

The Platypus synthesis: history, theory and practice

(Richard Rubin, Chris Cutrone and Ian Morrison)

Part 1. Four types of ambiguity

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The title of this talk, “Four Types of Ambiguity,” is, of course, a take-off on William Empson’s classic 1930 book *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which is heralded with launching the New Criticism. The thesis of it is that Platypus as a project can best be understood by considering the plausible misreadings of Platypus and how Platypus both is and is not like the ways it might be misunderstood. Hence, the emphasis on our ambiguity. But perhaps that is exactly what one would expect from a project named after an egg-laying mammal that looks like a cross between a duck and a beaver!

The notion of ambiguity is itself ambiguous, however. To quote Empson,

“An ambiguity in ordinary speech means something pronounced and as a rule witty or deceitful. I propose to use the word in an extended sense, and I shall think relevant to my subject of verbal nuance, however, slight, which gives room to alternative reactions to the same piece of language.

Sometimes . . . the word may be stretched absurdly far, but it is descriptive because it suggests the analytical method, and with that I am concerned.”

At the end of this talk I hope you feel that I have been witty and you may very well feel that I have been deceitful, and like Empson I will at times stretch the word “ambiguity” absurdly far. Unlike him, I will be concerned with ambiguities of thought and ideology rather than language.

I will consider four types of ambiguity relating to Platypus, or, should I say, *four questions*. The first three types of ambiguity are rather straightforward and involve *political* misreadings. The fourth, however, is more complicated and involves *epistemological* problems. The first three involve accusations and come from without. The fourth, however, is a problem coming from within. It involves not how outsiders are likely to misunderstand the project, but rather how we ourselves are likely to misunderstand the problems we pose. We will leave consideration of it for last.

The three political accusations that we will consider are that we are Spartacists, that we are neoconservatives, and that we are liberals. Like classical anti-Semitic theories about Jews, that combine contradictory notions of Jews as plutocrats and Jews as communists, the hostility to and anxiety generated by Platypus seems to take in contradictory notions, so that some of our enemies seem to feel that we are some sort of monstrous Spartacist neo-Con Liberals all at once! I am reminded by this of the Hippogriff, a mythological creature: part eagle, part lion, part horse and part snake.

The creator of this political monster is supposedly a nefarious character named Chris Cutrone, a charismatic teacher and corrupter of impressionable youth. Before I begin an examination of the intellectual content of Platypus, some remarks about the personal and pedagogical aspects of the project are in order. As someone who knew Chris before he became a Cutronist, I have a somewhat different take on the issue of “Cutronism.” Unlike many of you, for whom the ideas of Platypus, and indeed the existence of Platypus, came as a unified package, I came to them at the same time Chris did, not as a student of his, but simply as someone following a common ideological trajectory. Because Chris’s pedagogy has been so central to the development of Platypus,

my long, non-pedagogical relationship to Chris gives me a better perspective from which to discuss Platypus. While Chris has been central to the development of Platypus, and Platypus would certainly not exist without him, he is not the sole source of its ideas, even though this may seem to be the case because he has been our main spokesman. Does Platypus then have an “ideology?” Where did it come from? The answer to these questions cannot be as straightforward as one would hope. I will use phrases like “we” and “Platypus,” but these are meant to suggest an idealized collective consciousness not the decisions of a specific body or even particular individuals. It represents what I estimate is the basic common understanding of those members of Platypus who have the best understanding of the intellectual foundations of the project. It is certainly not, as I have indicated, an exegesis of “Chris Cutrone thought.” I, for one, have significant disagreements with many of Chris’s formulations. On the other hand, it is not a democratically agreed-upon programme, either. As a political organization, Platypus seeks to be run by a democratically elected leadership, but as an ideological enterprise the pedagogical model predominates. This is a somewhat contradictory and undesirable state of affairs, but is also at present a necessary one even if it gives rise to the notion of Platypus as a Cutronist cult.

Platypus is not a political party and does not have a “line.” Yet it clearly stakes out certain ideological positions. Explaining the tension between these two statements can become as complicated as explaining the particle-wave duality in physics. Precision in certain areas is achieved at the expense of precision in others. Platypus is still a work-in-progress. The questions it seeks to pose are extremely difficult ones that have no easy answers. Some of them may be unanswerable, and Platypus as a project may be a

delusion. But we do not want to pretend that Platypus is merely an open-ended search for truth. Platypus embodies a distinct sensibility and set of ideas that make it unique on the Left, or rather among the ruins of the historic Left. Like our namesake, we are a peculiar creature.

Here I will now try to explore our peculiarities in a somewhat peculiar way. Instead of merely indignantly rejecting the accusations, I will try to seek a limited truth in each of them, and show that in each case a fragment has been mistaken for the totality. We will look at each part of the Hippogriff in turn, and ask what it says about us that we are understood this way.

The first accusation we will consider is that Platypus is a form of Spartacism and that we are crypto-Spartacists. As most of you here will know, the relationship of Platypus to the actual Spartacist League is quite asymmetrical. The Spartacist League has nothing but vitriolic contempt for us. To them, we are “pro-imperialist,” a “talk shop,” et cetera. Certainly, the actual Spartacists do not see us as in any way similar to them. We, though, have considerable respect for the Spartacist League, or at least their historic role. We encourage people to read many of their pamphlets, for example, and treat them as qualitatively different from other sectarian Left groups. How is this asymmetry to be understood? There is a certain type of glass that on one side looks like an ordinary mirror but on the other side is like looking through a transparent but dark-colored window, rather like a gigantic set of sunglasses. It is often used in nursery schools, so that parents can come and observe their children playing and interacting with the other children, but the children do not know they are being observed. The Spartacists are on the mirror-side of the glass, and they cannot see us, because they can only see

reflections of themselves, and we can only be understood as a distorted reflection, people who, as they put it, “use our texts to eviscerate them of revolutionary content.” We, on the other hand, can “see” the Sparts, as through a glass darkly.

If one mentions the Sparts to most Leftists, the response is likely to be that they are “crazy” or “ultra-Leftist sectarians.” In fact, the Sparts are only “crazy” and “sectarian” in a secondary sense, that is, they have been driven into a posture which necessarily *seems* “crazy” and “sectarian,” and the need to maintain that position does ultimately end up making them “crazy” and “sectarian” in reality. But they are certainly not “ultra-Leftist,” and that they are perceived as such by nearly everyone on the Left is a sign of *how far to the Right* most of the “Left” has gone. The tragedy of the Spartacists is that they are hated, not for their actual pathologies, but rather for their non-pathological aspects. It is not their shrillness that is the real reason they are despised, but rather their genuine insights into the nature of political reality. The Sparts understand that the vast majority of the so-called “Left” is really a “fake Left” and that this fact is a fundamental reason why the world is such a miserable place. What the Spartacist league does not account for, however, is why millions and tens of millions of people do not share their views. But like the Red Queen in *Alice through the Looking Glass*, the Sparts run as fast as they can, but only to stay in the same place. This is our fundamental difference with them. Our emphasis is on historical regression. Although they inevitably assume our differences are based on some set of political differences — such as the Iraq war — our actual differences are meta-historical and involve the nature of Marxism, indeed the nature of history itself. It is impossible to express these in the language available to the Spartacists. A mathematical analogy may be useful. The Riemannian notion of curved

space can not be expressed in the language of Euclidean geometry. Things can be curved in space but space itself can not be curved. Curved space to a Euclidean geometer is simply gibberish. On the other hand, from a Riemannian standpoint Euclidean geometry is easy to understand. It is simply the special case where the curvature of space is zero. However, accepting the logical coherence of non-Euclidean geometries still leaves open the question of whether or not they are *true*. For many decades after non-Euclidean geometries had been accepted by mathematicians, it remained an open question as to whether or not *real physical space* was Euclidean or not. Eventually, it was determined by physicists that it is not Euclidean, but that is an empirical fact. Kant was wrong to believe on *a priori* grounds that space was necessarily Euclidean, but equally clearly there is no logical reason for space not to be Euclidean, as it seemed to be for thousands of years. Similarly, although, to the Sparts, a Platypus position is necessarily gibberish, the opposite is not the case, and from our meta-historical standpoint one could raise the question seriously of whether, after all, the Sparts might not be right. I obviously do not think that is so, since if I did I would not be here, but that is no reason to rejoice. Indeed, *if* the Spartacists were right, and Platypus were wrong, *that* would be reason to rejoice, since ours is undoubtedly a darker view than theirs. However, perhaps that last sentence is not quite right. Ours is a darker view than the Sparts to the extent that we believe what we say and they believe what they say. But often the Sparts remind one of soldiers bravely doing their duty, willing to fight to the death even though they know the war is lost. The willingness to express pessimism is not necessarily the best measure of it. Only at their height could the Greeks write great tragedies; in their decadence they could at best produce the pleasant farces of the New Comedy.

If Platypus is not a form of Spartacism, then perhaps we are form of neo-conservatism? Just as no actual Spartacist is going to see us bearing a resemblance to Spartacism, no actual neo-conservative is going to mistake us for neo-conservatives. But the impulse to see us as neocons is highly symptomatic. Like the hatred of the Sparts, the hysteria about the neocons reveals a great deal about the bad faith of the “Left.”

The sense that we are neo-conservatives is not really the sense that we are like Irving Kristol or Paul Wolfowitz but rather that we are like Christopher Hitchens. The anger directed at a Hitchens is the anger directed at an ex-Leftist who insists that it was the Left that betrayed him, rather than he the Left. Just as the Stalinophobia of the late Shachtman, causing him to support Nixon, was at least subjectively a distorted extension of his earlier Trotskyist anti-Stalinism, similarly the impulse that pushes a Hitchens toward supporting U.S. imperialism is revulsion at Leftist support for Islamist reactionaries. The notion that the neocons are “Trotskyists” who have pinned their faith on U.S. imperialism instead of world revolution is, of course, ridiculous, but it contains a germ of truth. It needs, however, to be stood on its head. It is the failure of Trotskyism — that is, revolutionary Marxism — that has made neo-conservatism possible. The neo-conservatives are a distorted reflection of the Left, just as classical conservatism is a response to the rise of the Left. It was the French Revolution that made possible Edmund Burke, but it was the 1960s that paved the way for neo-conservatism.

If the hatred directed at the Spartacists is because they remind the “Left” of its abandonment of revolutionary Marxism, the hysteria about the neocons is because they remind the Left that all political change in the world now happens from the Right. What is most striking about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that military might of U.S.

imperialism is not aimed at Leftist insurgents, as it would have been in the past, but Islamist reactionaries. Merely *saying* that makes many on the Left very uncomfortable, though. To us, the apostasy of a Hitchens is a less clear, less provocative, and — let us say it — less hopeful version of Platypus declaring “The Left is Dead!”

What is interesting to Platypus about the neocons is not their ideas. After all, supporting U.S. imperialism is hardly a strikingly original idea. Rather it is what they illuminate, in a negative sense. It is in so far as neo-conservatism represents an unconscious alienation from the *conservatism* and cynicism of the “Left” we are interested in it. In so far as the response to this alienation is an open embrace of the Right it is uninteresting. We do not need to “support” the neocons — whose policies, of course, are being continued by Obama — or U.S. imperialism, because they and it need the support of Platypus as little as the North Korean “deformed workers’ state” needs the Spartacist League to defend it.

For us, the problem of neo-conservatism is fundamentally about understanding the “Left,” or, in the case of the neocons, “the ex-Left,” as a collection of symptoms. Etymologically, the word “symptom” is related to the word “asymptote.” One might say that Platypus is the study of the asymptotic symptoms of the Left — the recognition of a meeting point, “at infinity,” of symptoms of an historical condition that is poorly represented by the categories of “Left” and “Right.”

Finally, we come to the third part of the political Hippogriff. Perhaps we in Platypus are simply liberals, in the end? Certainly, for the most part we are primarily *talking* to them. It is unlikely we can win people over from, say, the Spartacist League, and it is unlikely we can win over neo-conservatives, whatever hidden affinities we may

have with either or both. Instead, we talk to a mostly soft Left-liberal, rad-lib, anarchoid milieu. Most of these people do not like being called “liberals.” Anarchists think of themselves as revolutionary, as more radical than “conservative” Marxists. To such people, we say that anarchism nowadays is just a dishonest liberalism, a liberalism in denial about its own liberalism. Indeed, we prefer the honest liberals, the open Obama supporters to the anarchists and ISO supporters, et al. Ideally, for Platypus — although it will never happen — all the anarchists, anarchoids, ISO-ers, RCP-ers, et cetera would suddenly vanish in the Rapture, leaving only Obama supporters, the Sparts, and us. In such a context, Platypus would have the least noise to compete with.

Thus, in SDS, an organization in which several Platypus members participated, the role of Platypus was essentially to try to push SDS into a recognition of its own incoherent liberalism. The goal was not to push SDS “to the Left,” but rather into a self-recognition of its own incoherent politics. To imagine one could push SDS “to the Left” would have been to give too much credit to the incoherent liberalism that motivated it. This attitude by Platypus naturally can make us seem to the Right of SDS, as a recent critique of Platypus’s participation in the Naomi Klein/Milton Friedman Institute debate said, in the Spartacist League’s newspaper *Workers Vanguard*, that “Platypus does not even want the crumbs they do.”

But this preference for honest liberalism, over the manifold dishonest varieties, contains yet another danger. Thus, while Platypus certainly wanted (and expected) Obama to win, it did so for the peculiar reason that it saw an Obama victory disorienting to the “bad Left,” and thus politically clarifying. But if Obama’s victory was disorienting to the bad Left, it was equally disorienting to us, since there was an ever-present

temptation to read Obama-ism in a traditional progressive-ist way rather than as *further* regress. The problem posed by liberalism is that what constitutes “revolutionary politics” in the present is not clear. On the one hand, a group like the ISO simply dresses up radical movement-ism as “revolutionary politics,” and, on the other, the Sparts simply understand “revolutionary politics” as the maintenance of correct positions. For us, however, it is not clear that there is any possibility of “revolutionary politics” at all in the present. Thus, we are in the paradoxical position of defending the *necessity* of “revolutionary politics” while simultaneously bracketing the *possibility* of “revolutionary politics.” Clearly, a very thin line separates intellectual honesty from self-delusion, here! Precisely, because the default political background against which we operate is an academic liberalism, our bracketing the possibility of revolutionary politics, despite our insistence on its necessity, as the lodestar of our ideological orientation, nevertheless leaves open constantly the possibility of our simply becoming a “smarter” version of academic liberalism. Despite the high levels anxiety generated by our willingness to entertain “Spartacist” or “neo-conservative” positions, the real ideological danger is, in fact, that we will simply become a smart, slightly eccentric version of academic Leftism, a more serious version of Slavoj Zizek, perhaps. The collegiality of the academic environment we predominantly operate in also acts as an obvious inhibiting force. Fundamentally, academic Leftism, and by default we are a variety of academic Leftism at this point, is deeply apolitical.

The complement of our ambivalent relationship to Spartacism is our relationship to the work of Moishe Postone. As much as the Platypus synthesis can be described as an attempt to synthesize Trotsky and Adorno, it can also be described as an attempt to unite

what is of value in the superficially wildly divergent insights of the Spartacist League and Moishe Postone. To do this, particularly since both the Sparts and Postone are still alive, unlike Trotsky and Adorno, we must, of course, maintain the conceit that we understand both the Sparts and Postone better than they do themselves. This poses two questions. The first is whether the Platypus thesis that both Postone and the Sparts can be understood as wildly divergent symptoms of a common crisis on the Left — indeed, as the most interesting symptoms, as opposed to the myriad uninteresting symptoms — is in fact correct. Most people outside this room including both Postone and the Sparts would dismiss this idea as hogwash or lunacy. The second question is internal to Platypus and concerns the relative weight of these two elements. There are two ways that Platypus members tend to think of the Platypus project ideologically. One group tends to think of it as “Left-Postone-ism,” and the other as “neo-Trotskyism,” and there is considerable tension between these two views, so it is not only a question of whether one accepts the possibility of the synthesis but also the relative weight one assigns to the components.

Of course, this attempt to “marry” Postone and Spartacism may remind some people of the anecdote about George Bernard Shaw. When a famous beauty suggested they marry, saying, “With my beauty and your brains, think what wonderful children we would have,” Shaw replied, “Yes, but what if they had my beauty and your brains.”

Lastly, I will raise the *epistemological* problem. I will state it in its strongest form. Is it possible that we in Platypus will be the greatest misunderstanders of Platypus? Is it possible that we in Platypus cannot understand Platypus? That Platypus is, in essence, a project based on a deep misunderstanding of itself? Yes, it is possible. If we see in the present degenerate state of Leftist politics a collection of symptoms, we must

add that we too are an acute symptom. If the Left is a corpse, we too are part of the stench! We must, though, like Alyosha Karamazov faced with the stench of the rotting Holy Father Zossima, not surrender to our initial impulse of despair with this realization. Thinking through the limitation of our own ability to understand Platypus may, paradoxically, be the best way of understanding Platypus.

The ideological core of our project is based on recognition of past defeats and their cumulative effects, and, as such, we are in constant danger of embracing the necessity of defeat even as we formally deny it. This is a fairly obvious danger. But the deeper problem is what, for lack of a better term, must be called the “opacity” of the present. With each passing generation, the Marxist project becomes more tenuous. Its language becomes more esoteric. It becomes both more elusive and allusive, more akin to religious mysticism than scientific materialism. It is not merely bourgeois ideology that obscures social reality, as for our high-Marxist predecessors, rather, the nature of social reality itself seems to become increasingly opaque, and the decline of Marxism is accompanied by a simultaneous disintegration of bourgeois culture itself, the ground out of which Marxism emerged, as an immanent critique. Post-modernism is the reactionary manifestation of this, the *celebration*, as emancipatory, of an incoherence that is the product of contingent historical defeats. Against post-modernism, we are hyper-modernists. It is not “modernism” that failed, but rather our condition is the expression of the inability — ultimately political — to complete modernity by abolishing capitalism.

Platypus is clearly marked by its moment. Mostly Platypus is a group of quite young people. The oldest contingent in Platypus consists of those of us who were in college in 1989. The youngest, of people born or *in utero* then. None of us directly

experienced the politics of the 1960s. We are a product of late-Bush-ism and early Obama-ism. Culturally, we share in the general exhaustion with baby-boomer-ism and the endless recycling of the 1960s, a decade towards which we have a rather jaundiced and certainly not nostalgic attitude. The youth of Platypus also enables it to historicize the 20th century. This has many advantages since it enables one to sidestep many problems. Nowadays, historians of the 16th and 17th centuries do not feel compelled to take a side in the religious wars between Protestants and Catholics. A modern historian would not generally be interested, as was still the case in the 19th century, whether, say, Wallenstein or Richelieu should be praised or condemned for their actions, but rather would want to understand the context in which their actions occurred. In a similar way, the struggle between Cannon and Shachtman in 1939-40 has achieved a certain distance for Platypus that it certainly has not for a group like the Spartacist League. We do not study the history of the Left to know where we would have been on the barricades, but rather to find the ruptures and subterranean linkages in a problematic history. But, while this attitude has advantages, it poses certain problems, too. I have been speaking so far of the *resistance* to Platypus, the anxiety generated by the project. But what of the opposite? Often, I have found myself wondering at the ease with which Platypus was being accepted. It seemed to be going down too easily with many people. I am made uncomfortable often by the absence of resistance to Platypus, just as I am constantly frustrated by the manifest resistance to the project. I have often suspected that if the Platypus notion of the “death of the Left” were to become widespread, it would signal the failure of Platypus, not its success, since it would mean only that the notion “the Left is dead” had lost its provocative quality, and thus been naturalized as fact.

Trying to understand this paradox, I have been led to a curious and rather provocative analogy. Radical political theory in our time reminds me of pornography. If Marcuse in the 1960s offered the notion of “repressive tolerance,” we might offer, by contrast, a notion of “repressive transgression.” Radical political thought nowadays is constantly stressing its naughtiness, but such naughtiness, like pornography, only ends up reinforcing what it supposedly resists. It would clearly be a mistake to imagine that societies that tolerate, produce, and consume pornography are more sexually liberated than societies that try to repress it. On the contrary, the impulse to produce and consume pornography and to repress it are aspects of the same problem. Pornography and puritanism are twins, not opposites. Pornography is ultimately only about sex in the same way music is about sound. Sex is merely the medium through which a condition of unfreedom is mirrored. As such pornography is inherently a rightwing phenomenon. Can one imagine a pornmovie trying to express revolutionary sentiments? Only as parody. By contrast, pornography created deliberately as fascist propaganda is extremely easy to imagine. Yet pornography is at the same time ambiguous. One might say that it is a frozen utopian longing, and the denial of that longing, simultaneously. And just as sado-masochistic role playing is not equivalent to the desire to be an actual master or an actual slave, so one should not expect that a fantasy of unlimited freedom is a genuine desire for it.

About a month ago, on a wall in Neve Tzedek, a hipster neighborhood in south Tel Aviv, I read a graffito that said, “If you are bored, you are already resisting the system.” The image that came to mind was of someone watching a pornmovie and being utterly, unbearably bored by it, but unable, for some reason, to turn it off and do

something else. Perhaps this person would continue to hope that the movie would become titillating. Perhaps a nostalgia for a time when pornography was still arousing would continue to sustain viewing. Or, perhaps the excruciating boredom would simply be accepted, masochistically, as suitable punishment for the guilt of craving pornography in the first place? Or perhaps viewing would be sustained by the thought that everything else was equally boring and obscene, and that the whole world is just bad pornography, anyway. Like pornography, the Left is most honest when it is bored with itself.

Unlike pornography, psychoanalysis offers a scarier version of freedom. We in Platypus have taken on a role of psychoanalysts of the “Left.” We seek to dig up and understand repressed memories in order to overcome their debilitating effect. Platypus is, like psychoanalysis, a “talking cure.” We are, as we are accused of being, a “talk shop.” Such an approach runs the risk of seeming — and perhaps becoming — *nothing but* talk. Certainly, it seems at odds with the heroic traditions of the classical Left we admire, which sought to radically *transform* the world. Is Platypus, then, a reversion to those philosophers who “sought merely to interpret the world?” No.

Capitalism is unique in human history, as the only social system to produce the “Left.” For us, both the future of humanity and the key to understanding its past lie in the now-uncertain fate of this small fragment of capitalist modernity. Like our predecessors on the classical Left, we see no future for humanity in a decaying capitalism. Unlike them, we see our main immediate task as a critique of the Left. Our response is historically contingent. If we were living in 1909 instead of 2009, this would not have been our diagnosis.

As I have indicated, such an approach is fraught with ambiguity, and, as I have shown, the more one examines these ambiguities, the more complicated their ambiguity becomes. Our Marxism is a bridge between highly “orthodox” and intensely “revisionist” readings, and we are suspended above a deep, fog-shrouded abyss whose bottom we cannot see.

But probably the deepest and most perplexing of all our ambiguities, both to ourselves and others, is that, although Platypus is itself a response to generations of defeats, and, as such, suffused with despair, it is also a project based on profound hopefulness.