EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

IN THIS ISSUE

In our much-heralded “digital” or “information” age, reams — oops: I should have written “gigabytes” — of material have appeared in critical and Marxist circles on the New Industrial Revolution, the Post-Industrial Society, the weightless economy, and so on. Attitudes wobble, as always, between extremes: nothing new under the sun, on one hand; and everything, including the law of value, the nature of social classes, the existence of capitalist exploitation, called into question, on the other. We are therefore pleased to publish Alan Freeman’s singularly thoughtful — and creative! — study, “Creative Labor,

SCIENCE & SOCIETY

Science & Society is a peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal of Marxist scholarship. It publishes original studies in political economy and the economic analysis of contemporary societies; social and political theory; philosophy and methodology of the natural and social sciences; history, labor, ethnic and women’s studies; aesthetics, literature and the arts. We especially welcome theoretical and applied research that both breaks new ground in a specific discipline, and is intelligible and useful to non-specialists.

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.
Mental Objects and the Modern Theory of Production.” Is creativity, as embodied in the New Information Technology, about capitalism recreating itself, or undermining itself? Freeman provides open-ended answers, plus a great deal of food for thought, drawing critically but respectfully on the work of Marxists and other writers from a variety of world traditions.

Our correspondent Wei Xiaoping, of the Institute of Philosophy, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, offers a new study of an old subject: the question whether or not there is, in both classical Marxism and Marxism as currently practiced around the world, a theory of justice, in the sense of a moral principle serving as a guide to action and a measure of human progress. Wei’s inquiry ranges over Marx’s early writings, his writings on communist society, and interpretations by a number of Western Marxist scholars. Her study helps us transcend the dichotomy between idealist moralism, in which a moral yardstick is imposed from outside the process of human evolution, and an “anti-humanist” rejection of all sense of the desirability of progress. It also reveals the depth and potential in the rise of Marxist studies throughout the Chinese academy in recent years.

In the spirit of the new interest in socialism, and Science & Society’s continuing efforts to foreground work on envisioning socialism, David Laibman (“Incentives, Optimization, and Democratic Planning: A Socialist Primer”) examines the core question: whether planning is ultimately consistent with both efficiency and democracy. His concept of “multilevel democratic iterative coordination” is presented as an answer to the impossibility claim coming from capitalist economists. This discussion has been conducted in rather formal, mathematical terms, but Laibman here breaks it down using nothing more than a few simple numerical examples and illustrations.

This issue contains three review articles. First, Steve Ellner considers the work by Daniel C. Hellinger on Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in the Age of Trump, and sorts out the different ways in which the term “conspiracy theory” is applied to the different parts of the political spectrum. Second, Paul Blackledge reviews the new book by Raju J. Das, Class Theory for a Skeptical World, which provides a detailed defense of the use of the concept of social class by Marx, Engels and Lenin against various relativizing interpretations found in postmodernist circles and among some academic Marxists. Finally, Kaan Kangal reviews the new Marx biography by Michael Heinrich, Karl Marx and the Birth of Modern Society: The Life of Marx and the Development of His Work. Volume I: 1818–1841. All three books demonstrate, on different grounds, the continuing and increasing vitality of Marxism, as the premier foundation for critical inquiry into the ever-more-dangerous oppressive system dominating today’s world, and for sustained activism in transcendence of that system.
MARXISM IN OUR TIME

Notes From The Editor

BERNIE SANDERS:
A PROSPECTIVE — NOT A RETROSPECTIVE

Writing, as always, about a half year before you read this, I make this assumption: in October 2020, Joe Biden is the Democratic Party’s nominee for U. S. President. Bernie, therefore, has “lost” the race for the nomination, as he did in 2016, and the choice placed before the U. S. electorate in a few weeks is once more between the alt-Right neo-fascist racist billionaire incumbent, and the mainstream Democrat, where “mainstream” means “firmly under the control of the capitalist ruling establishment.”

(Again) as always, the question is: what should the left do? All of the usual issues are with us: electoral politics vs. non-electoral organizing and action; the “lesser evil” vs. “feel-good” voting; the electoral contest as opportunity for display of radical ideas vs. our responsibility to intervene and influence social development in the present, i.e., to reveal our capacity for eventual “leadership of any wider movement” (Marx). I am experiencing a wearying sense of déjà vu, and a strong desire not to repeat what has been said a million times before (including recently).

I will start with a personal note received from a comrade and colleague, concerning my recent response to August Nimtz (see S&S, July 2020). Nimtz had questioned some ideas I had floated in two “Editorial Perspectives” essays concerning Marx, Engels and Lenin on electoral politics. My friend writes:

Your sub[head] “The Lesser Evil . . .” may be misinterpreted by people (as it was by me when I first glanced at it) as support for a Biden candidacy in November. . . . if the election were just about domestic issues, I wouldn’t have much of a problem with someone or some leftist organization supporting the establishment Democrats. . . . But objectively speaking, foreign policy (i.e., U. S. imperialism) trumps (pardon) domestic issues and on this ground the difference between the two parties is not that great. I fear that your two-paragraph statement on Trump is not enough to do justice to the issue. Are we at a stage in which an anti-fascist Popular Front is necessary? And even if it is, does that means endorsement of anyone who happens not to be a fascist? . . .

I should mention, briefly, that the subhead in question was: “The Lesser Evil: Concretely, in Class Terms,” and that the section so headed was about
placing electoral strategy and choice in the context of “the evolution of capitalism’s class structure.” The section contains nothing about Biden, and no recommendations for progressive voters. Apparently, the very term “lesser evil” sets off many readers (resulting perhaps in too much “first glance” reading), which is why I have tried to identify the lesser-evil problem as one of finding a fruitful balance between short-term optimization under given constraints, and strategic assault against the constraints themselves.

But the attitude revealed in my friend’s statement goes to the heart of the real issue: Should we engage in electoral cretinism? By which I mean: Should we take the electoral process in its own terms? To the point: when we vote for a candidate, are we “endorsing” that candidate? Are we “supporting” either the domestic or the foreign policy of the candidate for whom we are voting? When we urge others to vote for a candidate — including many who, we may assume, do not share (or even grasp the existence of) a Marxist understanding of the class situation that is the real object of electoral contestation — what effect does that have on the evolution of their consciousness? Does this effect have anything to do with the wider context of our electoral recommendations and actions? What does it have to do with the building of activism in workplaces, trade unions, industries and professional associations, residential communities, cultural, ethnic and recreational communities, schools?

This is the hard part. We recognize, abstractly, that the electoral process is but a mirror of class struggle, but when we are actually there, a fog descends: we forget about the real social relations at stake and treat elections as a sort of candy store, where we survey the policies (and, worse, the personalities) of politicians or parties, and “choose” among them. This — and not some injunction always to opt for some least evil candidate — is electoral cretinism.

In this framework, has Bernie Sanders indeed “lost” in 2020? Well, he is clearly not the Democratic candidate for President. But let’s take him at his word: the OurRevolution movement is not about the political career of its presidential standard-bearer; it is about building a society-wide, organized, democratic (small “d”) force to change society’s priorities; to make the country (in this instance, the United States) work “not just” for the “billionaire class,” but for everyone. The take-away for the progressive movement must be sought in terms of this wider goal.

Note, of course, that the Sanders OurRevolution vision does not propose a radical reorganization of society, in which the billionaire class is not merely forced to “share” power (as though capitalist power can be “shared”), but

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1 S&S, July 2020, p. 413. In case readers are not aware of this: all of the “Editorial Perspectives” essays going back to Spring 2000 are available on the S&S website: https://www.scienceandsociety.com/archive.html

2 In wider circles this is described as the “political process,” narrowing the content of “political” to the formal representative state bodies and their periodic staffing by means of elections.
rather is removed from the stage altogether. When Bernie says “not just for the billionaire class,” the very existence of that class, and all that that entails, is taken for granted. The idea of eliminating the billionaire class as such, held by a small minority of Sandernistas, including this author, means envisioning something that can be called systemic socialism — an entire system of social relations distinct from capitalism and other class-antagonistic modes of production — as opposed to the ameliorative socialism or Social Democracy that forms the heart of the Sanders conception.3

What, then, is the relation between the two socialisms (ameliorative; systemic)? Several writers in the progressive camp have deplored Bernie’s use of the term “democratic socialism” to describe his people-friendly vision; Paul Krugman, for example, insists that this “make[s] him an easy target for right-wing smears.”4 For Krugman, “socialism,” “in the normal sense of the term,” means “nationaliz[ing] our major industries and replac[ing] markets with central planning”; Bernie’s use of the term “democratic socialism” to describe his New Deal politics is seen as an unfortunate “self-indulgence,” which “will be a gift to the Trump campaign.”5

The intensity of the attack against Sanders from the Democratic Party establishment, following his early primary victories, however, suggests that there is a deeper connection between the reformist Green New Deal platform and a full-blown systemic “red” socialism than Paul Krugman is willing to acknowledge. Just as the capitalist ruling class of the 1930s fought tooth-and-nail against Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, its present-day counterparts see the Green New Deal, Medicare for All, and the rest of the Sanders program as a slippery slope, one that could very well presage a fundamental challenge to the entire structure of capitalist power. In a word: while the capitalist establishment clearly has the hegemonic capacity, at present, to hold large sections of the working class within its ideological guidelines — as either Trump’s “white nationalism” and “USA/MAGA” jingoism, or the Democratic notion of reform without questioning the underlying system of power, property and privilege — it also knows that that grip could fail in the future. Thus, it sees

3 The classical adjective used by Marx and Engels to distinguish the communist conception of socialism is “scientific”: scientific socialism. This however raises the whole set of issues concerning the definition of “scientific” — in contrast to “scientistic,” which implies inappropiate use of concepts appropriate to natural science only. Historical materialism was classically referred to as the “science of society” (as evoked by the name of this journal!); while I believe this reference can and should be retained, I fear we must postpone this important discussion to another occasion.


5 On the difference between mainstream nightmares about socialism, on one hand; and multilevel democratic coordination, on the other, see D. Laibman, this issue.
something that many supporters of OurRevolution do not: Bernie Sanders, and the movement he represents, are indeed a profound and radical danger to the status quo. What the powerful fear most is the learning curve that ties the Green New Deal (GND) to a truly red vision. This is not only because we, the systemic socialists, are there; it is mainly because the Sanders program — as a simple but profound matter of the objective nature of capitalism — cannot be grafted neatly onto an intact structure of capitalist domination. In the process of fighting for, winning, and securing real changes for ordinary people, that reality will come home to the country’s working class, in a way that has not happened in U.S. history to date; and that places systemic socialism — today a minor factor in the political debate — at the future center of political and social change.

Bernie’s “self-indulgent” self-description as a “socialist” is thus not, as Paul Krugman thinks, an unfortunate tactical error; it is, rather, a signal to the base of OurRevolution: We are at the very beginning of a long road, whose twists and turns cannot be known in advance. The conservative forces will go all out to prevent the GND from seeing the light of day, and that will make the near-term path a very thorny one indeed. The movement will face significant tensions between those who understand this, and want to proceed regardless; and those who insist on a vision of piecemeal and orderly reforms, to shift social priorities away from the billionaires without addressing the system of power and domination that creates and supports them. Marxists are among the former group; indeed, we form its ideological core. Are we wrong? Maybe! (Science always requires that “maybe.”) Can the magnificent progressive vision — Medicare for All, the Fight for 15, tuition- and debt-free college, genuine jobs guarantees, an end to racism and misogyny, and a sustainable, carbon-free regime of care for our planet and its future — be won, without a decisive attack against the capitalist establishment, if we just keep on securing the votes? I would be glad to be proven wrong about the need for OurRevolution to broaden into a major revolutionary path out of capitalism, toward systemic socialism. Even if this turns out to be nothing more than a theoretical (or theoreticist!) illusion, it will have contributed to the vision, and the battle, and will in that way have been worth it many times over.

My correspondent’s point about domestic and foreign policy is important, and deserves separate consideration. All of the major party candidates, even including Bernie Sanders and parts of his base, share certain assumptions about the nature of power in today’s world, and the role of the United States in it, assumptions that the left must challenge. This may be because serious thinking about imperialism, and about transnational capitalist power, leads more quickly and directly to the systemic aspects of the ruling class than does similar thinking about domestic issues, which can more easily be assimilated to a simplistic resources-sharing perspective.
So. Back to our earlier question. Did we win or lose? Did the 2020 progressive campaign make some organizational and conceptual progress? It depends on what we do, going forward. But if we have taken some steps in the right direction, perhaps only a few, that is clearly a win — even if many more are still needed.

D. L.