-style "anti-authoritarianism." Though this did little to explain the event, it certainly helped to legitimize the neo-liberal Tzarism presently to rise on the ruins of Soviet Russia. Mirroring Marxism's degeneration in the Soviet Union to an ideology affirmative of the status quo, in place of the realization of the emancipatory potential of capitalism, in 1989 capitalism itself was celebrated as an emancipation.

The third phase in the total exhaustion of the Left that culminated in 2001 comes in 1999, the year of the “anti-globalization” protests in Seattle. This event marked the triumph of our current “post-political” activist culture, what Feathersone, Henwood, and Parenti have termed “activist-ism.” As Platypus members Ben Blumberg and Ian Morrison have observed, with respect to activism, more particularly, in the new “anarchism” that dominated proceedings in Seattle, “Today’s protesters celebrate simple altercations with the police as victories . . . Each blow of the truncheon dramatizes the difference between protesters [and the society to which they are being integrated].” It is not unfair to say, Blumberg and Morrison wrote, “Protesters elicit a police beating to sensationalize their own submission to authority.” Here, the regression already clearly in evidence in the 1960s has reached full flower. Re-enacting not only the defeat but the defeatism of the ’60s Left, the Seattle protesters no longer even bother with the old blather about students or youth as a new “revolutionary force.” Nor do these new would-be radicals require elaborate rationalizations of their failure. Theirs is, frankly, the acting-out of a discontented middle-class youth, for whom the schedule of international trade meetings takes the place of rock concert tours as the site for a peripatetic anti-authoritarian subculture. This generation of activists fulfills rather rejects the low expectations of their political parents, i.e. that they should either numb themselves with the pleasures on offer in neo-liberalism, “sex, drugs and Rock & Roll,” or engage in revolution “for the hell of it.” In the new protest culture, one can do both at the same time, achieving in the process only the sensationalizing of one’s own submission to authority and social integration that Blumberg and Morrison spoke of. Politically, the embrace of the cult of death that characterized the dominant Leftist response to 1979

reaches its anti-climax in the full-blown Romantic-reactionary rejectionism, anti-modernism, and anti-globalization of “black bloc”-style anarchism and the “turtle protest.”

The historic Left of bourgeois radicalism culminating in Marx’s auto-critique of utopian socialism isolated *history* as its problematic and *freedom* as its project. As Marx realized, capitalism posed a question that could only be answered by the overcoming of capitalism. As dissident Leftist Moishe Postone has argued, proletarian society, the society of commodity-producing commodities, “points beyond itself.” But regression has advanced so far now that critical recognitions such as Postone’s are the affair of a handful of intellectuals, while the labor movement, the necessary condition for the practical politics of the Left, is in full-scale rout, globally. The point of saying this plainly is not name-calling or pessimism, but to recognize the actual character of our times — proclaiming the “death of the Left” in order to begin the work of rebuilding. The struggle for freedom has been abandoned in favor of resistance to oppression. Charting the history of the Left is not intended simply to chide the present, but to help clarify its purposes. For the reconstitution of critical theory, the specific task to which Platypus is devoted, does not occur in conditions of our own choosing, but in conditions we inherit from the past. Indeed, theory can be reformulated not by supplementing new bits to rectify the supposed inadequacies of past theory, but by the actual working through of the history of the Left.