EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

IN THIS ISSUE

While the experiences of progressive and revolutionary movements are universal and embodied in cultures and political formations around the world, our sense of that universality is enriched by examining the lives of peoples with deep roots in one place, transplanted to yet another one with its own specific history. Nerina Visacovsky’s study of left-wing and progressive Jews in mid-20th-century Argentina, “The Yiddisher Kultur Farband in Argentina,” provides a unique opportunity to observe a rich political/linguistic/religious/cultural heritage with strong roots in Eastern Europe, as this takes shape in a

**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.
country with Latin and Indigenous foundations, itself subject to domination and underdevelopment under the capitalist imperialism of the United States. The Jewish left in Argentina shares all of the tensions between communist consciousness and ethnic identity that appear in the Jewish people’s countries of origin, as well as in other parts of the world, such as the Anglophone countries of North America, that also experienced Jewish immigration and settlement. Within that common frame, the particular features of Argentina’s Jewish progressive movement — its impressive achievements and contribution to its new homeland’s shared heritage — are wonderfully displayed in Visacovsky’s article.

For decades, the work of Jairus Banaji has been known for its important contribution to historical materialist theory and research, combining a rich theoretical and critical sensibility with impressive knowledge of concrete social realities across vast stretches of time and space. In his study of Banaji’s oeuvre, Tony Burns (“Marxism and the Concept of a Social Formation: An Immanent Critique of the Views of Jairus Banaji”) takes aim at the latter’s rejection of the concept of a social formation, which merges modes of production at a lower level of abstraction. This concept, Burns argues, is clearly implicit in Marx’s work; more importantly, it plays a crucial role in sorting through, and distinguishing, the layers of determination that constitute the full reality of the essences and their appearances that constitute the dialectical unity of social existence. Burns believes that the social formation and mode of production concepts stand or fall together; that Banaji’s attempt to excise one and retain the other does damage to his overall project, including his valid rejection of “vulgar” and structuralist interpretations of Marx.

Marxist theorists of systemic socialism — a distinct production relation that replaces spontaneous markets with democratic planning — reject the notion of “market socialism,” which grafts markets as an instrumental tool onto socialist public property and rejection of private profit-making. (We note, in anticipation, the appearance of our Special Issue, “(En)Visioning Socialism: Raising the Future in Our Imaginations Before Raising It in Reality,” forthcoming as S&S, April 2022.) Maxi Nieto, in his critique of “Market Socialism: The Impossible Socialism,” goes beyond enumeration of the negative features of markets — instability, polarization, alienation — which is the focus of many systemic socialist arguments. Nieto argues, based on careful exegesis of Marx’s law of value, that it is not just certain outcomes but the very logical foundations of markets that reveal the impossibility of combining them with socialist social relations. Markets are, ultimately, “incompatible with the conscious, rational, and democratic regulation of the economy.”

In the first of two Communications in this issue, Danny Goldstick (“Marx, Marxism, Ethics”) revisits the much-debated but still fruitful issue of whether or not the founders of Marxism embraced a moral philosophy, as this is
commonly understood in academic philosophical circles. Goldstick skillfully uses texts from Marx and Engels to unearth a position that charts a course between the idealism of “choosing” an arbitrary set of moral values; and a view, sometimes attributed to Marx, that rejects all ethical reasoning as incompatible with science and causality. Marx, evidently, “chooses” a non-arbitrary ethical guide that is inherent in the human condition: affirmation of freedom and potential for development.

Finally, we present William I. Robinson’s response to David Chen’s “Re-thinking Globalization and the Transnational Capitalist Class: China, the United States, and Twenty-First Century Imperialist Rivalry” (S&S, January 2021). Chen’s paper placed the analysis of China and its world role (itself controversial; see the Symposium on “Historical Materialism and China Today,” S&S, July 2021) in a context set by Robinson’s influential work on the emergence of a transnational capitalist class (TCC) and state, well represented in S&S over a number of years. That work — not surprisingly — is itself controversial. Robinson insists that Chen’s interpretation, which finds in the TCC concept a repetition of Kautskyian super-imperialism and “globalist” fallacies, is inaccurate and misleading. This perception, to be fair, is very common among critics of Robinson’s conception, a fact that points to the need for further work on concept clarification, as we continue to explore the nature of changes that have taken place in capitalist accumulation and structures of power in today’s world.

LEITH MULLINGS (1945–2020)

Dr. Leith Mullings, Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the City University of New York Graduate Center and former President of the American Anthropological Association, was a long-time member of the Science & Society Editorial Board. We are pleased to present this appreciation of her life and work by Dr. Gerald Horne. — The Editors

I am among the legions who continue to mourn the severe loss of our dear comrade, Dr. Leith Mullings, leading anthropologist, chronicler of and participant in important political movements and unparalleled Marxist intellectual.

While in Chicago for graduate training, she was an anchor of a broadly progressive movement that developed an impressive project known as the “CommUniversity,” which offered African and African American history courses, along with labor and working class courses — free of charge — to a wide and diverse array of students.
In the 1990s Leith was a sparkplug in developing the Black Radical Congress, a project that continues to resonate, which sought to bring under one organizational roof a vast assortment of ideological trends, including Communist, Marxist, Black Nationalist and the like, to the end of influencing debate and pushing the nation to the left. There as elsewhere Leith stressed feminist and gender concerns — and emphasized that “Blackness” be internationalized in an anti-imperialist direction with a sharp class angle.

All the while, Leith did not neglect scholarship. As with her overtly political engagements, she did not elide the global. Perhaps her signature academic work — *Therapy, Ideology and Social Change: Mental Healing in Urban Ghana*, University of California Press, 1984 — illustrates this point neatly. Leaping from every page is the enterprise that drove her every waking moment: understanding and bettering the lives of working people, especially those of African descent.

I miss her so much. I miss her stentorian speaking voice, which carried such authority and with its very timbre could cause the doubtful to capitulate. I miss her laughter, which could make the darkest clouds of gloom disappear. I miss her intelligence, which was able to pierce the veil of ignorance, almost effortlessly. Her passing has left a void, which we can only try to fill by redoubling our efforts on behalf of anti-racism, anti-sexism — and Socialism.

Gerald Horne

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**STATEMENT ON SEXUAL ASSAULT AND PUBLISHING IN S&S**

*Science & Society*, as a Marxist journal, has a fundamental commitment to full human liberation, which we see as possible only with transformation from a society based on the exploitation of labor, and on concentration of social, political and economic power in the hands of those who own and control capital and therefore benefit from this exploitation. We are aware that within this project there are some who may share that commitment intellectually, but who engage in practices and behaviors that are inimical to its emancipatory vision.

Unfortunately, sexual assault is all too common, and the perpetrators can be intellectuals and scholars who might otherwise share our ideals. All forms of sexual assault represent an abuse of power, in a system already characterized by great inequality. Along with damaging individuals, harmful
treatment of others by anyone associated with a community of Marxist teachers, mentors and researchers does great harm to Marxism, to the movements for liberation, and to our long-term hope for a society of justice and equality.

Those who commit sexual assault against colleagues and students will not be published in Science & Society. We want to be careful to make sure that reports of these assaults are credible and have been fully investigated. It is the belief of the S&S Editorial Board that the obligations assumed by individual scholars must include a humane, compassionate and comradely practice throughout their lives, not only in the realm of research and theoretical work.

MARXISM IN OUR TIME

Notes from the Editor

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONCEPTUAL CLARITY IN THE THINKING OF THE PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT

There is a little-noticed effect of the electronic communications groundswell of recent years. The stream of words has widened into a torrent. With online publishing occurring in almost instantaneous time — blogs, personal websites, zines, listservs, chatrooms, Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, YouTube channels and whatnot — anyone who seeks to reach others with ideas faces ever-increasing competition for attention. You can’t simply make an argument anymore; you have to headline your content with eye-catching images, metaphors, outrageous analogies — anything that will draw readers (or listeners or viewers) in your direction. But that in turn means that you need to conjure up concrete instances, specifics, things that are inherently more exciting, more attention-grabbing, than the dull essences that underlie them.

Today’s technology of communications thus encourages a tendency to go wide rather than deep, a bias with profound implications for the ways in which we come to grips with social realities. I have (of course) a case-in-point: a think-piece by California public-banking advocate Ellen Brown in ScheerPost, reported by Portside on May 24 last year. This carries the title: “How America Went from Mom-and-Pop Capitalism to Techno-Feudalism,” and the title alone tells the story.

1 The post was originally uploaded on May 18. https://scheerpost.com/2021/05/18/how-america-went-from-mom-and-pop-capitalism-to-techno-feudalism/
“Mom-and-pop capitalism”? Really? “Capitalism,” for Brown, can mean a system of small, personal businesses, in which “families own[ ] their own farms and small shops and compete[ ] with each other on a more or less level playing field.” This is the unfortunately ancient confounding of capitalism with individual private property (captured by Marx’s important concept of simple commodity production, in which labor is fused with ownership). Capitalism is the higher stage of commodity production combining the law of value with systematic extraction of surplus value by a minority property-owning class. Do we truly need to recall Marx and Engels’ classic refutation of the petty private property conception? “Hard-won, self-acquired, self-earned property! . . . There is no need to abolish that; the development of [capitalist] industry has to a great extent already destroyed it . . .” (Communist Manifesto, section II). Small-scale private property was important in the early history of countries like the United States, and it still plays a role in those countries, although an ever-diminishing one, as capital attacks and absorbs it in sector after sector. But romanticizing early capitalism, by confusing it with the simple market forms that it destroys, suggests an essentially reactionary solution: to go back to the halcyon days of “mom-and-pop” enterprises — a move that would entrap us forever in a small-scale, low-productivity world devoid of the potentials of fully socialized production. It also encourages a woefully lacking understanding of slavery, indentured servitude, and the genocidal extermination of Indigenous peoples; these are treated by Brown as “glaring inhumane exceptions” to the glorious world of the early “benign form of capitalism” that emerges as her actual ideal. The crucial role of slavery and genocide, perpetrated against non-European peoples, in enabling the formation of capitalist property and accumulation of capital, both in the United States and in England and Western Europe, is lost in this conception.

“Techno-feudalism”? The “techno” prefix sets the usual current preoccupation with electronics and the digitalization of life and work. In a period when changing technology is very apparent — a “sign of the times” — it is easy to attribute every effect to this factor, instead of searching for the actual social relations that are evolving in this outward guise. And “feudalism”: well, there is nothing in Brown’s essay that puts any meat on this concept, and this then reinforces the underlying conclusion: Capitalism, in its “benign” early form, is the goal to which we must aspire. If recent trends have replaced this golden age with huge concentrations of wealth; “unearned income” (as though the accumulated profits of industrial capitalists past and present were not “unearned”); “finance capital” (as though finance were absent in the feudal middle ages or in early mom-and-pop times); etc.; that must mean some sort of replacement of capitalism by something else, something earlier and uglier — hence, “feudalism.”
Brown also picks up a populist strain of criticism of “finance,” conceived of as “unproductive” buying/selling and lending/borrowing, as opposed to the “productive” activities of the early capitalists (mom-and-pop or industrial). This is of course a complex subject, but we may simply note yet another sideling, in which critique of capitalism is diverted into critique of finance, monopoly, and rentier speculation — where “money makes money for those who have it, ‘in their sleep’.” One looks in vain for any attempt to unearth the actual mechanism by which this money-making occurs; if the money in question amounts to real purchasing power, there must be a real social force enabling the appropriation of material resources (in the last analysis, labor).

The term, and concept, of socialism does not exist for Brown. When her essay approaches the “what to do” question, it focuses, as noted, on the matter of returning: “The capitalist model has clearly gone off the rails. How to get it back on track?” Several recent suggestions are reviewed: a wealth tax, proposed by U. S. Senator Elizabeth Warren and her colleagues; the idea, put forward by ex–Finance Minister of Greece Yanis Varoufakis, for a system of voting within corporations by the workforce — “one employee, one share (not tradeable), one vote”; and a land value tax. The first of these is a progressive reform, but one that does not address the “what to do” question with which the essay is presumably concerned. What should the tax — assuming we can assemble the political forces to wrest it out of the coffers of an ever-more-mighty capitalist elite — be used to accomplish? The second is a proposal for democratic management within corporations, based on those corporations’ current employment registers. There are often-raised concerns about whether formal voting authority is sufficient to transfer actual power within social institutions to their historically subaltern working memberships. But beyond this, the matters of conflicting interests of the employed (the insiders) and wider social communities, including the unemployed, and of the danger of polarization and conflict among democratic yet fragmented organizations, must be raised — and these concerns have been most fully addressed within socialist social formations and movements. (Brown, to repeat, seems to be allergic to socialism, except in one spot; see below.)

Finally, we have the land value tax. Brown quotes economist Michael Hudson regarding an option for “a tax on the rental income — the ‘unearned income’ — of land, natural resources and monopoly takings.” This idea points to another older line of thought within critical economics — the single tax on land, proposed by Henry George in the 19th century. The problem is thus not the power of capital as such, resulting from concentrated ownership of

means of production in general; it is the power to extract rents from non-produced and non-reproducible natural resources, especially agricultural land, waterways and mines (and, in some more recent Henry George–inspired thinking, urban land and building space). George’s philosophy combines the anti-landlord perspective of David Ricardo with a free-market commitment typical of Adam Smith, or perhaps the Austrian school. The key point for us, of course, is the restriction of “unearned” status to income derived from property in non-reproducible resources, in the form of rent. The incomes of Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates are, apparently, earned.

Brown considers other proposals: reforming the banking system, anti-monopoly legislation, patent law reform. Then, at the end, comes this:

Perhaps, however, the flaw is in the competitive capitalist model itself. The winners will inevitably capture and exploit the losers, creating an ever-growing gap in wealth and power. Studies of natural systems have shown that cooperative models are more efficient than competitive schemes. . . . We need a set of rules that actually levels the playing field, rewards productivity, and maximizes benefit to society as a whole, while preserving the individual rights guaranteed by the U. S. Constitution.

The problem, of course, is that the entire essay obscures the actual core content of the “competitive capitalist model itself.” The “competitive” element is ubiquitous — note its involvement in the concept of the “playing field” (as in “level the playing field”). Why do winners “inevitably” capture losers? (What shapes people into “winners” and “losers” in the first place?) Studies of natural systems are most likely irrelevant (human society is not a natural system), as is reduction of the entire problematic to a contrast between competition and cooperation. This balance, like the one between autonomy and community, has different meanings and applications in, e.g., capitalist and socialist contexts. “Rewards productivity” and “maximizes benefit to society” — these are either empty phrases, or phrases that cry out for specification: “productivity” — of what? “Maximizes” “benefit” — for whom? Finally, the un-examined presumptions that “individual rights” are synonymous with human rights, and that the U. S. Constitution is the ultimate source or arbiter of said rights, require deconstruction (to put it mildly).

This, then, to return to the theme that began this essay, is a call for more effort devoted to working on the theory of those “dull essences,” and avoiding being mesmerized by the tantalizing details of perceived life that

3 Perceptive observations on George in connection with the classical Marxist literature will be found in William J. Blake, An American Looks at Karl Marx (New York: Cordon Company, 1939), esp. pp. 493–496.
4 I can’t resist recalling a formula that emerged in discussions at the time of former U. S. President Jimmy Carter’s campaign championing “human rights” in the early 1980s: “Human rights” = “individual” rights = elite rights = human wrongs.
attract modern readers by grabbing their attention. Perhaps the web lacks collectives of participants who share certain objectives in common (I often wonder who the people and websites I am reading actually are; the audiences for and originators of e-blasts are rendered anonymous and distant from one another). If we were sitting in a room together (literally or figuratively), with a common purpose of sorting through the massive sense-data of our world, and separating the inner commonality of that data from its bewildering variety, it might become easier to find a path, along which we develop confidence: confidence that we are truly forging a line of revolutionary transformation, while bringing all of our experience and variations on board.

D. L.