

# Platypus

Marxist reading group

Chicago 2006

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## Preliminary reading

### **The Absence of the Left**

*"However difficult the task of grasping and confronting global capital might be, it is crucially important that a global internationalism be recovered and reformulated. . . . None of the massive demonstrations against the war featured oppositional progressive Iraqis who could provide a more nuanced and critical perspective on the Middle East, a telling political failure on the part of the Left." (Postone 2006)*

*"We have to note, with regret, that the Iraqi democratic forces have not received, in their difficult struggle, effective solidarity and support from international forces of the Left." (Iraqi CP 2006)*

[Moishe Postone, "History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism" \(2006\)](#)

[Iraqi Communist Party, Letter to Fraternal and Friendly Parties About the Situation in Iraq and the Position of the Iraqi Communist Party \(Jan. 2006\)](#)

[journalism on labor organizing in U.S.-occupied Iraq:]

["Iraqi Labor Tour in U.S. Stirs Controversy" \(Jul. 2005\)](#)

["Iraqi Unions Defy Privatization" \(Oct. 2005\)](#)

["Disunity Threatens Iraqi Labor's Resistance to Occupation" \(Nov. 2005\)](#)

## Parerga

### **Discussing Empire?**

*"The reemergence of imperialist rivalries calls for the recovery of nondualistic forms of internationalism. However objectionable the current American administration is, the Left should be very careful about becoming, unwittingly, the stalking horse for a would-be rival hegemon [and] constituting a form of politics that, from the standpoint of human emancipation, would be questionable, at the very best, however many people it may rouse." (Moishe Postone, "History and Helplessness" 2006)*

*"In practice, the sanctimonious anti-power idealism preached by Hardt, Negri & Co. degenerates into the grubby politics of 'lesser evil' capitalism . . . promoting the butchers of Auschwitz and Algeria as more benevolent and progressive than their U.S. rivals." (Spartacist 2006)*

[Samir Amin, "U.S. Imperialism, Europe, and the Middle East" \(2004\)](#)

[Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, "February 15, Or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe" \(2003\)](#)

[[excerpts from original German publication](#)]

[Gayatri Spivak, "Terror: A Speech After 9-11" \(2004\)](#)

[Russell Berman, "Anti-Americanism and the Movement Against Globalization"](#)

[[from Anti-Americanism in Europe: A Cultural Problem \(2004\)](#)]

[Spartacist League, "The Senile Dementia of Post-Marxism: \*Empire\*, \*Multitude\* and the 'Death of Communism' " \(2006\)](#)

**March 9, 2006**

**"Why art can't kill the New Left"**

discussion of [Retort, \*Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War\*](#)

*"Maybe, after Benjamin — after a half-century of the hermeneutics of suspicion — what needs to be recaptured is the sunlight, the full illusion of assurance and transparency that out there, beyond the academy, still holds the majority in its grip." (Clark 2003)*

*"Is this a 'material' which can patiently await interpretation without being consumed by its own aura?" [Adorno to Benjamin 1935] . . . as Marx, it might be argued, fetishizes the commodity in his very account of it." (Foster/October eds. 2006)*

[Retort Collective, "Afflicted Powers: The State, the Spectacle and September 11" \(2004\)](#)

[Hal Foster/October editors and Retort, "An Exchange on Afflicted Powers" \(2006\)](#)

[T. J. Clark, "Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?" \(2003\)](#)

[T. J. Clark, "Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International" \(1997\)](#)

**April 15 and 23, 2006**

**Theory and Practice I**

**Marcuse and Adorno in the New Left: the 1930s and the '60s**

*"In socialism, freedom is to become a reality. But because the present system is called 'free' and considered liberal, it is not terribly clear what this might mean. . . . Not only [the Little Man's] lack of freedom but that of [his betters] as well spells his doom. His interest lies in the Marxist clarification of the concept of freedom. . . .*

*The socialist order of society is not prevented by world history; it is historically possible. But it will not be realized by a logic that is immanent to history but by men trained in theory and determined to make things better. Otherwise, it will not be realized at all." (Horkheimer 1926-31)*

*"Praxis appears necessarily as a blind spot, as an obsession with what is being criticized. . . . This admixture of delusion, however, warns of the excesses in which it incessantly grows." (Adorno 1969)*

[Max Horkheimer, selections from \*Dämmerung\* \(Notes 1926-31\)](#)

[Paul Berman, "The Passion of Joschka Fischer: from the radicalism of the '60s to the interventionism of the '90s" \(2001\)](#)

[Herbert Marcuse, "The End of Utopia," and "The Problem of Violence" \(lectures 1967\)](#)

[Marcuse, "The Question of Revolution" \(interview 1967\)](#)

[Esther Leslie, Introduction to the 1969 Adorno-Marcuse correspondence \(1999\)](#)

[Theodor W. Adorno and Marcuse, correspondence on the German New Left \(1969\)](#)

[Adorno, "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" \(1969\)](#)

[supplemental reading:]

[Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti, "'Action Will Be Taken': Left Anti-Intellectualism and its Discontents" \(2002\)](#)

May 26, 2006

**Theory and Practice II**  
**Korsch, "Marxism and Philosophy"**

*"As scientific socialism, the Marxism of Marx and Engels remains the inclusive whole of a theory of social revolution . . . a materialism whose theory comprehended the totality of society and history, and whose practice overthrew it. . . . The difference [now] is that the various components of [what for Marx and Engels was] the unbreakable interconnection of theory and practice are further separated out. . . . The umbilical cord has been broken."*  
(Korsch 1923)

[Karl Korsch, "Marxism and Philosophy" \(1923\)](#)

[Korsch, "The Marxism of the First International" \(1924\)](#)

[Korsch and Adorno, selected epigraphs on social being and consciousness in modern history \(1923, 1935, 1966\)](#)

June 11, 2006

**Theory and Practice III**  
**Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme"**

*"Qui si convien lasciare ogni sospetto;  
Ogni viltà convien che qui sia morta  
[Here all mistrust must be abandoned;  
And here must perish every craven thought]"*  
(Dante Alighieri, Divina Commedia 1308-21, quoted by Marx 1859)

[Karl Marx, Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy \(1859\)](#)  
[also in [Robert Tucker, ed., Marx-Engels Reader](#), 3-6]

[Marx, Critique of the Gotha Programme \(1875\)](#)  
[also in [Tucker, ed., Marx-Engels Reader](#), 525-541]

[Karl Korsch, Introduction to Marx's Critique of the Gotha Programme \(1922\)](#)

June 25, 2006

**Reading the New Left I**  
**The post-'60s Left and the "unknown" Marx: the path not taken**

*"The most important Marxian political manifesto remains to be written."*  
(Nicolaus 1968)

[Martin Nicolaus, "The Unknown Marx" \(1968\)](#)  
[also in [Carl Oglesby, ed., The New Left Reader \(1969\)](#), 84-110]

[Moishe Postone, "Rethinking Marx \(in a post-Marxist world\)" \(1995\)](#)

July 9, 2006

**Reading the New Left — Excursus I  
Women and revolution**

*"The call to abandon their illusions about their conditions is a call to abandon a condition which requires illusions."*

*(Karl Marx, Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right 1843, quoted by Tariq Ali 1987)*

*"I'm gonna ask you comrade and brother  
How do you treat your own woman back home  
She got to be herself  
So she can free herself."*

*(John Lennon, "Power to the People" 1968, quoted by Ali 1987)*

*"The situation of women is different from that of any other social group. This is because they are not one of a number of isolable units, but half a totality: the human species. . . . They are fundamental to the human condition, yet in their economic, social and political roles, they are marginal. It is precisely this combination — fundamental and marginal at one and the same time — that has been fatal to them." (Mitchell 1966)*

[Juliet Mitchell, "Women: the Longest Revolution" \(1966\)](#)

[\[revised version from Women's Estate \(1971\)\]](#)

[Quintin Hoare, "On Mitchell's 'Women: The longest revolution' " \(1967\)](#)

[Mitchell, reply to Quintin Hoare \(1967\)](#)

[recommended background reading:]

[Tariq Ali, from "Much Maligned Movements 1969-75"](#)

[\[Chapter 10 of Street-Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the '60s \(1987/2005\)\]](#)

[\[Pasolini epigraph to 2005 edition\]](#)

[Herbert Marcuse, "Marxism and Feminism" \(1974\), and "The Failure of the New Left?" \(1975\)](#)

[addenda:]

[Lynne Segal, "Psychoanalysis and Politics: Juliet Mitchell then and now" \(2000\)](#)

[Clara Zetkin and V. I. Lenin, "My Recollections of Lenin: an interview on the woman question" \(interview 1920\)](#)

July 16, 2006

**Reading the New Left II  
Crisis on the Left: is revolution justified by history?**

*"For, after all, are we not always in exceptional situations? The failure of the [1848 revolution in France and the] 1849 revolution in Germany [were] exception[s], the failure in Paris in 1871 was an exception, the German Social-Democratic failure of the beginning of the 20th Century in producing the chauvinism of 1914 was an exception, the success of 1917 was an exception — exceptions, but with respect to what? Nothing but the abstract idea, which is nonetheless comforting and reassuring, of a pure, simple, dialectical schema, which in its very simplicity seems to have retained the memory (or rediscovered the allure) of the Hegelian model and its faith in the resolving power of the abstract contradiction as such: particularly the beautiful contradiction between Capital and Labor." (Althusser 1962)*

[Louis Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination" \(1962\)](#)

[\[in Oglesby, ed., New Left Reader, 57-83; also in Althusser, For Marx \(1965-66\)\]](#)

[Carl Oglesby, "Introduction: The Idea of the New Left" \(1969\)](#)

[\[in Oglesby, ed., New Left Reader, 1-20\]](#)

[supplemental reading:]

[Althusser, "Marxism and Humanism" \(1965\) \[also in For Marx\]](#)

**July 23 and 30, 2006**

**Reading the New Left — Excursus II  
"What is revolutionary leadership?"**

*"The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership."  
(Leon Trotsky 1938)*

*"'Revisionism' is the view that every new development requires the abandonment in practice of basic aspects of previously held theory. Ultimately this drift from the dialectical materialist method leads to a drift from the working class itself. Marxism, on the contrary, develops through the continual integration of new elements, new realities, into its theoretical structure. . . . Particularly in the present period, when the working class seems to the empiricist to be under the complete and everlasting domination of reformist bureaucracies, this ideological pressure is the result of a terribly strong social pressure. The Trotskyist groups feel small and isolated at the very moment that significant leftist forces are clearly in motion throughout the world. These forces, however, are under the leadership of non-proletarian tendencies: 'left' social democrats, Stalinists of one or another variety, and 'revolutionary' bourgeois or petty-bourgeois groups in the colonial countries." (RT of the SWP-USA 1962)*

[Cliff Slaughter, "What is Revolutionary Leadership?" \(1964\)](#)

[Revolutionary Tendency of the SWP \(USA\), "In Defense of a Revolutionary Perspective" \(1962\)](#)

[supplemental reading:]

[Spartacist League, "Genesis of Pabloism" \(1972\)](#)

[Communist \(Third\) International, "The Organization of Communist Parties" \(resolutions 1921\)](#)

[recommended background reading:]

[Richard Appignanesi and Oscar Zarate, \*Introducing Lenin and the Russian Revolution\* \(1977\)](#)

[Tariq Ali and Phil Evans, \*Introducing Trotsky and Marxism\* \(1980\)](#)

[Spartacist League, \*Lenin and the Vanguard Party\* \(pamphlet 1978\)](#)

**August 6, 2006**

**Reading the New Left III**

**The "black question" in America (1): revolutionary integrationism**

*"For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white."  
(Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 1952)*

[Dick Fraser, \*Two Lectures\* \(1953\)](#)

[James Robertson and Shirley Stoute, "For Black Trotskyism" \(1963\)](#)

[Spartacist League, "Black and Red — Class Struggle Road to Negro Freedom" \(1966\)](#)

**August 13, 2006**

**Reading the New Left III (continued)**

**The "black question" in America (2): in the absence of revolutionary leadership**

*"As far as organizing white people goes, we give white people the privilege of having a mind and we want them to get a body." (Newton 1968)*

Malcolm X, " 'I Don't Mean Bananas' " (1964)

[in [Oglesby, ed., \*New Left Reader\*, 207-222](#)]

Huey Newton, A Prison Interview (1968)

[in [Oglesby, ed., \*New Left Reader\*, 223-240](#)]

*screening*

[\*Finally Got the News\* \(film 1970, 55 min.: dir. Bird, Lichtman and Gessner with LRBW\)](#)

[supplemental reading:]

[Spartacist League, "Soul Power or Workers Power: The Rise and Fall of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers" \(1974\)](#)

**August 27, 2006**

**Reading the New Left IV  
New forms of discontent?**

*"It is with [the] problem of agency in mind that I have been studying the intellectuals. . . . [I]f we try to be realistic in our utopianism — not fruitless contradiction — a writer on the Left today must begin there. For that is what we are, that is where we stand." (Mills 1960)*

*"The advancing one-dimensional society alters the relation between the rational and the irrational. Contrasted with the fantastic and insane aspects of its rationality, the realm of the irrational becomes the home of the really rational — of the ideas which may 'promote the art of life'." (Marcuse 1964)*

*"The concept of the Left remains unclear to this day." (Kolakowski 1968)*

**C. Wright Mills, "The Politics of Responsibility" (1960)**

**[in Oglesby, ed., *New Left Reader*, 23-31]**

**[includes excerpts from "Letter to the New Left" (1960)]**

**Herbert Marcuse, "Conclusion" from *One-Dimensional Man* (1964)**

**[in Oglesby, ed., *New Left Reader*, 32-40]**

**Leszek Kolakowski, "The Concept of the Left" (1968)**

**[in Oglesby, ed., *New Left Reader*, 144-158]**

**September 8-14, 2006**

**Reading the New Left — *Excursus III*  
The Popular Front and the coup against Allende in Chile**

*"The electoral victory of Allende's Popular Front in Chile poses the issue of revolution or counter-revolution . . . paving the way for a bloody defeat for the Chilean working people when domestic reaction, abetted by international imperialism, is ready." (Spartacist 1970)*

**screening**

***Salvador Allende* (film 2004, 100 min.: dir. Patricio Guzmán)**

**Spartacist League, "Chilean Popular Front" (1970)**

**September 17, 2006**

**Reading the New Left V  
Re-organizing the Left?**

**André Gorz, from *Strategy for Labor* (1964)**

**[in Oglesby, ed., *New Left Reader*, 41-56]**

**Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson, from *May Day Manifesto* (1967)**

**[in Oglesby, ed., *New Left Reader*, 111-143]**

**Fidel Castro, "The Universal Conscience" (1968)**

**[in Oglesby, ed., *New Left Reader*, 186-206]**

**[addendum:]**

**Ernesto "Che" Guevara, "Socialism and Man in Cuba" (1965)**

**October 1, 2006**

**Reading the New Left VI  
New "vanguards" for revolution? (1): anti-authoritarianism**

**Rudi Dutschke, "On Anti-Authoritarianism" (1968)**

**[in Oglesby, ed., *New Left Reader*, 243-253]**

**Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, "The Battle for the Streets — *C'est Pour Toi Que Tu Fais La Révolution*" [from *Obsolete Communism: A Left-Wing Alternative* (1968)]**

**[in Oglesby, ed., *New Left Reader*, 254-266]**

October 15, 2006Reading the New Left VI (continued)  
New "vanguards" for revolution? (2): the "student" movement

The Open Assembly of June 13-14 1968, "The Appeal from the Sorbonne [Theses]" (1968)  
[in [Oglesby, ed., \*New Left Reader\*](#), 267-273]

Tom Fawthrop, Tom Nairn and David Triesman, "Three Student Risings" (1968)  
[in [Oglesby, ed., \*New Left Reader\*](#), 274-289]

Mark Rudd, "Columbia — Notes on the Spring Rebellion" (1969)  
[in [Oglesby, ed., \*New Left Reader\*](#), 290-312]

[Carl Oglesby, "Introduction: The Idea of the New Left" \(1969\)](#)  
[in [Oglesby, ed., \*New Left Reader\*](#), 1-20]

October 29, November 5 and 12, and December 3, 2006After the New Left  
"The thought of the outside"

discussion of [Foucault and the Iranian Revolution](#) and post-New Left Islamism

*"A social field offers more resistance than strategies [of power], and the thought of the outside is a thought of resistance."* (Deleuze, [Foucault](#) 1986)

*"We should not be deceived into thinking that [history] is an acquisition, a possession that grows and solidifies; rather, it is an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers that threaten the fragile inheritor from within or underneath."*  
([Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 1971 in \*Language, Counter-Memory, Practice\* 1977](#))

*"The past reveals to the present what the present is capable of seeing."*  
(R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* 1926, quoted by [Abrahamian](#) 1982)

[Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled" \[from \*A Dying Colonialism\* \(1959\)\]](#)  
[in [Oglesby, ed., \*New Left Reader\*](#), 161-185]

[Frantz Fanon, Conclusion to \*The Wretched of the Earth\* \(1961\)](#)

screening

[The Battle of Algiers](#) (film 1966, 121 min.: dir. Gillo Pontecorvo)

[Fred Halliday, "The Iranian Revolution: Uneven Development and Religious Populism" \(1982/86\)](#)

[Fred Halliday, "The Iranian Revolution and its Implications" \(interview 1987\)](#)

[Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, \*Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism\* \(2005\) \[including Foucault's writings on the Iranian Revolution\]](#)

[Michel Foucault, "Polemics, Politics and Problematizations" \(interview with Paul Rabinow 1984\)](#)

[Ervand Abrahamian, \*Iran Between Two Revolutions\* \(1982\) \[especially chapters 6, 9, 10 and 11\]](#)

[David Greason, "Embracing Death: the Western Left and the Iranian Revolution, 1978-83" \(2005\)](#)

Paralipomena

## "Anti-imperialism" and the "Left" after 9-11 and Iraq

*"We do not simply oppose U.S. power, but seek to revolutionize the world! . . .  
Can Marxist revolutionaries recognize that the policies of U.S. hegemony can be (and today are being mostly or only) opposed from the Right?"* (Chris C 2006)

[Spartacist League, "The Left and the Occupation: U.S. Out of Iraq Now! For Class Struggle Against U.S. Capitalist Rulers!" \(2005\)](#)

[Spartacist League and Chris C, "Exchange on the Iraq 'Resistance' " \(2004/05\)](#)

[Spartacist League and Chris C, "Exchange on Iraq Occupation" \(2006\)](#)

[Tariq Ali, "Mid-Point in the Middle East?" \(2006\)](#)

[Fred Halliday, "Who is Responsible? \[interview with Danny Postel in Chicago\]" \(2005\)](#)



## What is a platypus?

### On surviving the extinction of the Left

A story is told about Karl Marx's collaborator and friend Friedrich Engels, who, in his youth, as a good Hegelian Idealist, sure about the purposeful, rational evolution of nature and of the place of human reason in it, became indignant when reading about a platypus, which he supposed to be a fraud perpetrated by English taxidermists. For Engels, the platypus made no sense in natural history.

Later, Engels saw a living platypus at a British zoo and was chagrined. Like Marx a good materialist, and a thinker receptive to Darwin's theory of evolution, which dethroned a human-centered view of nature, Engels came to respect that "reason" in history, natural or otherwise, must not necessarily accord with present standards of human reason.

This is a parable we find salutary to understanding the condition of the Left today.

In light of the history of the present, we might ask, what right does the Left have to exist?

Every right — as much as the platypus has, however difficult it might be to categorize!

We maintain that past and present history need not indicate the future. Past and present failures and losses on the Left should educate and warn, but not spellbind and enthrall us.

Hence, to free ourselves, we declare that the Left is *dead*. — Or, more precisely, that we are all that is left of it.

This is less a statement of fact than of intent.

— The intent that the Left should live, but the recognition that it can, *only* by overcoming itself. And we are that overcoming!

So, then, *what* are we?

We are thinkers on the Left educated and warned by the history of the 20th Century — but *not* terrorized by it! "Let the dead bury the dead." Our actions might redeem their suffering yet.

We are motivated, after failed and betrayed attempts at emancipation, and in light of their inadequate self-understanding, to re-appropriate this history in service of possibilities for emancipatory struggle in the present — and the future.

Towards such ends, we might begin (perhaps provocatively) with the list of names that indicate the thoughts and problems issuing from events that, reading history against the grain (with Benjamin), still speak to us in the present: Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Adorno. — Not much more than what is represented by these figures, but absolutely nothing less.

We will overcome any easy and false recognition of such names, and all received wisdom about the thoughts and actions identified with them, to better possible *critical* recognition and development of *our* purpose.

In the history of the Left, the dates 1848 and 1917, but less 1968, and *not* 1989: the aftermath of ambiguous defeats and victories; but, more, the insights yielded by defeats, and the recognition of a present and a history that need not have been, for a future that need not yet be. The restive spirits of 1848 and 1917, in their unfulfilled possibilities, will continue to speak to an unredeemed future.

The history of modernity is not finished yet, nor will it be, short of redeeming its promise. Therefore, we do not share the (mis)laid feelings of exhaustion with the modern, but we recognize a certain abdication of its emancipatory transformation, which haunts us with its necessity.

We recognize *our* necessity.

We agree with the young Marx in "the ruthless criticism of everything existing." Unlike Hegel in his struggle against Romantic despair after 1789, we recognize the necessity of our present only as "bad." Our present does not deserve affirmation or even respect, for we recognize it only for what came to be when the Left was destroyed and liquidated itself.

And so, with the story of Engels and the platypus, let us begin to address the improbable but not impossible tasks and project of the *next* Left.

June, 2006

## **Platypus**

**international journal of critical letters  
and emancipatory politics**

## ***A short history of the Left***

### **Marx and 1848**

Marx was not the author but the brilliant critical participant of the Left in the 19th Century. Socialism and communism were not invented by Marx, Engels and their collaborators (and opponents) on the Left, but issued from the contradictions of modern society itself, as expressed in the French Revolution of 1789 and in the modern labor movement that emerged with the Industrial Revolution in the early 19th Century. Marx's great insight was to regard the Left itself as symptomatic of capitalism that does not oppose it from without but from within, *immanently*. Nevertheless Marx endorsed the Left, the modern socialist workers movement, and sought to push it further and provoke recognition of how it pointed beyond itself.

Marx's thought originated in the immanent critique of emancipatory politics after 1789, in French socialism, German Idealist philosophy, and British political economy. By 1848, the time of Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto* and the revolutionary uprisings in France, Germany, and other parts of Europe (triggered by the global economic depression of 1847), the politics of social equality and democracy had become more complicated and profound than a Rousseauian civilizational critique of modern society (Proudhon's slogan "property is theft") could comprehend — or hope to overcome. By 1848, radical democracy, in forms of revolt by the "bourgeois" (urban) "third estate" (including workers) had come to grief: capital was threatened by social democracy, for it pushed beyond its forms of social reproduction. The aftermath of failed revolution in 1848 saw the advent of emphatic forms of "mass" politics and the modern national parliamentary-Bonapartist state with which we still live today.

After the post-1848 crisis on the Left, Marx engaged the critical-dialectical conception of capitalism, recognizing it as a form of emancipation that (re)constitutes a specific form of domination over society: the imperative to produce "surplus value" and thus capitalize on labor in forms mediated and measured in labor-time. Capital became a form of wealth measurable as an investment of social labor, a form of preservation and stake of value on the future, but one in which "dead" labor dominates the living.

After 1917, Lukács recovered Marx's grasp of the contradictory but constitutive identity and non-identity of social exploitation and domination under capitalism that gives rise to forms of discontent and agency — *ideologies*, including on the "Left" — that reproduce and perpetuate a society dominated by capital, a contradiction of social being *and* consciousness for subjects of the commodity form.

For Marx, capitalism itself sets the stage for and provokes emancipatory social potential that it also constrains. As social form, capital points beyond itself.

### **Lenin, Luxemburg and 1917**

At the turn of the 20th Century, the younger generation of radicals in Second International Social Democracy took for granted the revolutionary character of their Marxist forebears (Kautsky, Plekhanov), but uneasily came up against problems in the movement they so enthusiastically championed. The standard bearers of the revolutionary Marxist mandate found themselves shockingly isolated on the Left with the outbreak of World War in 1914. Russia proved to be the "weakest link" in the world system of capitalism, becoming the epicenter of revolutionary political struggle, but with the paradoxical outcome of what Lenin called a "deformed workers' state" administering "state capitalism" on the frontier-backwater of global capital, which too soon "recovered" from the crisis of the war. Luxemburg and her comrades in Germany supported the Bolsheviks, but as Marxists remained critical, knowing that October 1917 advanced the necessity of global revolution, posing a "problem" in Russia that could not be "solved" there. Struggling to remain true to the principles of Marxism, actually Lenin, Luxemburg and their cohort transformed the Marxist movement, but in very uneven ways that, with the ultimate failure and betrayal of the anticapitalist revolution opened in 1917-19, set the stage for the later degeneration of the Left — not least in its self-understanding.

### **Trotsky**

When Stalin announced the policy of "socialism in one country" he was not thereby explicitly overthrowing a revolutionary Marxist perspective but rather accommodating circumstances of the Russian Revolution by 1924. Even those revolutionaries less cynical than Stalin and the Bolsheviks he manipulated and murdered did not countenance that only the risky politics of worldwide Communism had any hope of preserving, let alone furthering, the very modest gains of 1917. In the absence of this, the exigencies of "preserving the revolution" demanded ever higher sacrifices, an unfolding catastrophe for humanity.

### **Adorno**

The disintegration of revolutionary Marxism by the 1930s presented an acute problem for critical consciousness on the Left. The radical crisis of war and social revolution 1914-19 produced its reactionary complement, the virulent movement of fascism and a resumption of world war that by 1945 had devastated the Left. In the wake of counterrevolution and reaction after 1919 emerged the "authoritarian character" structure of social and political subjectivity that was expressed pervasively, not only in black- and brown-shirt rallies, but also in the Popular Front and, later, "nationalism" in the "Third World." The "authoritarian personality," with its characteristic wounded narcissism and sado-masochism, evinced a regressive "fear of freedom."

(continued)

"Marxism" became part of the ideology of the reactionary social reality of "advanced" capitalism, but one which yet, smoldering with history, pointed beyond the terms of the "bourgeois" ideology whose vacancy it had come to occupy. In the period of triumphant counter-revolution that characterized the high 20th Century, the question and problem of critical social consciousness re-emerged. Recovering the critical intent of Marxian theory and practice proved an obscure issue by the 1960s, but one that haunted the Left in the social-political disorientation and occultation of the tasks and project of emancipation that is the most profound legacy of defeated and failed revolution.

### **From '68 — and '89 — to today**

By the 1960s, the "Left" increasingly denied the rights and responsibilities of strategically placed populations at the heart of global capital to change the course of history. — As Susan Sontag succinctly expressed it in 1967, "the white race is the cancer of human history." — Embraced was a passive expectation of the crowding onto the historical stage by "subalterns," with no critical regard for the actual political forms this takes. — As Adorno put it at the advent of decolonization: "Savages are not more noble" (1944). — Such abdication took diverse forms of self-abnegation — including racist enthusiasms for "cultural difference" — evacuating politics.

The revolutionary Left, already in a state of deep decomposition after 1945, received the last nail in its coffin with the abdication of the role of critical social consciousness in the wake of the "New" Left — but prepared long before. The post-'60s disenchantment of the Left cast a long shadow across the 1970s-80s, and culminated in 1989-92 with the destruction of the Soviet Union and the "end of history" — an end to any ("grand") projects of emancipatory social transformation. The "New Left" got the world it deserved; attempts to sustain its pseudo-radical anti-Marxism are efforts to resuscitate a ghost.

Adorno's observation that "wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (1944) has been mistaken to be an existential and not a political problem. But the problem of practice is not ethical but concerns opening actual social-political possibilities for emancipation.

An emancipated world in which the freedom of each would be a precondition for the freedom of all, achieved through social solidarity that provides "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" (Marx), whose vision motivated the historical Left, seems scarcely conceivable today.

But, just as it is quite possible, manifestly, to be oppressed without realizing the reasons for it — the meaning of "alienation" — unfulfilled potential can yet persist despite lack of awareness of it: a non-identity of subject and object. The possibility of critical consciousness of emancipation survives its apparent demise, however unconsciously it tasks us today. The role of consciousness is vital for any possible social emancipation.

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