
EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

IN THIS ISSUE

For many people in the S&S community, Lenin remains crucial to the onward development of Marxist thought — not as a sacred figure, any more than Marx and Engels themselves, but as a central one, in the sense that all roads from Marx and Engels pass through Lenin’s contributions to the revolutionary–scientific project. In the spirit of previous work in and from the Marxist–feminist tradition, especially that of Lise Vogel, author Joe Pate-man (“V. I. Lenin on the ‘Woman Question’”) revisits Lenin’s thinking on the women’s rights movement and its relation to socialism, both before and

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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.

after revolution. Much of this has been noted before, but it is brought together here in a highly systematic way, and one that both celebrates Lenin's near-uniqueness (and his superior vision compared to many of his contemporaries), and reveals still-existing weaknesses. Placed in the context of S&S' continuing work within the Marxist–feminist enterprise, Pateman's study might well be read in connection with "Intersectionality: A Symposium" (S&S, January 2018).

We have published, in recent issues, several critical studies of the transnational capitalist class (TCC) thesis, developed in S&S and elsewhere by its proponents William Robinson, Jerry Harris, Leslie Sklair and others (see, e.g., David Chen, "Rethinking Globalization and the Transnational Capitalist Class," S&S, January 2021). Now Harris ("Global Capitalism and the Battle for Hegemony") returns to the topic. Harris is at pains to differentiate the TCC approach from naive conceptions of globalization ("globaloney") and assertions of the complete disappearance of nation–states. Fractions of the TCC, including a division between green reformism and military authoritarianism, play out in various ways, including relations to various national states. These are distinct globalizing projects, not simple conflicts among states, taken as unanalyzed units of analysis. Harris also uses the TCC framework to explore the hot contemporary question of the balance of power between China and the United States in today's world.

The name Joseph Dietzgen is not widely known outside of Marxist circles. Dietzgen was a 19th-century German printer who is thought to have been the first to use the term "dialectical materialism." Eric-John Russell's study, "Dialectic in the Hands of a Handwerker: Joseph Dietzgen and the Humble Beginnings of Dialectical Materialism," goes beyond Marx and Engels' warm evaluation of Dietzgen's work to an actual detailed exegesis of that work, in particular Dietzgen's *The Nature of the Human Brainwork: An Introduction to Dialectics*. He concludes that this work is essentially empiricist, an early exemplar of present-day inductivist positivism, despite its author's early connection to the founders of Marxism. Russell also sees Dietzgen as a forerunner of "Diamat . . . a formal schematism" that renders Marxism as "a positive science and systematic philosophy of nature, but also as a theory of linear and deterministic historical change and progress."

In our April 2020 issue, David Laibman presented his study of "China: In the Perspective of Historical Materialism." The current issue features a Symposium, "Historical Materialism and China Today," in which three participants, Ying Chen, Barbara Foley, and Zhun Xu (all, as it happens, members of S&S' Editorial Board) welcome Laibman's effort to apply historical materialist theory systematically to China, its history and its relation to the world capitalist socioeconomy (although, of course, not without specific differences in interpretation). Questions arise, however, concerning Laibman's

view of the nature and role of Chinese society in the present. The critics challenge the idea that the socialism of the 1949 Revolution continues to be an important element in the production relations of the present, at least since the “reform and opening up” initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s. All of these presentations, plus Laibman’s “Comment But Not a Rejoinder,” help to reveal the importance of rigorous Marxist foundations, to orient today’s vital discussion about China, a discussion that of course proceeds in many circles without the benefit (as all of the Symposium participants would see the matter!) of those foundations.

Finally, we present Andriana Vlachou’s review article on Spyros Sakellariopoulos’ book, *Greece’s (Un)Competitive Capitalism and the Economic Crisis: How the Memoranda Changed Society, Politics and the Economy*. Both reviewer and book author in this instance are seasoned contributors to S&S, and both have been active participants in the Greek events recounted here. Accustomed as we are, in many countries, to seemingly unchallengeable capitalist hegemony over the electoral process, we sense a moment in which a left party actually wins a general election as somehow magical, and expect great things from this event. The Greek experience in 2015 nevertheless brought home the reality of a situation in which electoral victory is accompanied by deep structural weakness, in the face of international hostility and *de facto* control by outside forces over key institutions. What does (should) the left do when its promises of democracy and social progress strike a chord with a country’s people, but the actual situation makes fulfillment of those promises difficult at best? The only answer to that question that both Vlachou and Sakellariopoulos agree to *reject* is: “Give up.”

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MARXISM IN OUR TIME

Notes from the Editor

EYES ON THE PRIZE: COMMUNISM AND THE FIGHT AGAINST RACISM

BARBARA FOLEY, Guest Essayist

A few years ago, as part of a project examining the empirical grounds for the claim that the white working class enjoys “white privilege,” I looked into

statistics regarding income distribution, county by county, in New York State. The poorest county, in terms of median income, at \$17,575, was the Bronx, the blackest, brownest, and least gentrified borough in New York City. The next dozen or so poorest counties, however, were all in upstate New York. First among these was Franklin County, located in the North Country across from Canada; its citizenry, 86% white, enjoyed an annual median income of \$19,807. (The data here are from 2010; the most recent statistics for both counties, while registering higher median incomes, reveal comparable proportionalities.) Franklin County, it bears noting, contains seven federal and state prisons; these no doubt supply badly needed jobs to some county residents. But it is worth noting that, even factoring in these jobs, the median income was extremely low; the children of prison guards were not being well nourished. While it could be argued that the white workers in Franklin County have an interest in the continuing incarceration of the largely black and brown population in the prison-industrial complex, we need to ask: What kind of “interest” is this?

I considered too some statistics regarding the racial demographics of police murders, which inspired the founding and growth of the #Black Lives Matter movement. According to a *Washington Post* survey (subsequently updated every year), in 2015 in the USA there were 990 fatal police shootings — compared to 22 in Canada, three in the UK, two in Germany, and zero in Japan. The great majority were of men; in the USA, 50% of those killed were white, and 25.1 % were black. Since about 63% of the U. S. population is white, and 13% black, this was clear evidence of racism: black men were almost 2.5 times more likely to be shot and killed than whites. (The data for Hispanic men were also dramatically disproportionate.) In raw terms, though, twice as many whites were shot as blacks. In the 18–29 age group, the ratio of black to white was five to one; under 18, five to two. Notably, though — for whatever reason — in the category of men aged 45–54, white men were killed at a slightly higher rate.¹ My point in invoking these statistics is not to substitute “all lives matter” for “black lives matter,” but to observe that the USA’s high degree of state-sponsored violence — largely reliant on racist rationalizations — adversely affects the white population as well. A white man living in the USA was 64 times as likely to be killed by the police as a white man living in Germany. Are these the rewards of whiteness, U. S.-style?

This brings us to the notion of “white privilege,” a term that, while widely used, remains largely uninterrogated in current discussions of race and class. Is there such a thing as white privilege? If so, is it, as W. E. B. Du Bois proposed many years ago (in *Black Reconstruction*, 1935, ch. 16), a

1 Detailed sources for all data in this essay are available on request. For this paragraph, see Stephen C. Ferguson and Gregory Meyerson, “Shred of Truth: Antinomy and Synecdoche in the Work of TaNehisi Coates,” *Cultural Logic*, 22 (2017).

“public and psychological wage,” or does it describe a situation of objective material benefit for the majority of people who can be classified as white? An enormous amount is at stake in how we analyze this question. For if most white people actually stand to gain from the lesser quality of life (broadly measured) experienced by racialized “others,” there are no material grounds for multiracial class-based solidarity. Expanded humanistic compassion, much less guilt, will take us only so far, resulting at best, as Jodi Dean (*Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging*, 2019) has recently commented, in a politics of coalition and alliance in which the participants keep one another at arms’ length; for all practical purposes, we might as well fold up our social justice tents and go home. So I’ll put the point in a slightly different way: does differential treatment equal objective benefit? Does the portion of the population coded as white enjoy a marginally better life because of, or in spite of, ruling-class-imposed racist differentials? Is “white” identity a “baited hook,” as Theodore Allen has proposed, or a “bribe,” as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor has put it? Or does the average white person, regardless of class, go around toting a knapsack of privileges that, according to Peggy McIntosh, amount to something of real value?²

These are real questions, because racialized differentials — reflected in everything from wages to housing to vulnerability to police violence to rates of pandemic infection and death — do, emphatically, exist. How then can objective benefit be assessed and understood? For Afro-pessimists like Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton, who view non-Blacks of all classes as having an investment in the project of anti-Blackness that pays actual dividends, the question answers itself: for them, the needs and outlooks of the different groups are incommensurable. If, however, non-elite white people (I leave aside such toxic descriptors as “whites without a college education”) end up being caught on the baited hook and find themselves gasping on the shore, taking the bait has hardly been in their interest, as has been dramatically illustrated by the self-destructive behavior of the majority of Trump supporters in the United States. Indeed, swallowing the hook — that is, accepting the mediation of social selfhood through the category of “white” identity — is a classic manifestation of false consciousness (a formulation of which, under the abiding influence of postmodernist epistemological relativism, far too many Marxists remain leery).

In order to get at what is fundamentally at stake here, though, it is crucial that we get past economism — in this instance, redistributionist social democratic thinking — and bring to bear the full weight of the Marxist analysis of the present as the contradiction-laden intersection of past

2 Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 2012; Taylor, *From #Blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation*, 2016; McIntosh, “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack of Privilege,” *Peace and Freedom*, 1989.

and future. For if economism focuses on process at all, it does so only in the short term. From this perspective, it may well be in the interest of an unemployed white working-class man in rural Franklin County to take a job at a newly opened medium security prison specializing in the incarceration of black and brown men from the Bronx. This may be true even though the pay is terrible; he can't afford to fix his car; his kids are dropping out of high school; his marriage is on the rocks because he drinks too much; and he runs the risk either of contracting the Covid-19 virus rampant in the prison population or (albeit more remotely) of being killed in a prison uprising. The historian David Roediger, increasingly uneasy with the term "white privilege," has come to prefer the term "white advantage" (see his *Class, Race and Marxism*, 2017).

But "advantage," while featuring the comparative over the absolute, still implies benefit. How about flipping the script? How about viewing the prison guard's situation, and the question of material self-interest, from the vantage point of a communist future? Why not describe him as "less oppressed," "less exploited," or "less disadvantaged" than the people he is assigned to surveil? Why not establish the political and ethical baseline for assessing where we are now from the standpoint of where we wish to go? From this standpoint — which is at once political, ethical, and epistemological — we can more readily see that both the prison guard and the inmate have a common interest in living in a very different kind of world — a communist world.

I am aware that this proposition leaves me open to the charge of utopianism, and that I can be reminded scoldingly of Part III of the *Communist Manifesto*, as well as Engels' *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. But we should recall that Marx and Engels described communism as a "real movement that abolishes the present state of things," as well as a future goal (*The German Ideology*, Part V). We should also recall that, in *What Is to Be Done?*, Lenin wrote of the need for "revolutionary dreaming" beyond — that is, "from outside" — the reformist constraints of the moment. Relevant here is Ernst Bloch's vitally important distinction between "compensatory utopia," which simply papers over the contradictions of the painful present through wish-fulfillment, and "anticipatory utopia," which envisions the possible future dialectically embodied, and embedded, in the seeds of the present (see his *The Principle of Hope*, 1995). Bearing in mind Marx's counsel, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, that revolutionary movements cannot rely for their vision of potentiality upon the past, but must "take their poetry from the future," we need to ask ourselves, What notions of "identity" — that is, of socially defined selfhood — might characterize a society in which the various forms of exploitation and oppression with which we are all too familiar — indeed, which we view as normative — have been superseded? In which the welfare of society is premised not simply on "distributive justice" — the limit beyond which many

on the left at present seem unable to think — but on “contributive justice”?³ But justice at this level would be possible only when the separation of manual and mental labor has been superseded; the racialized and gendered division of labor has been abolished; and money functions (if indeed it still exists at all) solely as a means of keeping track of what goes where. Contributive justice is thus a notion — future-oriented, to be sure — premised upon a communist conception of universal human requirements. It is the North Star enabling us to keep our eyes on the prize.

To posit communist universalism as the basis for a present-day Marxist ethics is not to hold up a tantalizing but chimerical false universal, an idealist notion of transcendence that will detract attention from the hard, practical business of making change in the here and now. By contrast, bearing in mind the revolutionary Marxist notion of objective human needs — of “both the stomach and the imagination,” as Marx noted on the very first page of *Capital* — should make us more aware of the potential for transformation that exists right within the shorter-term movements in which we are — and must remain — active and committed participants. Interpreting the world correctly — or at least as correctly as we can — should help us change it more effectively. This commitment to the dialectical conjunction of theory and practice will make us better thinkers and better organizers, as well as better comrades. For it means that we will be seeking out, finding, and acting upon evidence of what the proletarian writer Tillie Olsen, in *Tell Me a Riddle* (Dell, 1961) called “the not-yet in the now” (p. 109).

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3 This is the proposition that “each flourishes by advancing the flourishing of others” (see Paul Gomberg, “Why Distributive Justice Is Impossible but Contributive Justice Would Work,” *S&S*, 80:1, January 2016).