

re thinking

rethinking

marxism:

A report from the "Marxism in the New World Order: Crises & Possibilities Conference"

by
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Intro:

The post-cold war era is a tangled web of global tensions, xenophobia, racist and populist movements, economic uncertainties, and an unchallenged American hegemony that is deeply riven and unsure of its capacities or willingness to lead. It is a time, as Gramsci put it during the rise of European Fascism, "when the old is dying and the new cannot be born." In this interregnum many strange things can happen. While American politicians of both parties are claiming the birth of a New World Order, other critics are bleakly announcing the emergence of a protracted crisis of global capitalism. No one, and certainly no-one on the left, seems to have ready answers about how to meet the upcoming challenges, though there is room for some guarded optimism.

No longer weighed down by the bogeymen of the Soviet Union, many western leftists, and in particular American Marxists, find themselves in a unique position to reconsider the rich legacy of their intellectual and political traditions. Over the past 40 years Marxism has expanded from a focused economic theory of social change into a much wider amalgam of theoretical discourses and new social movements. Marxism has continued to provide one of the richest assemblages of theory, experience and talent for the new social movements of feminism, post-colonial resistance, anti-racism, AIDS activism, and the ecology movements. There is more than a glimmer of hope that a new Marxist thinking, decentered and more attuned to the breadth of contemporary political struggles, can provide the critical thrust for a radical democratic coalition and new types of progressive politics.

Marxism in the New World Order: Crises and Possibilities, a three day conference sponsored by the journal *Rethinking Marxism* which featured more than 140 panels, roundtables,

exhibits, and three plenaries, captured some of the eclecticism of current Marxist thinking and wrestled with the difficult questions of the present global crisis. Held on the campus of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the conference brought together over 2,000 leftist economists, cultural critics, historians, philosophers and activists, nearly double the number of participants at the first conference three years ago. It was an opportunity for progressive intellectuals to take stock of what they are doing in their own cultural and political work, to be reminded afresh that there are possibilities for building a social order *not* based on exploitation and class oppression, and to keep alive and continue to evaluate and learn from the history of socialism. The global contributions of socialism have been deeply significant and emancipatory, and if a counter-hegemonic political culture is to be sustained, one cannot forget the experience of previous generations.

Antonio Collari, one of the conference organizers, stressed that careful attention was paid "to getting as many voices heard as possi-

ble and to organizing a rich diversity of outlooks." Nevertheless, the contradictory position of a Marxist movement within the United States was quite glaring. Many of the sessions included a mixture of notable and less well-known critics and activists. The bulk of the presenters were academics with a good sprinkling of cultural workers but relatively few people who were, primarily, community and labour activists or members of the organized left. A considerable number of Canadians were there: Leo Panitch, Pat Armstrong, Alex Wilson, Greg Albo, Marie-Christine Leps, and Norman Feltes all presented papers. Largely because in the United States Marxism is closely bound to academia, sessions on theory, ranging from Althusser to Zizek, were prominent. On balance, however, the conference was not as esoteric as most academic meetings. The discussions were accessible and most of the speakers dealt with specific cultural and political themes. And throughout the conference



The message was quite clear that class, that often maligned term in the discourse of contemporary theory, has not disappeared either as an agent of history or as an important catalyst for social change, though the definition has been modified by new political realities.

From Old Left to New Left

The difficulties that the left faces in the 90s have some of their roots in the political and cultural transformations that have taken place since 1968. There is nothing magical about the year 1968 — in fact it has its own built-in problems of periodization — but it does provide a useful marker for discussing the shifts that occurred between the Old Left and the New (which are in themselves somewhat totalizing categories), and for identifying some of the themes and problems that have since become evident. Of all the speakers in the plenary sessions it was, perhaps predictably, Immanuel Wallerstein who took it upon himself to provide a broad analysis of this transition. But nearly all the speakers alluded to or relied on the implicit assumptions of this shift and the consequences it had on Marxist political organizing and theoretical development.

According to the generally accepted narrative, by the end of the 60s the New Left had successfully challenged the hardened ideas of the Old Left. As the failure of socialism in the Soviet Union became apparent, many western Marxists questioned the wisdom of first taking state power and later transforming society without wider cultural and political preparation. While vanguardism remained rooted in a few increasingly marginal Marxist parties in the west many people on the left had become suspicious of centralized control and the idea that a single cohesive party should organize political activity. As a consequence of the cultural and political upheavals of the 60s a New Left politics gradually emerged that was not only more democratic and less centrally controlled but decidedly more critical of the traditional tenets of Marxism. There was a growing confidence that democracy was profoundly anti-capitalist and indeed a revolutionary rather than merely a bourgeois idea that blocked revolutionary action. Economic production, which was often touted as the essential prerequisite for socialist construction, was soundly criticized by new emerging political groups in terms of environmental issues and its commodification of everyday life. At the same time, faith in science as the foundation of a socialist utopia gave way to an emerging skepticism about science and the notion of a new complex relationship between scientific and technological determinism on the one hand, and free will on the other.

The chief transformation in Marxist thinking, however, came about with the reformulation of the idea that conflict between capital and labour is fundamental, while other conflicts based on gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality are secondary and derivative. By the end of the 70s this central argument was no longer tenable. Economist Richard Wolff underscored this point during his plenary talk: "the traditional Marxist focus on class and the exploitation and undemocratic appropriation of surplus by a tiny minority must now be seen more or less as one perspective that includes others." Within contemporary Marxism it is now widely recognised that the current emphases on anti-racism,

feminism and subaltern studies are generating different knowledges and irreducibly different ways of making sense of the world, and that these social movements are integral to the equation of social change.

But if the New Left is now multifaceted it is also less coherent. Ever since 1968, argued Wallerstein, there have been an evolving panoply of parties and what he calls anti-systemic movements: the women's movement, anti-racist struggles and gay and lesbian liberation among them. In the 1980s in the United States there was an attempt to create a "Rainbow Coalition" of such movements, but very little came of it as Jessie Jackson's presidential campaign floundered, despite the gains outlined by Vincente Navarro in the final plenary. These movements, while successful in their attacks on the premises of the Old Left, have often fallen short of providing strong alternative strategies and vision. As we write this, the ability of the various autonomous forces on the left to consolidate is being threatened by other events. In the 1990s, in the midst of an economic recession, we are witnessing the spread of new movements which are racist, nationalist and populist and which often use themes and language that overlap with those of the anti-systemic movements. There is enormous risk of political confusion. So in essence we are, according to Wallerstein, "exhausted and eclectic, with no visible concept of a revolution, with new anti-systemic movements that are vigorous but with a narrower strategic vision, while new racist and populist movements are growing in strength."

The call for coalition building can be understood and accepted intellectually by many socialists, yet the task is by no means simple. Ralph Miliband struck a responsive chord when he suggested that what prevents the left from making lasting alliances is a deep sense of skepticism and cynicism about the possibility of a new social order. The culture of the left, Miliband argued, is profoundly dispirited. It is the first time since the French Revolution that so few western leftists have believed in the idea of social transformation. The intellectual climate seems to be one of despair, in which many people either accept Jean-Francois Lyotard's discouraging idea that metanarratives are dead, illusionary and sinister, or embrace the more explicitly conservative view of Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis that liberal and market capitalism is the highest level human society can reach and hence the terminus of history. Variations on the "end of ideology" theme have been internalised by many socialists and have become, Miliband argued, "the shameful little secret of the left." The retreat that we have witnessed in the left is unwarranted. Nor should we be overwhelmed with pessimism by the rise of neo-fascism in the west. These groups continue to be a small minority irredeemably lost to progressive movements. While it is true that some may have sympathies or may passively support them, on the whole, most people will not support parties or groups committed to insurrectionary projects.

Nearly all the speakers exhorted the audience not to forget that we live in a capitalist system which is inherently based on domination and exploitation. For all its democratic claims, this is a system that is fundamentally oligarchic, but which can take democratic forms in the sense that social pressure from below has helped to push back the frontiers of exploitation. The socialist project, as Miliband in particular reminded his listeners, must regain its confidence and spirit

by continually pushing for the radical extension of bourgeois democracy. Socialism is both reformist and revolutionary, demanding both an extension of democratic rights and a new economic equality. Ultimately, concluded Miliband, supporting the ideas of other speakers, socialists must demand the radical reorganization of the economy in the direction of a mixed economy with a predominantly public sector and a regulated private sector, for there can be no freedom without economic justice.

African-American activist and critic Manning Marable echoed these sentiments and contributed other explanations for the inability of the left to support and sustain a broad coalition for democratic change. He quite correctly pointed out that the building of a radical democracy will fail, and will deserve to fail, unless progressives squarely confront the issue of race. In the United States today, argued Marable, nearly 30% of the population is either Latino, Native American, African-American or Asian-American. By the middle of the 21st century over half of the population of the United States will consist of people of colour. Marable pointedly asked the audience why, given this basic reality, most socialist organizations have consistently failed to attract these constituencies and why most whites who consider themselves Marxists have little or no intimate contact with grass-roots organizing efforts among inner-city working people, the poor and the homeless.

The intricacies and complexities of developing both local and global anti-hegemonic alliances were further examined by Gayatri Spivak from a subaltern perspective. Post-colonial development continues the work that colonial racism began in previous generations. What we see today in the developing world is a new form of re-colonialization based on the principle of the "free" market and export-driven economies. For many developing countries, argued Spivak, the state is unable to resist the pressures of the World Bank or the interests of multinationals. Consequently, the new social movements within the Third World are learning the importance of bypassing the state and building a new internationalism. Her examples here were what she termed "non-Eurocentric feminists," and ecological and other progressive movements which confront the issues that divide people because of their different economic and cultural locations.

Once again the terms of a political alliance among these groups are extremely complex and fragile. Population control and environmental protection, for instance, mean radically different things and are tied to different political interests, discourses and knowledges in the west than in subaltern nations. Thus, the political desires of subaltern groups for self-sufficient economic development cannot be identified with the desires and interests of the green movements in the west and are on occasion radically opposed to them. Similarly, the struggles of western feminist movements for abortion and reproductive rights cannot be separated from the more ominous shadow of enforced population control in the Third World. Spivak pointed out that the "consumption explosion" in the USA was far more dangerous than any "population explosion" elsewhere, and went on to critique the rights-based discourse of the liberal strain of the pro-choice movement, which she rejected in favour of a model of freedom as political means rather than as some nebulous and ever-retreating "end." Spivak could be ques-

tioned here for seeming to conflate western women into one (privileged) group, for certainly women of colour and poor and working-class women here in North America have been equally critical of the emptiness of the liberal model of "choice." The debates about political strategies around reproductive rights and freedoms, and reproductive technologies, are only going to intensify. Nevertheless, Spivak's use of FINRRAGE (Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering) as an example of a new kind of non-hierarchical international political organizing, the focus of which is not to take, and in effect replicate, state power, but to diffuse it, was evocative.

Many of the speakers in the three plenary sessions took the debate in different directions. The feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham talked about what feminists can reclaim from Marxism — its commitment to social justice, its large vision of social change and its thorough historical analysis — and also about what Marx missed and what Marxists have been slow to recover: namely, the various feminist contributions to socialism. The modern feminist movements in the past two decades have struggled with the tensions between self-emancipation and social emancipation. Yet these debates have been going on within the largely forgotten history of feminist socialism for over 100 years and are linked with women's knowledge that their subordination is internalised and their oppression closely tied to the under-examined area of sexuality and the economic organization of the household. For women, socialism has been experienced historically as a deeply transformative experience, but they have also had to contend with an entrenched male thinking that marginalized their contributions and confined them to issues of reproduction while men took care of the more "important" problem of production.

While Rowbotham exhorted Marxists to reclaim the buried experiences of socialist feminists, it was Belgian Marxist Ernest Mandel who gave the most rousing speech of the conference and brought the audience to its feet with thunderous applause and fists clenched in solidarity. Mandel is a veteran of many important battles in the movement, which, as he reminded everyone, is about social justice, equality and fundamental liberty. These are the themes, he declared, that are central to Marxism and that need to be restated and reclaimed.

Crises and Possibilities

MARXISM in the New World Order

Daily Sessions

The more traditional economic and historical concerns of Marxists were clearly evident, but the conference was notable for its breadth of attention to social movements and cultural issues. The latter were nicely supplemented by two art exhibits, "This Is My Body: This Is My Blood," about the gendered, class- and race-encoded body as a contested



political site, and "ReSituations: A detour into the throbbing heart of the mall," as well as by an array of films and videos such as Pratibha Parmar's *Khush* and *A Place of Rage*, Tony Buba's work on African-American steelworkers, and Laura Kipnis's *Marx: The video*.

There was a whole series of sessions on sexuality and queer studies with papers by Eve Sedgwick on "Queer Performativity" in which she explored the "queer" body as a site of unusable social meaning, and Cindy Patton on AIDS discourse. Rosemary Hennessy challenged the left for its silence on queer theory; she critiqued Judith Butler and others who reduce queerness to signifying play and narrative strategies, and looked to a solidly materialist queer theory which challenges the bourgeois subject, but which also comes to terms with patriarchy and capitalism. Meredith Michaels explored the possibilities reproductive technologies such as surrogacy may hold, if women can appropriate them, for assisting in the deconstruction of the heterosexual nuclear family. There were also a number of papers which dealt with sexuality in history: Chrys Ingraham on the Comstock Act of 1873, in which she spoke of middle-class interests in working-class reproduction; Michelle Barale's analysis of the rhetorical strategies of 1950s lesbian pulp novel cover art; and Barbara Epstein and Jennifer Terry, who each examined the marginalized ways in which homosexuality was constructed in the 1950s and 60s, in the popular media and in dominant psychological discourse, respectively.

There were a number of sessions on materialist literary criticism, as well as cultural studies and popular culture. Alan Wald's presentation in the session "Cultural Studies in Late Capitalism" was a very good example of the kind of exciting work that can be done in intellectual history. Arguing that cultural resistance is a good indicator of the strengths and weaknesses of emancipatory movements, Wald traced the various careers and work of a number of now half-forgotten working class, ethnic, gay and lesbian American leftist writers of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Writers such as Howard Fast, Pietro di Donato, James T. Ferrel, Tilly Olsen, Dorothy Doyle and Josephine Herbst not only contributed to an original non-doctrinaire proletarian literature that interrogated dominant representations, but are themselves inspiring figures whose work — some of it avowedly feminist and anti-racist — recorded the excluded memories and experiences of an oppositional left culture. Wald ended his talk with a critique of contemporary cultural studies for not being sufficiently interested in the cultural history of the American left. Barbara Harlow continued the theme of resistance literature by focussing on the current Irish literary and political scene. During discussion period she also pointed to the shortcomings of British cultural studies for paying scant attention to manifestations of Irish cultural resistance and Irish anti-colonial struggle. Both Harlow and Wald emphasized that there are some counter-productive tendencies in contemporary cultural studies: namely, its emphasis on theoretical abstraction and its lack of historical rootedness and empirical research. There were also several sessions on ecological issues — in some ways the most salient indication of a true paradigm shift on the left — with papers by Alex Wilson and Andrew Ross which examined our uses of the environment in refreshingly concrete and historicized ways.

On the second day of the conference there was a

wide-ranging roundtable, "The History of Modern Feminism," which included Sheila Rowbotham, Lourdes Beneria, Joy James, Cynthia Halpern, Barbara Joseph, Rosalyn Baxandall and Harriet Fraad. The panel raised important questions, even if they could not be fully answered, about different tendencies in feminism, the impact of Third World women's movements and questions of race and ethnicity on Western feminism, the relationship of feminism to other social movements and to socialism, and the integration of different oppressions, race, gender and class, despite the traditional foregrounding of the latter on the left.

What's Left? The New Internationalism.

The conference left us with a sense that Marxists in North America are living through a problematic historical moment that is simultaneously depressing, challenging and liberating. Many of the speakers stressed that a renewed commitment to internationalism is a crucial part of the solution. There are many problems that confront us today that cannot be addressed at the level of the nation-state, but must be articulated globally and require the active participation of socialists and progressives alike. Public health issues such as AIDS require international coordination and so must be addressed with a global strategy in mind. Women's oppression, as Sheila Rowbotham and Gayatri Spivak made clear, must also be seen within a complex structure of power, property and privilege. Women have a long history of resistance against systematic subordination, but their oppression is tied to global structures and must be perceived in international terms. Critical environmental problems such as the dangers of nuclear power and waste, acid rain, the depletion of the ozone layer and water and air pollution need to be linked by leftists with the labour movement, and it must be made clear that the export of manufacturing jobs and industries to developing countries is motivated not just by corporate desire for lower wages and higher profits, but by the wish to avoid even minimal pollution control and health and safety standards.

Finally, the basic strategy for building socialism, either in the United States or Canada, is inextricably linked with the deeper currents of the social protest movements: the struggles of trade unionists, gay and lesbian activists, peoples of colour, environmentalists, feminists, native peoples and the dispossessed. For the near future, as Manning Marable eloquently argued, the essential debate will not be between socialism and capitalism, but with the character and content of the capitalist social order. Progressives and Marxists should seek to strengthen their own counter-hegemonic movements in order to resist both the systemic racism and the new-found influence of xenophobic groupings. Such a strategy may not be "socialism" and it does have its drawbacks, rooted in "particularism" as Wallerstein pointed out, but it can provide the necessary bridge to the site from which a new socialism, which may take a form inconceivable to us now, can emerge.

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Browsing the Apparatus: homosexuality, classification, power/knowledge

By Nicholas Packwood

"Browsing" can be a dilettante's pursuit. It can also be a tactic of resistance. It is such an act in its negotiation of the territory of regular categories by extraordinary means. In browsing we have decided to disregard the elaborate systems by which knowledge is usually presented to us. In browsing we need have no specific purpose beyond our own enjoyment. We allow ourselves the luxury of surprise. "What is this?" "Who could have imagined we might find this here?"

I was browsing recently in the Maxwell MacOdrum Library when I had a nasty surprise. Everything that MacOdrum had to say about "homosexuality" seemed to sit on the shelves between everything it had to say about sex crimes on the one hand and prostitution on the other. This is not an accidental (dis)placement.

Ours is still a society which has very specific and unflattering ideas about homosexuality. My browsing did not reveal anything to contradict these constructions. Gay men, after all, are commonly held to be notorious for selling their bodies and for tampering with children.