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What's Left?

Platypus

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publications

What is a platypus? On surviving the Left
(June, 2006)

Introducing Platypus
AREA Chicago magazine #3, Summer/Fall 2006
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Platypus pre-issue manifesto:
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Introducing Platypus

**A report and bibliography for an attempt
at reformulating the Marxian Left in Chicago in 2006**
**The problem of theory and practice in political solidarity
and critical consciousness on the Left today**

Chris Cutrone

September 11, 2006

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Only if the extremes come together

"The producers are more than ever thrown back on theory . . . by virtue of insistent self-criticism. . . . Following the schematic division of physical and mental labour, they split themselves up into workers and intellectuals. This division cripples the practice which is called for. . . . The growing opacity of capitalist mass society makes an association between intellectuals who still are such, with workers who still know themselves to be such, more timely. . . . [In the past] such unity was compromised by free-wheeling bourgeois of the liberal professions, who were shut out by industry and tried to gain influence by left-wing bustlings. . . . Today, when the concept of the proletariat, unshaken in its economic essence, is so occluded that in the greatest industrial country there can be no question of proletarian class-consciousness, the role of intellectuals would no longer be to alert the torpid to their most obvious interests, but to strip the veil from the eyes of the wise-guys, the illusion that capitalism, which makes them its temporary beneficiaries, is based on anything other than their exploitation and oppression. The deluded workers are directly dependent on those who can still just see and tell of their delusion. Their hatred of intellectuals has changed accordingly. . . . The masses no longer mistrust intellectuals because they betray the revolution, but because they might want it, and thereby reveal how great is their own need of intellectuals. Only if the extremes come together will humanity survive."

— Theodor W. Adorno, *"Messages in a Bottle"*
(orphaned from *Minima Moralia*, 1944-47)

Platypus is an idea for a journal project on the Marxian Left several of us have had for a number of years, starting with two of us with a long political background on the Trotskyist Left, going back to our undergraduate years (1989-92) at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. The journal idea has been grounded in our shared commitments to challenging post-New Left politics. In recent years, the initial two of us were joined by a few University of Chicago students of the critical social theorist and Marx scholar Moishe Postone. We have been motivated by questioning what a Leftist politics today might be — we are struck by the decline if not total demise of the Left, and by the certain absence of Leftist politics informing the world. So our project involves radically interrogating the self-declared "Left," taking nothing for granted in our sense of the necessity for reformulating a Leftist politics and re-appropriating the history of the Left towards the present.

The idea for taking our namesake from the platypus comes from the history of the creature's discovery and difficulties being categorized and recognized for what it is, which we take to be emblematic for the state of any possible Left — of any social-emancipatory politics — today. Just as the platypus symbolizes the challenge to traditional understandings of the order of the natural world, our intent is to challenge the received understanding of the Left, both "Old" (of the 1920s-30s-40s, i.e., post-1917) and "New" (1960s-70s) — as well as "post-" (1980s-present). We find present and historical self-understandings on the Left to manifest great confusions that remain confounding and defeating for emancipatory politics today. Because our focus is on ideological problems of the Left, we consider ourselves to be revolutionary intellectuals and identify as such.

Our approach to the history of the Left is characterized by going "against the grain" of historical events, exemplified by Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history. For us, past moments in the history of the Left are charged with emancipatory potential that went unrealized but nonetheless continues to task us in the present. It is in this sense that we understand Benjamin's injunction that "even the dead are not safe." Past struggles that failed or were betrayed can be failed and betrayed

again, and needless suffering in the present and future that could have been averted will not be. For us, any possible future emancipation is tied to honoring — learning from — past efforts and sacrifices. Our first meetings of the *Platypus* Marxist reading group in Chicago grew out of the course I teach at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) on Theodor W. Adorno and addressed Adorno's 1969 correspondence with Herbert Marcuse concerning the New Left: we recognized the history for problems of our present in Adorno's critical prognosis on the 1960s.

The principal influences for *Platypus* are the Marxist political tradition exemplified by Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky, and the critical theoretical tradition of the Frankfurt School, exemplified first and foremost by the works of Adorno, but also by important works by Lukács, Benjamin, Horkheimer, Marcuse, et al. However, we are also concerned with the complex legacy of 20th Century thought and politics that has developed in response to — and reaction against — Marxism, both politically and intellectually: existentialism, post-structuralism, and other tendencies leading to "post"-modernism — as well as neo-conservatism — which we regard as products of the regression and disintegration of the Left to the present.

These first years of my teaching at SAIC and the University of Chicago have been characterized politically by the conditions of the post-9/11/01 world: the various policies of the George W. Bush administration, and the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions and occupations. So my teaching Marxist critical theory in this context has always involved certain caveats about the (in)adequacy of the present "Left" response, and how the historical critical-theoretical tradition (of Adorno, Benjamin, et al.) might speak to the state of the Left today.

The actual determining impetus to form the *Platypus* reading group was provided by a few of my graduate students from SAIC classes last year (2005-06), who raised the issue of an extra-curricular forum that could address the purchase of historical critical theory for the tasks and problems of the Left today. Thus the reading group was formed in Spring 2006, at first including the core *Platypus* group of long-term participants, and expanding to include my fellow teacher colleagues and graduate students from University of Chicago and my graduate students from SAIC (about a dozen people altogether), and growing by June to include a group of undergraduate students from SAIC and University of Chicago, with whom we doubled our numbers.

At the meeting that saw the undergraduate students join the group in numbers, I presented the short editorial/mission statement, "What is a

platypus? On surviving the extinction of the Left," which I had drafted at the request of my long-term colleagues on the *Platypus* project for a planned intervention at the Marxism 2006 "Festival of Resistance" Conference of the British Socialist Workers Party (affiliated with the International Socialist Organization in the U.S.). I proposed a "syllabus" of readings for the group to discuss for Summer and Fall 2006, centered around readings from *The New Left Reader* anthology (1969) edited by former Students for a Democratic Society President (1965-66) Carl Oglesby. The core members of the prospective editorial collective regard the reading group as a place for expanding the editorial collective and cultivating writing contributors for the journal, which we intend to launch in 2007. The *Platypus* editorial statement and supplemental short history of the Left can be found at:

http://home.comcast.net/~platypus1917/platypus_statement.html

The *Platypus* Marxist reading group in Chicago presently consists of about two dozen regularly attending participants, of which approximately three-fourths come to any particular meeting. We have held bi-weekly meetings since April, with some discussions spawning extra meetings and many continuing onto our e-mail discussion list.

Events that groups of several of us have attended that have informed our progress in the reading group and the *Platypus* journal project, allowing for our growing familiarity and critical awareness of the present state of the "Left," have been the following: Talks given in Chicago by David Harvey on cosmopolitanism and the "new" imperialism, Brian Holmes on emergent "continental" identities and geopolitics, the Retort Collective on their book *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, Fredric Jameson on dialectic and historical meaning, and Richard Wolin on his book *The Frankfurt School Revisited*; the Chicago Social Forum this past May; and the re-founded Students for a Democratic Society First National Conference in August. In September, most of us attended the Chicago screenings of Patricio Guzmán's film *Salvador Allende* (2004), which provided a good frame for our discussion of classic historical issues on the Marxist Left concerning the state, political parties and social revolution. — These events have informed our sense of possibilities for a re-founded Left mostly in a negative sense, allowing us to grasp what any future Left will have to combat and overcome (and illustrating for us the manifold legacy of the preceding Left of the 1960s that has been our critical focus thus far). Positively, the massive immigrants' rights protests in the first half of 2006, which happened to coincide with the emergence of our group efforts, have remained signal events for our thinking about emerging possibilities for the Left in North America.

Up to this point, our discussions in the *Platypus* reading group in Chicago have been concerned primarily with issues of theory and practice, specifically in considering the history of the 1960s "New" Left in terms of its multiple origins and concerns, such as the Civil Rights movement, the student Free Speech movement, solidarity with the Cuban Revolution, protest against the Vietnam War and imperialism, and women's liberation, and how these had challenged the Left.

One important discussion, which was carried over the course of several weeks, concerned the historical struggle against racism and for social equality; the roles played by the Civil Rights movement, organized labor and the Marxist Left; the emergence of Black Nationalism (Malcolm X) and the Black Power turn of the late 1960s; the relation of these developments to the self-understanding of the Left; and its legacy for ostensibly Leftist politics today. We consider the Black Power turn to have been highly destructive of the Left, for it was predicated on the idea of such a thing as a "white" Left, where political solidarity — and consciousness — should not be so racialized. Our sense of the present dearth of blacks on the Left indicates this to us, for we do not regard victims of oppression as thereby having inherently more emancipatory politics, and we regard "identity" politics as symptomatic of the decline of the Left. An important point in our discussion of the late-1960s Black Power turn was to question whether Malcolm X and the Black Panthers really had been to the "Left" of — had more social-emancipatory politics than — Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin, et al.

On the issue of identity politics, we also addressed the issue of women's liberation from gender and sexual oppression versus feminism, primarily through our reading of a seminal essay by the psychoanalytically informed socialist-feminist theorist Juliet Mitchell, "Women: the Longest Revolution" (1966: a work first published in *The New Left Review* but inexplicably omitted from Oglesby's *New Left Reader*), her subsequent debate with Marxist scholar Quintin Hoare, and a constellation of related texts, including Marcuse's essay "Marxism and Feminism," which contains theses that Mitchell explicitly critiqued. As in the case of the Black Power turn, we discussed the emergence of so-called "second-wave" feminism (of the 1960s-80s) and its explicit anti-Marxism as having been disastrous for clarity about social-emancipatory politics on the Left to the present. Like other substantial essays from the 1960s we have considered, we took Mitchell's work as indicative of a path not taken that we must necessarily revisit, rather than accepting its subsequent historical eclipse.

In neither case of the historical struggles for social equality, against racism or for women's and sexual liberation, do we accept that the 1960s "New" Left "knew better" than previous Marxist politics had *done*. Rather, our point is to recover the actual social-emancipatory content of the history of the Left and recognize that perhaps the perceived failures of the "Old" Left had come to seem so only because of subsequent historical defeats and disintegration that set the stage for the 1960s, and not due to inherent deficiencies or blindness in the Marxist revolutionary socialist tradition. Perhaps the fault was in the (1960s) present and not a past too hastily liquidated. The questions that remain to be answered include: How does a working class-struggle perspective point beyond itself? What, for Marxists, is the social-emancipatory content of the struggle of "labor against capital," beyond the empirical struggles of workers under capitalism?

The Leftist tendencies that have been important as influences for our past and present activities towards *Platypus* include various currents in the (post-)Trotskyist Left, including such groups as the Spartacist League and News and Letters (Marxist-Humanists). Beyond these, we have had contact with several other groups in Chicago. A few participants in the reading group during Summer 2006 came to us from the 49th St. Underground, an extremely broad-based and all-inclusive Chicago group whose lead organizers are also University of Chicago graduate students.

In mid-summer (July), the reading group came to touch upon the issue of the significance of the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and subsequent international Communism, in the context of discussing the troubled legacy of "Leninism" for the New Left, after 1956 (the crises of the Khrushchev "revelations" of Stalin's crimes, the split between the Soviet Union and Mao's China, and the Soviet invasion of Hungary) and after 1968 (when the New Left became predominantly "Marxist-Leninist," i.e., Maoist). Our discussion of Communism began with reading French Communist Party theorist Louis Althusser's essay on "Contradiction and Overdetermination" (1962), addressing the issue of problems in Marxism regarding the Hegelian dialectical "logic" of history and the role of critical consciousness and agency in revolutionary possibilities. This was followed by our reading of contemporary (circa 1960) Trotskyist writings on the problem of Marxism and revolutionary "leadership" (including the issue of the 1959 Cuban Revolution).

However, this discussion of historic Bolshevism and international Communism in the 20th Century was the occasion of a precipitous and unfortunate development for *Platypus*. Rather than trying to think through and reconsider the meaning of the importance of the Russian

Revolution for 20th Century Marxism, two reading group participants from the University of Chicago balked and left the group, bringing about the first major controversy that *Platypus* has experienced. (This was a "shake-out" that only involved those leaving who had not been full participants in the group but had maintained an ambivalent distance for political reasons.)

The frame through which the dissenters chose to attack Bolshevism was the issue of the Bolshevik suppression of the Kronstadt garrison mutiny in 1921 (which the Bolsheviks themselves had not glorified but had regarded as a "tragic necessity," and on which the principal historian of the event, Paul Avrich — an anarchist — had concluded [in his 1970 book], despite his stated sympathies for the mutineers, that the Bolsheviks had been "justified"). We maintained that the suppression of the Kronstadt mutiny was a greatly misleading frame for evaluating the merits of historical Bolshevism, and is not good for explaining the subsequent problems of the Left in the 20th Century; rather, Kronstadt as an issue is a well-worn hobby-horse for a very specific politics: post-1917 anarchism. In the e-mail debates on Kronstadt that ensued, the dissenters refused to engage the very difficult but important issue of the meaning of the Russian Revolution for 20th Century Marxism: What, precisely, was the nature and character of the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution that at once had seemed to confirm and challenge Marxism (Gramsci had called it the "Revolution Against [Marx's] *Capital*")? For our consideration of the 1960s "New" Left, this difficulty took the form of the 1960s failures to avoid the twin, complementary pitfalls of Stalinophobia and Stalinophilia in regarding both the Soviet Union and international Communism: What would it mean to adopt a critical attitude towards the Russian Revolution and the history of the Soviet Union and international Communism without abandoning everything we might learn and re-appropriate from it (and treating 20th Century Communism merely, as the title of the recent book by apostate Communist and *In These Times* editor James Weinstein [1926-2005] called it, *The Long Detour* [2003])?

If, as was asserted by the dissenters, Lenin and the Bolsheviks (including Trotsky) and the influence of the Russian Revolution and subsequent Soviet realities had "destroyed" Marxism for the Left, then what are we to make of the fact that all the problems of Stalinism raised by the dissenters seemed to confirm 19th and 20th Century anarchist critiques of Marx (e.g., by Bakunin, et al.), which forecast that Marxism could only lead to a totalitarian state? What remains of Marxism if the history of Bolshevism is denied root and branch? If, according to the dissenters, the anarchist critiques of Marx are not good, but only Rosa

Luxemburg's critiques of Lenin, then what are we to make of Luxemburg's and her Polish and German organizations' long history of political collaboration with Lenin and the Bolsheviks, her solidarity with the Bolshevik Revolution and identification of her own politics with "Bolshevism," and her membership in the Bolshevik-led Third (Communist) International after the Russian Revolution up to her murder by German counterrevolutionaries in 1919? — These are the kinds of issues to which we are committed to (re)thinking through, and for which we do not accept *prima facie* received "wisdom" of any kind.

Towards the end of Fall 2006, we look forward to addressing the aftermath of the 1960s New Left and the crisis of progressive politics in the 1970s-80s through a few meetings on the case study of Michel Foucault and his response to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, through the recent book *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (including Foucault's writings on Iran) written by Chicago-based authors Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson. Starting in Winter 2007 and extending through the Spring, we project embarking on a series of lectures and discussions on the history of the Left, pre-1789 to post-2001.

We anticipate that *Platypus* could be part of a potentially much broader renaissance on the Left in coming years, one which might occasion yet another "return to Marx" (as had occurred in the 1920s-30s and 1960s-70s) for grappling with capitalism as the fundamental context for social politics. Our goal is to develop a cohort of like-minded thinkers around a publishing vehicle to help inform to best effect such a reconsideration of the critical-theoretical tradition in light of the history of the Left, and thus help open possibilities for actual — eminently realizable — emancipation from an oppressive and highly destructive present and future that need not have been and need not yet be.

As C. Wright Mills put it at the dawn of the last, "New" Left (1960), we must "try to be realistic in our utopianism."

Chicago
September 11, 2006

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Bibliography

The bibliography/reading list encompasses several different registers in which our discussions have been thematized. These readings have been important in our discussions less for interest in the authors and their particular political biographies and more in the issues raised by the texts themselves. They are listed in chronological order of writing. For the order and themes in which the *Platypus* group has read and discussed these texts at our meetings, please refer to our web page for the reading group at:

http://home.comcast.net/~platypus1917/platypus_chicagoreadings2006.htm

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