
EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

IN THIS ISSUE

We begin this time with an entry in the long-standing debate in general historical materialist theory, concerning the precise nature of the primacy of the productive forces and of the interaction between forces and relations of production. Luke Lattansi-Silveus, in his “Societal Selection and Historical Materialism,” adopts the standpoint of the Competitive Primacy position of Alan Carling and others, which seeks to improve upon the widely criticized Intentional Primacy view propounded by G. A. Cohen in the latter’s seminal *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* (1978). Competitive Primacy appeals to

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S&S does not adhere to any particular school of contemporary Marxist discussion, and does not attempt to define precise boundaries for Marxism. It does encourage respectful attention to the entire Marxist tradition, as well as to cutting-edge tools and concepts from the present-day social science literatures.

Editorial correspondence: see “Instructions to Contributors,” inside back cover.

a broad analogy with Darwinian natural selection: People don't intentionally choose superior productive forces — or, indeed, relations — but when these appear randomly and have unintended beneficial impacts on the societies where that happens, this leads to their eventual predominance. Lattansi-Silveus insists, however, that the role of imitation must be addressed and incorporated into the theory, along with other interrogations that strengthen and enrich the Competitive framework.

Continuing the critical inquiry that began with our Special Issue, “Red on Black: Marxist Encounters with Anarchism” (April 2015), Gerald Meyer (“Marxism and Anarchism: Their Contradictions”) offers a broad survey of anarchist theory and practice, from the 19th century to the present. He concludes with a strong affirmation of the general Marxist position: anarchism is essentially the product of early and superficial experience, and Marxist movements across the world are its necessary transcendence. However, anarchism has been strong in certain areas of cultural development and community-based organization, areas where Marxism has had significant weaknesses; “the insertion of a thoroughly democratic, humane ethos, to some large extent derived from anarchist traditions, into a reconstituted movement . . . together with Marxist method and theory and the experience of the largely self-defeated socialist bloc, offers genuine hope for a revival of a left capable of surpassing capitalism.”

Political economist Paddy Quick, in her study “Labor Power: A ‘Peculiar’ Commodity,” cross-interrogates a long-standing issue at the heart of Marx’s analysis of capitalism — the nature of labor power and the role of its purchase and sale in the generation of surplus value — with the thorny matter of household production, women’s labor therein, and the nature of women’s oppression. The implicit but decisive key assumption is that these two traditions require each other in order for each to progress. Careful re-development of the concepts and categories needed for this cross-interrogation leads to new insights into capitalist prehistory, the contradictory impacts of recent trends in advanced capitalist countries on the position of women and the pressures placed on the household, and much else. Quick’s study is bound to generate responses along several different lines of Marxist inquiry.

Herbert Marcuse has long been a central figure both in classical Frankfurt School Critical Theory and in the 1960s New Left in the United States, as his trajectory bridged both worlds. Now author Marcial González returns to this vast topic, examining an early work (*Reason and Revolution*, 1941) and a later one (*One-Dimensional Man*, 1964). He discovers an unmistakable trend, and one that represents movement away from the dialectic, class and capitalism and toward “techno-industrial” society, non-class agency, and eclectic indeterminism. Ironically, perhaps, the critical spotlight now needs to be turned toward one-dimensionality in the later work of one of the original “critical” thinkers, whose contributions remain worthy of continuing study.

Finally, we present Bruce E. Parry's review article on Anwar Shaikh's important new book, *Capitalism: Competition, Conflict, Crises*. Shaikh's book represents a lifetime of work on the theory and reality (he is an excellent empirical researcher as well as a developer of theory) of accumulation, profit, crisis, competition, value, and many other aspects of the capitalist totality. We encourage others to write in about the many contributions of the book, as part of the ongoing debate that is the normal science practiced in the Marxist tradition.

MARXISM IN OUR TIME

Notes from the Editor

SCIENCE FICTION AS CONCENTRATED HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Some readers may recall an "Editorial Perspectives" essay from Summer 2001, called "Blink of an Eye." This was the title of a *Star Trek: Voyager* episode: the crew encounter a planet, with "humanoid" inhabitants, on which time passes more rapidly than elsewhere in the universe. The *Voyager* crew are therefore able to watch in real time as a primitive civilization passes through developmental stages, finally emerging into technological and rational mastery of its own natural and social environment — a sort of thought experiment in historical materialist understanding of social development.

Well, (some of) the same folks are back, this time in a new series, *The Orville*, which has just (at this writing, January 2018) concluded its first season on Fox (yes, Fox!). The *Orville* is a spaceship of the early 24th century, staffed by a human/non-human crew of peaceful explorers, very much in the Gene Roddenberry *Star Trek* tradition. A distinctive, and utterly delightful, innovation over previous space-explorer series is that these space travelers talk, and act, on impulse and whim, joking and interacting in a colloquial (and occasionally sexual) manner (as people do), rather than in the more stilted style of earlier SF series of the same type.

The season finale aired on December 7 last year and is unhelpfully titled "Mad Idolatry" (Seth McFarlane, executive producer and writer, Brannon Braga, executive producer; McFarlane also plays the *Orville's* captain, Ed Mercer). The ship comes across an inhabited planet that follows a "multi-phasic" orbit in two universes, emerging into "our" universe for brief periods only to disappear again into the other one. The kicker

is that time, as in the older *Voyager* episode, passes differently in the two universes, so that when the planet disappears from our space and re-enters it later, 700 years have passed on the planet, while only 11 days have passed in the *Orville's* time frame.¹

The captain's second-in-command, Commander Kelly Grayson, leads an away team to explore the planet.² The team reports back that the people there are at what we earthlings would call the Bronze Age stage of civilization, with settlement confined to small villages. The Union of Planets has a strict policy of non-contact with alien peoples at primitive levels of cultural development, but Cdr. Grayson inadvertently violates this principle when she comes to the aid of a small girl who has fallen and injured herself. The Cdr. uses a 24th-century device to heal the child's wound, and then quickly departs. But the girl's eyes follow her reverently, as she pronounces the name: "*Kel-ly*."

Eleven days later, after the planet has cycled out into the other universe and returned, the *Orville* crew discovers, to their amazement, the remarkable feature of the time discrepancy: in the same spot as Cdr. Grayson's earlier encounter, there is now the equivalent of a 14th-century city. They also discover, to their horror (particularly Kelly's), that the people worship a God named "Kelly," who had performed the "Great Healing" 700 years ago. The Kelly religion is cruel and oppressive: "deniers" are crucified by the roadside; accused thieves are cut, and told that if they are innocent "'The Great and Mighty Kelly' will heal them"; children are admonished: "If you don't behave, Kelly will get you!" The Union [of Planets] Admiral who is Capt. Mercer's direct superior is adamant: leave these people alone, and let them solve their own problems! But Kelly is beset with guilt, blaming herself for the pain and suffering she has caused. The crew, Mercer included, decide to violate the Admiral's order and return to the planet to try to fix the situation.

They enter the main religious temple, with a prominent statue of Kelly at the entrance, in her Union starship uniform. Inside, the supreme leader, Valondis, is proclaiming punishment for a boy who has stolen some fruit, to feed his hungry family. As the boy is dragged away to be cut, Kelly steps forward, removes her outer cloak, and reveals herself. Valondis and his minions immediately prostrate themselves before her. He says: "You are Healer of Men, the Divine Hand of the Heavens, God of All Creation."³ He continues:

- 1 For readers not accustomed to the genre: this is where a healthy dose of suspension of doubt is helpful; remember the "F" in "SF." And, as with "Blink of an Eye," it helps if you don't try to follow the math too closely.
- 2 Captain Mercer and Commander Grayson are in a steamy but troubled personal relationship. For details, check *On Demand* or re-runs.
- 3 At this point, one member of the away team, near the back, whispers to her colleague: "Man, this guy'd make the perfect boyfriend." Just a taste of the flavor of *The Orville* dialog.

“700 years ago you healed a young girl with your touch! I have waited so long for Your return!”⁴ Kelly replies that this is all a huge misunderstanding; she had not healed with her hands, but rather with a healing device, a tool, an advanced machine, “just like the ploughs you use on your fields.” She cuts and heals her own hand, to demonstrate. Valondis says: “I have seen you bleed. A God does not bleed.” She then has Valondis take the device and do the same on his own hand. She notes that her people travel differently in time, explaining the lapse of 700 years. “Spread the word to your people. Kelly does not deserve your worship.” As they depart, Valondis proclaims: “I wish you good journeys, Kelly the Traveler!”

After the *Orville* away team returns to their ship, Valondis reflects on all this. He is confused, but finds Kelly’s rational explanation convincing, and resolves to go to the people with the truth about this encounter. One of his underlings in the religious hierarchy tries to dissuade him: “The people worship Kelly, Sire, but they also fear her. And as we are the Guardians of the Word of Kelly, they fear us. If that ends, there will be chaos.” Valondis does not relent, saying: “The truth cannot be compromised. The people must decide.” At this point, his associate produces a knife from within his robes and stabs Valondis in the back, killing him! Here we see systems of organized ideological control in the service of reproduction of class power. (But this is my language, not Valondis’ or Seth McFarlane’s.)

The *Orville* team waits another 11 days for the planet to return. Hopefully, they scan for signs that the Kelly cult has disappeared over the most recent seven centuries. Alas, this (as we already know, from Valondis’ death) is not the case. The people on the planet now have artificial satellites and computer technology. Isaac — an artificial life form who is the *Orville*’s Science Officer — scans the surface, and discovers many mentions of Kelly. There is a televangelist, haranguing a huge audience of worshipers and pontificating about “The Great Kelly.” There is a CNN-like debate on TV: “The Kelly religion has no place in the public schools”; “How can you have education without the greatest truths of all?” There is a news report on civil war and violence breaking out over the authority of the Kelly Temples.

Kelly (the real one) says: “What if I stayed behind, to get them out of the mess that I got them into?” Captain Mercer: “No! You will die there! And you might even be locked up in an insane asylum!”⁵ Isaac (the android) has a

- 4 Readers may be wondering how the *Orville* crew and the planet’s inhabitants can even communicate. *Star Trek* got around this one by means of a device called a “universal translator,” a sort of 23rd-century Google Translate gizmo. In this case, however, we have a planet that spends most of its time in an alternate universe, and no translation technology is even evident. Also, everyone in at least two universes, apparently, speaks perfect English. Again, in the interest of uncovering the underlying message of the parable, it is perhaps not recommended to examine the details too closely.
- 5 Recall that the Captain’s concern for Kelly is not entirely disinterested.

helpful suggestion: "Send me down instead. Passage of time has no meaning for me." And so they do.

One more 11-day cycle passes. The planet reemerges into view. Immediately, a space ship rises from the surface and heads toward the *Orville*. Another *Orville* crew member, Alara Kitan, reports from the Communications station: "They are asking permission to come aboard." Mercer: "Granted." Two representatives of the planet's society beam aboard the *Orville*, along with Isaac. They say: "We have come to return your artificial life form to you." Kelly thanks Isaac profusely, but he replies that he didn't have to do anything; he just had the great pleasure of observing a society evolving, "from the computer age to the age of quantum drive." The visitors explain: "We are now a space-faring civilization. We had to go through inevitable cultural growing pains." To Kelly, they insist: "We had to wait for the phasing to occur before we could finally meet you. You are not to blame for anything. If you had not been there, the mythology would have found another face. Have faith in reason, discovery and the endurance of the logical mind."

"Inevitable cultural growing pains." "The mythology would have found another face." I think you can see where this is going.

The episode is remarkably progressive: advance of knowledge brings societies through periods of social antagonism and conflict, and (eventually) into the realm of "reason." Progress consists in the dispersal of ignorance, but while it exists ignorance breeds coercion and violence, in the name of religion. Knowledge as such is the sufficient basis for harmonious social relations and development. Anathema though all this would be to the average Fox News viewer, it is essentially idealist: power, wealth and authority emerge as the result of insufficient ideological development, rather than the other way around.⁶

But the episode also reveals the power of science fiction to "lay bare" essential social relations and realities. Just as capitalist-dominated media outlets, despite their primary functional task of ideological control in the interest of reproducing the existing social arrangements, can turn out to be contested terrain on which content may appear with progressive, even revolutionary, implications, so the SF genre can sometimes escape from the technological determinism and dystopian dogmatism that often characterize it, to produce imaginary parables that raise up hopes for the ultimate triumph of democracy, reason, and human potential.

D. L.

6 "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" — Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Preface.