

**"Let the dead bury the dead!" -- Marxism vs. anarchism
Response to the *Principia Dialectica* (UK) leaflet commemorating May 1968**

Chris Cutrone, for Platypus

The new *Mayday* magazine (UK) and Platypus have been in dialogue on the issues of anarchism and Marxism and the state of the "Left" today in light of history. (Please see "Organization, political action, history and consciousness" by Chris Cutrone for Platypus, and "Half-time Team Talk" by Trevor Bark for *Mayday*, in issues #2, February 2008, and #4, April-May 2008, respectively.)

Principia Dialectica, another new British journal (www.principiadialectica.co.uk), also has taken note of Platypus (see "Weird gonzo leftoid journal," April 15, 2008, at: <http://www.principiadialectica.co.uk/blog/?p=133>), specifically with our interview of Moishe Postone on "Marx after Marxism" (in issue #3, March 2008).

In their note of us, *Principia Dialectica* cites our interview with Postone to say that "Postone's reflections on Lukács are certainly bracing, and enough to challenge any cryogenically frozen leftoid stuck in 1917." Platypus raises the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which Lukács regarded as follows:

"Only the Russian Revolution really opened a window to the future; the fall of Czarism brought a glimpse of it, and with the collapse of capitalism it appeared in full view. At the time our knowledge of the facts and the principles underlying them was of the slightest and very unreliable. Despite this we saw -- at last! at last! -- a way for mankind to escape from war and capitalism." (1967 Preface to *History and Class Consciousness*)

But Platypus raises Bolshevism and its historical moment less as a rallying cry than as a question and problem. 1917 should be followed not by an exclamation point but a question mark, but one that has not lost its saliency but only become a more profound enigma in subsequent history. What was to Lukács and others of the time a brief glimpse of emancipatory potential has only become more obscure, but without becoming any less penetrating.

-- But today the danger is not being frozen in 1917 but rather 1968.

Principia Dialectica distributed the leaflet following below, "Let the dead bury the dead!" (<http://www.principiadialectica.co.uk/blog/?p=139>) at the May '68 Jamboree at Conway Hall in London on May 10, 2008. This leaflet uses a great deal of Platypus rhetoric, on the "fossilized" and undead character of today's "Left," on anarchism being an enduring "bad conscience" of the failures of Marxism, etc., and involves not only this plagiarism but an unacknowledged response to our statements on the necessary return to the history of the revolutionary Marxist tradition. At the same time, this leaflet rehearses

precisely those aspects of a non-/anti-Marxian and/or "anarchist" approach we have addressed previously in our articles in dialogue with *Mayday*.

The problem with this *Principia Dialectica* statement is that it has no cognizance of the issue of historical *regression*. Necessarily, this involves a non-dialectical and non-immanent understanding of capitalism as a "system," resulting in an insistence on an (historically impossible) "outside" of capitalism. -- Regarding the announcement appended below their leaflet, for a meeting on "What is value, and how to destroy it?," the point, following Marx, is not to "destroy" (the social) "value" (of capital and proletarian labor), but rather to realize and overcome it on its own basis, and so would mean *redeeming* the very great sacrifices humanity has already made -- and continues to make -- in the history of capitalism.

Corollary to the one-sided view of and opposition to "value" (and what it means socially) is an unjustified yet assumed progressive view of history. This is unwarranted especially in light of the state of the "Left" today, 40 years after 1968, which has not shown any progress. -- Otherwise, why call the "Leftist" commemoration of 1968 that *Principia Dialectica* picketed with its leaflet, a "wake" conducted by "embalmed" "mummies?" But, like all anarchism, *Principia Dialectica* has no (need for a) theory of history (of capital).

An incoherent view of capitalism and its recent history both underlies and results from the leaflet's ambivalent salute and adieu to 1968. As Moishe Postone has pointed out (in his 2006 article on "Theorizing the Contemporary World: Brenner, Arrighi, Harvey"), the combined and equally inappropriate triumphalism and melancholy of post-1968 politics results from the undigested character of the Marxist tradition from which the 1960s "New" Left sought to depart:

"[T]he emancipatory potential of general social coordination [i.e., Marxist "planning"] . . . should [not] be dismissed. But that potential can only be realized when it is associated with the historical overcoming of capital, the core of our form of social life. . . . Without such an analysis of capital, however, one that is not restricted to the mode of distribution, but that can, nevertheless, address the emancipatory impulses expressed by traditional Marxism . . . our conceptions of emancipation will continue to oscillate between a homogenizing general (whether effected via the market or the state) and particularism, an oscillation that replicates the dualistic forms of commodity and capital themselves."

As such, the *Principia Dialectica* leaflet commemorating 1968 is a symptom of what Postone calls the post-1960s postmodernist politics of "premature post-capitalism," which imagines that the necessity for proletarian labor in mediating the conditions of modern social life and its potential emancipatory transformation has already been overcome *in practice*, however ripe its overcoming has been historically *in theory*.

As Lars Lih has pointed out (in his essay "Lenin and the Great Awakening," in the conference anthology *Lenin Reloaded*, 2007), the reconsideration of history for an

anticapitalist politics adequate to our time would mean indeed redeeming and realizing what *Principia Dialectica* disdainfully calls "proletarian Messianism." -- Precisely Walter Benjamin's understanding of the historical significance of such "Messianism," and its negative philosophy of history in the period of defeat and regression on the Left after 1917-19, provides the necessary guiding insight for such redemption. As Theodor W. Adorno interpreted Benjamin, "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all [historical] things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of [their potential] redemption" ("Finale," *Minima Moralia*, 1944-47).

Rather than attempts at redeeming the modern (and still on-going) history of the industrial proletariat, and realizing and fulfilling -- and going beyond -- this necessity of what Marx called proletarian self-transcendence/self-abolition (*Aufhebung*), however, the "Left" has (ever since 1917-19, but especially after 1968) regressed behind this task. This is why the revolutionary Marxism of 2nd International radicalism of Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, et al. -- as well as the thought and politics of Marx himself -- can still "flash up" as a historical image that haunts us and won't go away, despite all efforts at exorcism by varieties of "post-Marxism."

The very problematic history of the Marxist revolutionary "tradition" -- as well as of the modern workers movement -- requires *redemption*. And this is not simply desirable or possible, but actually unavoidably necessary.

Historical "anarchism" and its various offspring (e.g., Situationism) remain the deserved forms of the "bad conscience" of the failures of historical ("traditional") Marxism, but anarchism is nevertheless a symptomatic regression to pre-Marxian socialism (of Proudhon et al.).

Marxism was not a mistaken detour because it failed historically. Rather, the continued recrudescence of anarchism proves in a certain sense that a reconstitution of the Marxian point of departure remains necessary. A revisiting -- and "repetition" -- of the Marxian critique of (pre-Marxian as well as post-Marx-ist) socialism is in order. -- As Adorno put it (in "Resignation," 1969), the return of anarchism "is that of a ghost," which however "does not invalidate the [Marxian] critique" of it.

For Adorno, anarchism manifested "the impatience with theory." Ironically, such impatience with theory is corollary to the dismissal of the industrial proletariat as "Subject" of human emancipation (through its self-transformation and overcoming). This dismissal is seen in the *Principia Dialectica* celebration of the "happy unemployed" and the calls to "never work ever" and thus (try to) remain "outside" the "system." But as the historical Marxian critique of "actually existing socialism" -- and the history of capitalism to date -- has shown, there is no secure let alone emancipated state outside of capitalism that has been possible. Capitalism will be overcome from within (its own historical logic), or not at all.

As Adorno put it (in "Imaginative Excesses," orphaned from *Minima Moralia*), "Only if the extremes [of the theoretically armed revolutionary intellectuals, and the industrial working class] come together will humanity survive." -- Platypus is noted -- and attacked -- for being on the one hand too intellectual and on the other hand too committed to a proletarian path to social emancipation beyond capital. Thus our indication of this dual necessity of theory and practice finds its critical affirmation -- even when our project remains unacknowledged rather than singled out by our interlocutors.

The history of the failed Marxian attempted departures from symptomatic socialism (from Marx's departure from Proudhon, to Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and Lukács's departure from the politics of 2nd International Social Democracy and its "vulgar Marxism," to Trotsky and the Frankfurt School's departures from Stalinized 3rd International Communism) still tasks us, but not as ritual invocation devoid of the actual content of historical self-understanding, but only as this history allows for its critical apprehension -- in the critique of the present and how we got here.

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"Let the dead bury the dead!"

For a beautiful month of May

If you go *inside* you will see a corpse, and mummies embalming this corpse. We were kindly invited to this mass but we have refused to take part. However we are here -- *outside*, as their *bad conscience*.

In 2008, the position of all these people is false, and as far back as 1968 it was the same. Today, as yesterday, they are wrong about everything: they fantasise about a glorious past which never existed, they take on present society with the theoretical weapons of the past. Already in May 1968, their goal was to realise 1917, to redo 1936. And their recollection of May 68 precisely is this levelling: even today they dream of Soviets, Red Square, occupied factories and Cultural Revolution in popular China. Indeed, the past does not go by.

To help the past go by is to speak about the modernity of yesterday and of the fact that 'this modernity' has turned to dust. In May 68, the most advanced group was the Situationist International. The S.I. combated all the corpses of the Left in the name of an other idea of revolution. May 68, in its most surprising aspect, and in practice, was closest to what the S.I. had done in theory.

However, May 68 - as the S.I. -- belongs at the same time to the past and the present. The strength of the revolution of May, as of the Situationists, was to attack capitalist society as a *society of work* and to call into question State Communism, parties and trade unions with the help of a new definition of the proletariat. In May 68, one can say that those who defined themselves as *revolutionaries* were all those who had no power over their life, and who knew it. This goes beyond the traditional definition that

this very one literally explodes: with such a vision, one is far away from the good Leninist, anarchist, councilist worker to whom the organisation will dish out the gospel. This is certainly beyond the old definition, but not beyond proletarian messianism. That is where the limit lies.

Whoever wants to get rid of capitalism must go further. One must rid the world and its ideals of all illusions, including the ideals of the Left, including those of the most radical Left -- including thus those of the S.I. and May 68.

Revolutionary theory today knows that there is no revolutionary subject. The only subject is capital as an *automaton subject*, as *value, which valorises itself*. And this subject -- the economy that has become autonomous, what Guy Debord justly used to call "the autonomous movement of the non-living" -- transforms each of us into the *human resources* of its infinite self-reproduction.

In 1968 as in 2008, the critique of work must be put *centre stage*: not as a consequence of the critique of everyday life, but as the *heart* of the new theory and the new practice. And it must be done in a completely disenchanted, post-messianic manner. Straight away it must position itself beyond all myths: not only beyond the convention of the sub-critique, beyond the contingencies of realist reformism, beyond the self-satisfaction of the "happy unemployed" who believe themselves to be radical because they benefit from social security. But also, and above all, it must be *beyond the S.I.*, which had based its cause on the revolutionary Subject of history.

It is easy to be done with the corpses that May 68 has already ridiculed and who today act as guarantors of the "spirit of May" (from the good democrat Left to the ex-Maoists, and right up to the anarchists). It is more difficult to be done with the May 68 which lives still, although fossilised: the one that says *never work ever*. It is even more difficult, in fact, because this old critique still shines. But let's repeat it, it shines with the light of dead stars. *Never work ever*: to really be done with work, one must be rid of the idea of the proletariat as revolutionary subject of history. The class struggle is an integral part of the capitalist dynamic: it is not a matter of a struggle between the dominant class and the revolutionary class, but between different interests (although differently powerful) *within* capitalism.

The question is not to remain *faithful* to 68, but to be equal to the spirit of May. The only method is to be *resolutely outside the system*.

Beyond conventions, beyond the contingencies, beyond attachments!

[Distributed outside The Conway Hall, London, 10th May 2008 to coincide with the so-called May '68 Jamboree.]

'What is value, and how to destroy it?' Friday 16 May 2008 at 7.30pm, at The Lucas Arms public house, Grays Inn Road, London. Nearest tube: Kings Cross/Chancery Lane.