

The 3 Rs: Reform, Revolution, and “Resistance”
The problematic forms of “anticapitalism” today

[opening remarks by Chris Cutrone (*Platypus*)]

My name is Chris Cutrone and I am representing the *Platypus* Affiliated Society at this forum that we have organized. Here at the School of the Art Institute, I teach Marxian critical social and aesthetic theory, through the works of Benjamin and Adorno [and other historical Marxists]. [I also teach classical social theory as a lecturer in the College at the University of Chicago.] I am one of the lead organizers of *Platypus*.

When we in *Platypus* conceived the topic of this forum on “Resistance” and the Left, we had in mind the title of a pamphlet written over a hundred years ago by the brilliant Marxist radical Rosa Luxemburg, titled *Reform or Revolution?*, which sought to argue for the necessity of *revolutionary* politics on the Left, not against *reforms*, but against a *reform-ist* perspective that was developing on the Marxist Left at the time, in which it was regarded that only reforms were possible -- and hence that political and social revolution was not only unlikely and unnecessary, but undesirable as well.

We in *Platypus* seek to respond, in the present, to the development of the perspective on the Left that assumes that only “resistance” is possible. We find this to be a symptom of the degradation and degeneration of the Left over at least the past generation -- over the last 40 years, since the 1960s “New” Left -- and, indeed, for much longer than that. We find the current self-understanding of the Left as “resistance” to express despair not only at prospects for revolutionary transformation, but also for substantial institutional reforms.

We in *Platypus* seek to develop critical consciousness of the history of the Left, which we think is necessary for the possibility of emancipatory politics today and in the future. We understand the last, 20th Century, as one of the history of the defeat and decline -- and ultimate disappearance -- of the Left, as the 19th Century was of the Left’s emergence and rise. We consider how we might suffer from a more obtuse grasp, a less acute consciousness, of socially emancipatory politics than those on the Left that came before us were able to achieve, how the Left has degenerated in both practice and theory.

In Rosa Luxemburg's phrase [after Engels], the world in the crisis of the early 20th Century faced the choice of "socialism or barbarism." But socialism was not achieved, and so perhaps the present is the descendant and inheritor of barbarism -- including on the "Left."

So we seek to re-open the question and problem of anticapitalist politics at the most fundamental levels, asking what it means to struggle against and seek to move beyond capitalism, and what makes this possible -- and desirable. -- This is what the name and the works of Marx signify to us.

Marx did not *invent* anticapitalist politics or socialism, but rather sought to understand the significance of Left politics in light of history. Marx saw himself, and we regard him principally in his capacity of offering a critique of the Left, understanding its assumptions and aspirations in light of the historical development of possibilities, and thus seeking to push these further, through seeking to understand how the Left pointed beyond itself.

For instance, we follow Marx as a critic of the Left to the extent that we find that the conception of emancipation remains inadequate if understood as deriving primarily from struggles against exploitation and oppression. Rather, following Marx and his liberal predecessors [such as Hegel], we seek to specify the freedom-problem expressed in the history of capitalist society, to clarify how capitalism is bound up with changes in the character of free humanity.

We find the true significance and meaning of anticapitalist politics in its expression of how capital itself is the product of and continually creates possibilities for its own self-transformation and self-overcoming. Modern categories for emancipatory social struggles should be understood as part and parcel of capital and how it might point to its own transformation and self-abolition.

We find evidence of failure to grasp capital in this double-sided sense to the extent that the very conception of emancipation -- as the freedom-in-becoming of the *new*, rather than the freeing of the prior-existent -- to be virtually tabooed on the Left today. The Left today almost never speaks of freedom or emancipation, but only of "resistance" to the dynamics of change associated with capital and its transformations. The spirit of Marx's observation that in bourgeois society, under capital, "all that is solid

melts into air,” has been displaced by his other famous observation from the *Communist Manifesto* that “history is the history of class struggle” -- but even this has been debased to the sense of the perennial suffering of the oppressed, taking the subaltern in its alterity, and not, as Marx meant in his notion of the proletariat, in the figuration of the new -- and the new not as an end, but as an opening onto yet further possibilities.

A crucial distinction Marx found it important to make over a hundred and fifty years ago was between a progressive-emancipatory and reactionary-conservative critique and opposition to capital. Marx spoke of “reactionary” socialism, and categorized socialists of his day such as Proudhon, the coiner of the term “anarchism,” among conservative and not progressive responses and oppositions to capital. Marx resisted the one-sided, Romantic critique of capital prevalent in his time, and understood socialism as being made possible by capital itself, as becoming possible only through capitalism.

But, with the reconsideration of Marx and Marxian critical theory must come reconsideration of the meaning of the history of subsequent Marxism. But this means treating the tradition of the revolutionary Marxist Left of the turn of the 19th and 20th and of the early 20th Century, especially of its best and most effective exponents, Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky, not in terms of what this Left actually accomplished, which from the standpoint of emancipation was minimal and quickly stifled and undone, but rather what the historical revolutionary Marxist Left strived for but failed to achieve.

Platypus seeks to reconsider the legacy of Marxist politics in order to understand our present as being conditioned -- and haunted -- by its failure, so that we can marshal its suppressed and buried history, its unfulfilled emancipatory potential, to the service of the critique of and the attempt to overcome the most fundamental assumptions of the present, including and especially those on the “Left.”

Thank you.

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