



***What's Left?***

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## 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

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## ***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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