

Introducing Platypus

Ian Morrison

What is Platypus?

Platypus was set-up as an attack on thought-taboos. From the start, we've rejected the usual Left culture, which preaches the struggle against the common enemy and focuses all of its energy on demonizing this or that Right-wing clique. In quite the opposite way, we have chosen instead to elucidate the conservative character of our time, and the obvious weakness of the Left, perhaps even its total disappearance, not as a question of bodies on the ground, but as the logical by-product of the Left's ideological murkiness, as an utter lack of clarity about the world we live in, and moreover as an all-pervasive stigmatization of debate and critique. In the past it may have seemed as if philosophers had hitherto only interpreted the world, but today it seems that people seeking to change the world have stopped interpreting it.

Given our philosophy, it should come as no surprise that our project started as a reading group, hoping to decode the overlapping social imaginations, which cover the present with a thick fog. Our initial point of departure was an exploration of the disconnection between the Old and New Left, as well as a study of how this confusion plays out in our time. And, pessimistically, we've come to believe that it is entirely possible that the Marxist tradition will be eclipsed during our life times — that is if it hasn't already been eclipsed — unless the ban on debate and critique about the Left's history is lifted. The difficulty in addressing the history of the Left is complex, of course, and our world has produced a plethora of shields against this, not least of which is the

dogmatism of the pseudo-“Left.” Today, we can neither read the classics of revolutionary Marxism as a road map, nor can we necessarily reject their insights. Because part of the problem is that it is simply not possible to know more about revolutionary change than those did in times past who actually struggled to bring their thoughts to the light of day. So, as an estimation of our time, we are interested in exploring the fetters and taboos that impinge on exploring the highest aspirations for human freedom, which we believe are located in the Marxist tradition.

In late 2006 we began to move outside of our reading group model and started hosting events. As you all know, this was during the Iraq war, in which our project was inevitably bound up. At our first public event we sparked a much-needed conversation about “imperialism,” perhaps the least-understood topic of our time, not least because it serves as mask for a great deal of confusion by acting as a superficial point of shared agreement. We feel that our project has been vindicated by that fact that almost no other group sought to bring out this debate, even though the concept, “imperialism,” found its way on to almost every placard and banner during this time. And yet it is not at all self-evident how one would overcome this problem of misunderstanding “imperialism” while continuing to denounce it. If it were, we would have long since overcome it. For this reason, we believe that one needs to trace the historical changes, especially of ideas like “imperialism,” and not paper-over the problems in the typical anti-intellectual manner of the “Left.” Yet, so profoundly deep-rooted is the hatred for change, the hatred for a thoroughgoing critique, that our project was mistaken to be pro-war, as if to raise a single question would blow over the Left’s house of cards. And perhaps this single question mark will bring the house of cards down. So much the better, in our opinion, for the

inability to understand a phenomenon like “imperialism” is as much a part of conserving it as anything else. Perhaps the inability to understand, in fact, is the most important part in perpetuating imperialism. Our project would like to raise that possibility.

Recently, we've also attempted to start a public conversation about how people are mobilized: for what ends, and under what psychology? We have addressed this through an interrogation of some of the other key buzz words the Left likes to throw around, namely Resistance, Reform and Revolution. And we have found that in the virtual world the Left lives in it is not at all easy to articulate these supposedly strict delineations. Following this discussion, we tried to interrogate the rather abstract notion of “movements” — another mysterious, almost occultist thing we are all supposedly clear about.

In our brief history, we have covered a large range of topics including: the conflict in Israel/Palestine; the catastrophe in South Asia; changes in the character of racism; and most recently, in reaction to the recently dubbed economic crisis, we asked working class organizers how their work has been affected. And we're going to cover a range of other topics at our convention this weekend.

I should say, in order to make myself clear, that we find all these questions deeply ambiguous. In all these conversations we have avoided making the typical predictions and reciting the usual clichés. We refuse to dress up every social movement as revolutionary for our own psychological satisfaction, or see every catastrophe, be it economic or militaristic, as an opportunity, if only for protest. We have decided instead to set up a space for people to take a backwards glance: to work through ideas in an open

manner; to finally take a sober look at reality; and, hopefully, transcend the misplaced pessimism and optimism, in favor of a critical approach to our time.

This has also inspired us to publish the *Platypus Review*. Like our public events it is not a venue simply for Platypus members or other people close to our project. We are hoping to create a clearinghouse for reflections on the Left, for anyone willing to break out of the typical conformity and the blind obliviousness of protest culture.

Platypus has been forging a conversation about the Left that we believe would otherwise not happen. The groups which fall under the banner of the “Left” today, are nothing if not professionals at ignoring each other. They use a vast array of techniques to serve this end, whether it is overtly ignoring each other, or the endless platitudes on shared ground carefully calculated to avoid any real debate. Platypus emphatically rejects the idea that the struggle simply goes on.

For Platypus, the movement is nothing if the goal appears as a farce. This is why we say: “The Left is dead! — Long live the Left!”

The Platypus synthesis: history, theory and practice

(Richard Rubin, Chris Cutrone and Ian Morrison)

Part 3. What is to be done?

Ian Morrison

J. P. Cannon said that,

“If the group misunderstands the task set for it by conditions of the day, if it does not know how to answer the most important of all questions in politics — that is, the question of what to do next — then the group, no matter what its merits may otherwise be, can wear itself out in misdirected efforts and futile activities and come to grief.”

Our project has often been subjected to two historical fantasies. The first draws a parallel with the *Partisan Review* and the second with the Frankfurt School. Our “death of the Left” thesis and the historical gulf between us and the ’30s make the practical orientation of these two projects completely anachronistic, and confuses the needs of our time. The *Partisan Review* sought to make a specific intervention in American socialism, and the early Frankfurt School was set up to provide an intellectual atmosphere which would transcend the sectarian divisions caused by the failure of the German Revolution. There is no such comparable milieu in our time, to either intersect or transcend. And the problem is much more thoroughgoing than simply the realization that Leftist third parties are defunct or that organized labor is fractured and weak. The groups, which talk about the Left, justify their existence on dubious grounds and do more to muddle the issues than

to clarify them — this much is certainly obvious. Many of these groups are of an extremely conservative nature; they are often the manifestation of a new Right.

Because the Left really is dead, we must first and foremost build intellectual milieus from scratch. As we have often said, we must “host the conversation” that would otherwise not happen, and we must demonstrate to others that the Platypus conversation can even happen at all. We have an extremely strong track record of events, providing a space in which intellectuals are able to sound stronger than they would otherwise have the opportunity to.

Our main point of intersection, for better or worse, is at universities and the campus culture more broadly conceived. There is simply no other institution we could realistically intersect today. This is not a blessing. But it can raise a great deal opportunity. Universities are international phenomena.

Public events. — We need to modulate between different styles of events: Large fora, public interviews, teach-ins. Our shift to a chapter model, I believe, is forcing us to change our organizational culture. In the past we have emphasized the build-up towards the event. And I am not proposing that we dramatically change how we plan events; creating a reading list to work up to the event is extremely helpful. But what we need to focus on more than anything is regularity and follow-through. I strongly believe that this will not be to the detriment of our content. On the contrary, I think that we will only learn to improve the quality of our events through regularity. Our inability to have regular events has been our greatest shortcoming. This cannot continue if we have any pretension of growing the organization.

Draining-the-swamp thesis. — We believe we can impact and prevent the recruitment to sectarian “Left” groups on campuses and thus stop the demoralization and depoliticization that results from their activities. We have already begun to do so, and we need to continue this.

The Platypus Review. — We have not fully taken advantage of our paper. Our paper is of an extremely high quality but we have been failing on two scores. The first and most obvious problem is our inability to acquire more content from outside Platypus. To make this possible we need to marshal the whole organization to the task. The interview has been a successful genre for us. We lack reportage. We need to act as a historical record of our time. The review can travel to new places before we will be able to provide an organizational structure — the paper should follow ahead of us.

Membership. — The reading group is not optional. The texts we read are not road maps. But, if our project has any line at all, it would perhaps be that nothing that has been passed down to us from the historic Left can be used as an adequate guide. It is not possible to understand the group outside of attending the reading group. The reading group must focus on “what it is that we are doing.” We often said that we don’t have a line. But, it is true that we have a set of concerns and they are very specific. The concerns we are working through are not self-evident and we should be suspicious of anyone who claims to understand the project while infrequently attending our pedagogical activities. If there is one especially surprising aspect of our project it is the way in which our ideas, once adequately grasped, seem to make a permanent impression. Our ideas have not been met with indifference.

What are our members going to become? Intellectuals and cultural workers. The notion of the free intellectual, like liberalism, is dead. There is much more at play than simply good ideas in the making of public intellectuals. We cannot let the topics we have been trying so hard to unearth become taboo to us in our public dealings. There really are people who have made a concerted effort to squash our project. The sectarian Left would like us to disappear. They are set in their ways and they would prefer it if their ideas never met the light of day.

The need to go to Left events. — Our attendance in itself will be corrosive on the existing fake “Left.” We go and ask questions that they cannot answer. What could be easier? This we really need to do.

So, we should have no illusions. Our project is time-sensitive. We live at a crossroads. Though it may seem like we have an overabundance of esoteric ideas forcibly bundled together, which are ridiculously challenging to impress upon others — this is our estimation of our period.