

## **Organization, political action, history, and consciousness: on anarchism and Marxism**

### **A response to *Mayday* magazine (UK) inaugural issue #1 (Winter 2007-08)**

Chris Cutrone, for Platypus

"Socialism is the first popular movement in world history that has set itself the goal of bringing human consciousness, and thereby free will, into play in the social actions of mankind . . . to try to take its history into its own hands; instead of remaining a will-less football, it will take the tiller of social life and become the pilot to the goal of its own history."

-- Rosa Luxemburg, *The Crisis of German Social Democracy* (1915)

Platypus has earned recognition from the new British publication *Mayday: magazine for anarchist/libertarian ideas and action*, in its inaugural issue #1 (Winter 2007-08) "Introduction: Open letter" (pp. 2-7). *Mayday* cites the initial Platypus statement, "What is a platypus? On surviving the extinction of the Left:"

"Attempts at progressive political renewal are occurring all round the world . . . Platypus in their 2006 document 'On Surviving the Extinction of the Left' say: '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!' " (2-3)

*Mayday* goes on to say:

"This is a spirit which *Mayday* has much in common with, although we include the anarchist movement in this assessment, and it is through engagement with such groups who are beginning again that serious progress may occur." (3)

The Platypus assessment of the "death" of the "Left" also applies to anarchism.

But we should distinguish a Marxian approach from anarchism to clarify our engagement. A key distinction is the relation of political organization and historical consciousness. Critical historical consciousness is primary for Platypus, and we are currently addressing classical issues in the history of revolutionary Marxism 1900-40 through a series of discussions in Chicago, reading Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky to approach the relation between history and organization on the Marxist Left, *how* and *why* theory and political programme are essential forms of historical memory and consciousness on the Left. Platypus asks: What is the purpose of "revolutionary" organization? Revolutionary "leadership?" -- Or, as present "anarchist" aversion to organizational leadership would have it, are such formulations contradictions in terms?

The *Mayday* "Introduction: Open letter" states that "*Mayday* was produced because experience within political movements led to dissatisfaction with what already passes for politics and political organisation" (3). *Mayday* critiques the organizational "conservatism" and "hierarchies" of political groups "more concerned with the continuation of themselves rather than the growth of an independent and free workers movement" (3). *Mayday* ascribed this phenomenon to "Leninist tactics which are designed to perpetuate the organization not the class struggle" (3). But *Mayday* thinks "anarchist" groups are not exempt from this problem: "Rather than enabling progressive politics, existing practice was rather sectarian in approach; they practice self-isolating politics, rather than an inclusive and growing approach, and this even from anarchists" (3). *Mayday* notes the legacy of 1960s New Left activism that the "movement is full of lions led by donkeys," due to an "anti-intellectualism" that is "also suggestive of hidden hierarchies inside outwardly democratic appearances" (3). *Mayday* thereby disarticulates a usual but unwarranted and problematic identification of intellectualism with pitfalls of leadership.

Platypus considers that there might be reason for the self-perpetuation of avowedly "revolutionary" organizations, but that this should not be taken for granted and needs to be justified. Perhaps there is a specific relation of organization to consciousness and emancipatory action that is lost in the classic antinomy of spontaneity vs. organization. As Rosa Luxemburg's biographer J. P. Nettl pointed out, Lenin and Luxemburg each addressed different, complementary questions, but towards the same purpose: How does political action enable transformative organization; and how does political organization enable transformative, emancipatory, and not foreclosing action? How can the Left "live" and take form not deadly to itself?

Nicholas Spencer, in his 1997 essay "Historicizing the Spontaneous Revolution: Anarchism and the Spatial Politics of Postmodernism," stated the issue as follows:

"[T]he Marxist model of a rational or scientific understanding of historical processes . . . culminate[s] in a class-based revolution at the end of dialectical time. . . . Conversely, those of an anarchist persuasion have often criticized the Marxist emphasis on rational history as a counter-revolutionary justification for the authority of the state and political party leaders. Both anarchists and Marxists consider themselves the spokespersons for the authentic political revolution . . . Luxemburg supported the need for party leaders and organization to guide revolutions according to the historical science of dialectical materialism . . . According to anarchist philosophy, belief in history is the guarantor of political authority, since change over time implies the need for a centralized body to guide the processes of change. The anarchist appeal to spontaneous revolution is one symptom of the rejection of history."  
<http://www.ags.uci.edu/~clcwegsa/revolutions/Spencer.htm>

Platypus pursues the revolutionary Marxist tradition to ask questions of the relation between organization and historical consciousness. What role, if any, does historical consciousness play in emancipatory politics? What is meant by "historical" consciousness?

The relevance of history is not given but made. But "made" in a dialectical sense. As Marx put it in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, humanity makes history but not under conditions of its own choosing. History is made but in ways that also produce us. We make history with what is given under certain conditions, and so need to be conscious of *how* history is made and reflect upon its significance, rather than taking it for granted. This is why Walter Benjamin spoke, in his 1940 "Theses on the Philosophy of History," of the "writing" of history, historiography on the Left being urgent for emancipatory politics.

From a Marxian approach to capital, there are two registers for apprehending history: the specificity of modern, capitalist society as an epochal problem distinguished from other historical forms of society; and the historical transformations that occur within the epoch of capital in which social-emancipatory movements take part, since Marx's time of the Industrial Revolution and related social and political changes starting in the mid-19th Century and the emergence of the modern workers' movement, to the present. The issue of capital thus becomes the question of: What changes while remaining "the same?"

Benjamin's concept of "constellation" refers to the sense that historical moments might not have pertinence to the present in a linear-progressive way. Rather, these historical constellations appear as structuring figures in the constitution of the present, as sets of enduring problems yet to be worked through. As Benjamin put it, this is a matter of making the past present. Hence something that happened more recently might not have a more immediate relevance to problems of the present than something that happened long ago. Something later might expire faster because it is less essential to the present than something earlier might allow us to grasp.

Such constellations in the appearance of history are importantly involuntary: as Benjamin put it, they "flash up;" as Marx put it, they "weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living." So history cannot be a simple matter of an inventory of "lessons already learned." For, as Benjamin put it, "even the dead are not safe." The significance of the past changes as a function of the present. History haunts us as a problem in the present. This is why Benjamin spoke of regarding history from the standpoint of its *redemption*. What value, if any, do past thoughts and actions have for us now? The history of the Left furnishes us with a set of questions and problems that we are tasked to answer in the present. But, as Adorno put it in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), "What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations."

The question of organization can be seen in a limited, one-sided respect if it is treated merely in terms of effective action in the present, if it is not also seen as a problem of historical continuity, through moments of change in which conscious actors have taken part. The organization of emancipatory politics should be understood properly as a matter of self-transformative action. What organization allows for itself to be transformed in and through actions it makes possible? Thus we can see that the present fossilization of the Left, in both theory and practice, presents problems of organization in a certain light. We need to understand the reasons for and significance of this inertia, and how it is a problem that we don't have the choice to bypass but must try to overcome.

Programmatic organization might be necessary precisely because it can objectify and thus make available for critical reflection problems of changes in consciousness. *Problems of organization are not only deplorable in terms of resulting incapacity for effective and sustainable transformative action under changing conditions, but might be important symptoms whose task it is for us to work in and through, and not merely oppose.* Perhaps we need to be "conservative" in our "revolutionary" politics in order to be actually radical in the present.

"History" can be accumulated in forms of organizational programme as a problem of consciousness in and of the present, in the results of attempts (but failures) to consciously act effectively. But organization transcends the immediate act; it is its own cause and effect. Hence this is a problem of *how* we recognize history in the guise of problems of organizational forms, not simply as a matter of their inevitable obsolescence. Not simply that groups and programmes on the Left have become "dead," but how and why this has become so, for what they were trying to accomplish has hardly become irrelevant but *remains to be fulfilled*. Such is the only way this history can be made relevant, if at all, to the present. So Platypus asks: What did historical Marxism seek but fail to accomplish that might yet succeed through our efforts?

Hence, the Platypus declaration that "the Left is dead!" is not only a characterization of the present as a place or condition in which we happen to be, but is more importantly a *historical* characterization of the present, a hypothesis and provocation for recognition of what has led to the present and what it might take to lead ourselves out of it. So it is not merely a question of "where" we "are" vs. where we "were," as *Mayday*, among others, asks, but also and perhaps more importantly "when" we are -- and "when" was the historical Left? How can the historical Left, specifically the history of revolutionary Marxism, help us situate ourselves in and despite the historical moment of today?

For we do not live in some timeless and perpetual present of oppression and struggle against it, but in what Benjamin called the "time of the now" (*Jetztzeit*), a time of particular and fleeting possibilities and the ambiguously obscure history that brought them -- us -- into existence.

The present might not be an opportunity for a break so much as a recovery and reinvention. As Lenin wrote, in the title of his 1901 article that became the basis for *What is to be done?*, "Where to begin?" -- Or, *how?* Platypus proceeds now that emancipatory social politics is necessarily at a preliminary phase of potential development. Beginning this way gives the history of the Left and questions and problems of our consciousness of its relevance for being able to grasp the very possibility of emancipatory politics today, and what is most essential towards this.