

Culture and Crisis

An introduction to this special issue of *Cultural Logic*

Joseph G. Ramsey, editor

– for Mark Hudon,
who got it, and who gives me hope

I. Crisis Occupations: Moving from Danger to Opportunity

This special issue of *Cultural Logic* on “Culture and Crisis” appears at an exciting juncture, at a moment when the relationship between these two terms – *Culture. Crisis* – is shifting and shaking before our very eyes and feet. The long suppressed is breaking into the open. A new language is spreading across the body politic, like an infection, or, perhaps, like the cure for one: *Occupy. Occupy. Occupy*. Truths once whispered are now shouted. Ideas kept alive by lonely souls staring into flickering computer screens are painted across banners and taken up together down main streets. Cracks in the ruling walls are showing, and in the space between the buds for a thousand blossoms are finding their roots. In the wake of a revolutionary *Arab Spring*, and a *European Summer* filled with revolt and mass protest – from Madrid, to London, to Athens – we hear talk of an *American Autumn*, or perhaps more appropriately, considering the teetering hegemonic position of the US in this trembling world-system: An *American Fall*. After a long series of compound *crises*, for the left, for the working classes, and for the world, a radical *opportunity* is suddenly upon us.

November 2011 is a moment when things that once seemed like utopian fantasies now appear on the verge of becoming possible. “The Beginning is Near,” proclaims the website of Occupied Wall Street. It is a moment when dominant institutions, built to look Immortal, suddenly look time-bound and vulnerable. Just in time for 2012, a year much discussed and joked about across pop culture as hearkening “the end of the world,” it is possible again to imagine the *end of capitalism*, instead. Faced with a movement boasting transparent and horizontal social networks, need-based gift economies, participatory consensus decision-making, non-violent mass direct democracy, and

creative fearless truth-telling, the concrete blocks and glass walls of Big Finance and the State alike increasingly look out-of-date – grotesque monuments to a top-down, tyrannical, capitalist mode of production that has outlived its usefulness. Occupiers gather in tents and discuss whether the Big Banks should be bulldozed to make parks to play in, or occupied and turned into museums, so that we may teach the next generation about dinosaurs and other extinct predators. What hide-bound institutions in this society could *not*, should not, be occupied? The very name of this upsurge suggests its infectious potentiality, its wide if not universal translatability. To speak of *occupy* is to conjure a challenge: *How can we, how will we take our world back?* In a world privatized to the last pore, the act of resisting austerity and of reclaiming and recreating the public – in defiance of the state’s orders – takes on revolutionary dimension; if a single spot can hold . . . who knows what eruptions may come?

Our belated 2010 volume goes “live” just in time, as a radical questioning of the capitalist system is occurring on a mass scale (in various registers), not only on Occupied Wall Street but in countless communities across the United States. (Indeed, as this introduction is being edited, the majority of the occupations across the US have been evicted and dismantled, meaning that tens of thousands of occupiers now are settling into a transitional winter, a time of indoor reorganization and reflection.) In the amazing swirl and swell of just over a month, the streets and public commons have come to life. “*Resist. Reclaim. Recreate,*” is one slogan coming over the wire. (“*You cannot evict an idea,*” is another.) Suddenly Marx’s old notion of ideas becoming material forces of history as they are grasped by the masses has metamorphosed from a clever and optimistic epigraph (to be found atop essays like this one) to an undeniable reality, a pressing, practical challenge; it is an idea that has taken to the streets: *Occupy. Occupy. Occupy.*

Fueled by the suffering and outrage of not just three years of economic super-recession since the onset of the Great Financial Crisis of 2007-2008, but decades—*centuries*—of misery and mayhem under this system, in “good times” as well as “bad,” sparked by the inspiration of recent public occupations, from Egypt and Tunisia, to Wisconsin, the Occupy Wall Street / Occupy Together movement has burst the scene, drawing hundreds of thousands, even millions, into creative forms of sustained

discussion, organization, and struggle. Those who have never engaged in public protest before – returning veterans alongside students who were too young to have protested the invasion of Iraq – are facing down police and pepper spray in the streets to stake their claim on shaping the future of this world. They have struck en masse, closing major city ports. They have rallied by the thousands defying and outflanking the riot cop armies of the billionaire Mayor of New York, who some have dubbed, prophetically, “*Mubarak* Bloomberg.” They have driven back horse-mounted police in Portland. They are dispersed, but they return. In Boston thousands rally to the defense of Dewey Square . . . And so it goes. The authorities pray for a winter of blizzards, so they may evict us for “our own protection.” “Public safety” becomes the ironic call of a state that auctions the “public” to the highest private bidder.

The Occupy is a movement “Too Big to Jail.” And as the recognition of the movement’s power grows, so do the possibilities for further breakthroughs – now and in the Spring. With every teach-in, with every march – whether for labor rights, for ecology, against police brutality, against racist deportations, or imperialist war – with every democratic meeting that takes form in the face of the glass bastions of capitalist finance, Occupy Wall Street shames, exposes, and delegitimizes the economic and political establishment. Though the media attention lags with the closing of the physical occupations, the common sense of this movement – that the “representatives” in government serve not the people but the big commercial interests – has taken hold. Some polls have shown broader public sympathy for the Occupy movement than for either the Executive or the Legislative branch of the US government – not to mention the Big Banks.

These occupations are not just “protests.” They have become *spaces* for the sharing of ideas, *schools* for interrogating the system we are up against, a sustained public presence to remind people elsewhere of the issues at stake, and a network of *sparks* to incite further rebellion, from the “Hood” and the “Barrio” to the halls of Harvard University.¹ The Occupy movement is the militant motley Other of the cynical

¹ For a sense of the radical education efforts this editor has been personally involved with – efforts which have certainly delayed the publication of this special issue, even as they are animated by its spirit – see the website of the *Howard Zinn Memorial Lecture Series* at Occupy Boston, a part of the Free School University at Dewey Square: <<http://www.zinnlectures.wordpress.com>>.

straightjacket system it defines itself against. More than a merely indignant reaction to immediate injustice, it breathes carnival and experimentation, open to “unrealistic” ideas (including many radical ones), to new methods, and to discussions about fundamental questions, learning as it goes, sustained by an infectious enthusiasm that exceeds the grasp of those who ask it “What does it *demand*? Does it not have *demands*?”

It is not just an eruption, not just a registering of dissent, but a sustained experiment in reordering social life, one that, in the main, does not seek redress or concessions (nor permission or approval) from the state, or even from “the 1%.” Rather, at its best, Occupy works to expose the ruling elite and their system *to the rest of “the 99%,”* confident – even ecstatic and audacious – in the truth that if this “99%” can find a way to move together, then all the towering wealth and power of that “1%” (and the *0.1%*, in fact) can be overcome. As a chant at Occupied Boston had it recently: “*We Are Many. They Are Few. When We All Stand Up, What Can They Do?*” The very existence of the occupations authorizes the raising of voices elsewhere, the voicing of truths in places that are built to exclude them. Similarly, the experience of collaboration and sustained common work that the occupations offer, and the uncompromising determination they represent, pulls against the fragmentation, isolation, and cynicism of the terminal capitalist age. Even miles away from an encampment – even weeks after our encampments have been overrun – we carry in our minds a common space, a symbol of the commons. Our minds continue to be *occupied* by the tasks to be done.

The Occupy movement has become an Event (in something like communist philosopher Alain Badiou’s sense of the term). It has created a major rupture in the prevailing culture and discourse, giving a name and a visibility to an aspect of existence which has long been present and yet largely buried and denied, while drawing militant subjects into the common body of a truth-process with its own unique and irreducible dynamics, even its own new language. However much such subjects may (and must) draw on truths from Marxism and other traditions of revolutionary theory and practice, there is no getting around the fresh particularities of this new political field. As Badiou puts it in *Theory of the Subject* (1982, 2009), “The ‘right ideas’ of the masses, which the

Marxist party must concentrate, are necessarily *new* ideas” (39, my emphasis). Many on the left, Marxist and otherwise, should admit it: even as our theories taught us that resistance of some kind was inevitable – given this or that (objective) social tendency – we have been *surprised* by the specific (subjective) form it has assumed.

Already the eruption of this movement – perhaps it would be more appropriate to call it an *insistence*, a refusal to give way or to let go of the power of a basic truth – has sent remarkable waves and ripples through US society in particular. The basic and undeniable facts of income and wealth inequality and the consequent inequalities of political power – previously confined to margins, to radical blogs and Facebook posts – now occupy central stages in the newspapers, the magazines, even on mainstream television. The virtues and vices of capitalism are up for open debate in the Letters pages of the widest circulating newspapers. One senses the impact of this Event in its many marginal effects: Bank of America cancels its \$5 monthly debit card fee; communist philosopher Slavoj Zizek is invited to do an hour long interview with the respectable Charlie Rose on PBS; members of the Democratic Party, eager to raise sails to capture the shifting winds suddenly announce a proposal to challenge the bald-faced plutocratic tyranny represented by the recent *Citizens United* ruling by the Supreme Court, and so on. Discussions and debates about fundamental issues of class power and socio-economic injustice – the sorts of concerns which have long been the stuff of journals like *Cultural Logic*, but which are cast to the margins of even academia – spread. As Lenin once famously wrote, “There are decades when nothing happens. And then there are weeks when decades happen.” We would appear to be several weeks in to the latter sort of time.

The prevailing rhetoric of the movement – “We are the 99%” – whatever its limits as strict sociology, has restored a (dialectical) concept of class to American life, and with it a populist frame that holds great potential. The content of the “We are the 99%” banner is not in any static identity of the mass of people, but in their *common enemy*: “the 1%,” against which “We” unite, subjectively, even as our precise class position (or political ideology) varies. The banner’s value is partly in how it points the finger – *which* finger it points I leave to the reader’s imagination! – at those who control and benefit from an economic and political system that operates at the expense of the vast majority of

humanity, not to mention other living creatures on the planet. But the value of the “99%” notion goes beyond its identification of a clear, class enemy. It also evokes the actual and the potential *power* of the organized and mobilized masses. In this it points beyond the stabilizing rhetoric of “the middle class” – long proclaimed to be the only “class” in America – and excites subjects to militancy and courage precisely because it does so. Likewise it points beyond the rhetoric of victimization that often predominates in what mainstream US discourse there is about class inequality. As one recent Occupy poster put it, “99 to 1. *Those are great odds.*”

The statistical abstraction of the “99%” itself, while not without dangers (notably potential blind spots around class and race stratification as well as ideological contradictions *within* “the 99%”), has its virtues; its very openness and emptiness represent an opportunity for intervention. This is not a fixed populism of the wholesome People being infested by some corruptive and impure Outsiders. Even where radical understanding lags, the numeric impersonality points to the cold and structural nature of the problems we face; similarly, it points beyond a simple moralization against the “bad” or “greedy” corporations (even as such moralizing language still persists in many places, as do other liberal residuals). Indeed, rather than settle the Identity of the movement, the all-but-empty signifier raises fundamental questions, questions that should be ripe for Marxist intervention: *What is the nature of this 1% “enemy”?* *What exactly separates “us” (the 99%) from “them”?* *How is this 99/1% split produced and maintained?* *How did we come this point historically?* *Do we even need a “1%” ruling over this society at all?* *And if not, what is necessary to make “them” no longer necessary and/or possible?* And so on. While there is plenty of moralizing about “corporate greed,” there is also quite broad agreement within the movement that what is called for is a major shift in class power, not simply a lesson in ethics, nor a changing in the politicians in charge of skimming profit from the planetary mess. The 99/1% framing of the movement suggests, at its sharpest, that the ruling elites are not qualified, *by virtue of their structural position within this system*, to represent the vast majority of people, their so called “constituents” (let alone their “employees”).

As one Oakland occupier put it, capturing the spirit of direct action that has animated much of Occupy, “We are not asking to have our needs met [by the existing

power structure]. We are meeting them [ourselves].” The creativity that has come forth in all sorts of unexpected places these past months testifies to the material possibility of creating new kinds of relationships, in a short period of time. Possibilities abound as what Badiou called “lightning displacements” of people from their proscribed social spaces spread.

And yet, of course, like any populism, the Occupy is not without its contradictions, its dangers, its opportunists, its confusions, its competing interpretations, its risks of co-optation or just plain exhaustion. (An American *Winter* is upon us, and already different ideas about the American Spring are starting to contend). All sorts of debates about the current situation and the nature of the system we are in – its roots, its determinations, its future trajectory – are occurring within this mix; likewise many ideas about what is to be done, and how to do it.

Looking toward the New Year, it is my hope that the current issue of *Cultural Logic* can be of use especially to those who are involved in such discussions. I do believe that the contributions in “Culture & Crisis” can help organizers, activists, and occupiers to sharpen and deepen their understanding of the nature of the system under which we live (at its various levels of operation), as well as to learn critical lessons about past attempts to grasp and to transform this system in a progressive or revolutionary way. Marxist editors and writers alike can ask for little more than to have their critical work read and discussed in a moment like this, by those who are working both to reinterpret the world and to change it (unless it is to hear these comrades’ reply).

II. The Current Issue: “Culture & Crisis”

The current issue takes up the theme of “Culture & Crisis” in many different modes and in many different places. While every essay here, in a properly marxist spirit, approaches its particular object in light of the contemporary social and political situation, contributors address a wide variety of topics, periods, and issues, exemplifying a diverse set of critical approaches. The present issue thus includes – to give just a taste – both deeply informed theoretical analyses of race and gender dynamics within contemporary US capitalism (**Jeffrey B. Perry** and **Julie Torrant**, respectively) and ecosocialist re-

readings of Depression-era proletarian fiction (**Tristan Siple**). Essays range from textual analyses of how the crisis-decade of the “1930s” resonates in contemporary culture and film (**Benjamin Balthaser**) to rigorous empirical discussions of key crisis moments in the socialist Soviet Union of the 1930s and 1950s and why they still matter today (**Grover Furr** and **Joseph Ball**). “Culture & Crisis” further offers up both participant-reflections on the labor struggles of university faculty (**Kim Emery**), and analyses of the rapidly expanding field of exploitation known as student internships (**Heather Steffen**), alongside an in-depth interview with a scholar working to explicate neglected Marx texts (**Marcello Musto**). The essays collected here (totaling well over 800 pages) address many types of “crisis” that are operative today: the finance and debt crisis, the economic stagnation crisis, the ecological crisis, the deployment of “crisis” rhetoric as a ruling-class propaganda and management strategy, the avoidance of class issues by framing injustice and inequality as “humanitarian crisis,” the struggle over the meaning of past “crisis” eras in US history (notably the 1930s and the 1970s), the crisis of academic labor and of the university, and, of course various crises of the Left, variously understood as Marxist, as socialist, as communist (or *Communist*).

What virtually all of the contributions to this special issue share on some level is a standpoint of partisanship. Running through the issue is a tacit – sometimes explicit – transgression of the academic code that would have critics represent their intellectual projects as focused upon inert material, episodes from history that are long since “closed.” The writers here, in their committed trajectory, refuse a simply *specular* relationship of scholarly subject to object. Engaging artifacts and conflicts from the past in a spirit of theoretical and practical militancy – but without flattening the particularities of their objects – they engage the layered, living present. They do not settle for objectively charting the dynamics of the current crisis, but seek to intervene within it, to help others take advantage of the opportunities, and to avoid the dangers that make up our present situation. Seeking out what is still contemporary in distant debates, in forgotten moments, in neglected texts, they awaken aged and potentially helpful spirits join in a new round of emancipatory struggle.

Cultural Logic is a rare scholarly journal in terms of its willingness to play host to such an array of radical spirits, including spirits which refuse to purchase a dubious

respectability in exchange for checking all but the most circumscribed and foreclosed forms of action at the door. There are, of course, prices to be paid for maintaining such a radical militancy in today's academy, as no doubt more than one of the contributors here can testify. To speak of radical and revolutionary history – of Marxism, of socialism, of communism – not as a corpse, but as something that still lives, or that can, that *must*, be called back to life, is an easy way to get oneself quietly (or not so quietly) escorted from the academic estate. As Jeffrey B. Perry puts it at the end of his appended history of his “The Developing Conjuncture” article,

The manner in which my article was deleted [from the journal *Daedalus*, where it had been both solicited and accepted] may serve to illuminate how dissent is controlled in “the academy.” As explicated in a letter to me from a former senior editor at a leading University Press, writing in the language of the academy –

[The essay] crosses the line laid down by liberal scholarship in which *it is permissible to describe and treat biographically the radical thought of historically located individual thinkers but it is not OK to treat that thought's value as inseparable from active application of its principles and insights to present circumstances of continuing inequality and oppression.* [emphasis added]

I am pleased to be able to say that not only Perry's article but many of the articles in this *CL* issue assume something like a “prophetic frame urgently demanding social justice in the present.” After all, for marxism, the project of understanding the world – while crucial – is inseparable, and in fact incomplete, without the task of changing it . . . and changing it in fundamental, emancipatory ways.

This issue was constructed, in part, on the assumption that grasping and learning from past radical and revolutionary efforts is vital for contemporary praxis. Thus, the present volume includes both radical re-evaluations of mid-20th century U.S. Communist and Popular Front culture and politics (**Barbara Foley** and **Christopher Vials**), close engagements with critical theory, from Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Bertolt Brecht, to more contemporary developments in queer theory (**Kevin Floyd**, **Carl Grey**

Martin, Rich Daniels), as well as in-depth discussions of theoretical contributions to socialist anti-racism represented by the work of Ted Allen and Hubert Harrison (Perry).

“Culture & Crisis” is also oriented around the proposition that we need to attend to what is novel in contemporary global capitalism without neglecting its basic continuities. Thus, **Robert Tally** focuses closely on the emergence and the cultural significance of financialization – derivatives, credit-default swaps, and other forms of “meta-capital” – in the wake of the financial collapse of 2007-8, while **Amedeo Policante** and **Max Haiven** return us to a close examination of Marx’s own categories and texts, with an eye to how Marx is still very much our contemporary in this latest capitalist crisis. Haiven situates and draws out the implications of Marxist thinking about the concept the *imagination* for an era of financialization, an era in which the imagination itself is in the process of being colonized by capital. His article seems particularly worthy of examination as the radical imagination in the US rekindles quite literally on the steps of Big Finance.² Policante explores the relationship between capitalist crisis and monstrosity, attending to the terrain of Marx’s own gothic literary imagination, a field where the line between conceptuality and rhetoric grows suggestively, provocatively thin.³ There is attention here to both the contemporary and to the classic, to the political and the poetic, and indeed to the relationship between these categories.

Contributors further highlight how contemporary crises are often best viewed not primarily as purely new developments, but as symptomatic of and intrinsic to capitalism itself as a mode of production. Many of the crises we face today – though not without their important twists of particularity – are the latest expression of endlessly reckless contradictions that are built into the very structure of the capitalist system. This system today continues to be characterized by contradictions: between social production and

² The fruit of Max Haiven’s own important editorial labors around the question of “What is the Radical Imagination?” can be found in the special of *Affinities A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action*. Vol. 4, No 2 (2010), <<http://journals.sfu.ca/affinities/index.php/affinities/issue/view/5>> (co-edited with Alex Khasnabish).

³ Policante’s piece has its uncanny prescience as well. As this introduction was being prepared for publication, a radical Halloween march occurred at Occupy Boston, one in which the participants – largely college students – have dressed up like “corporate zombies” and “vampire bankers” reviving this radical strain in Marx’s own conceptuality for our own moment. A pile of these “zombies,” signifying the “death of the American dream,” was featured on the front page of the *Boston Metro*.

private appropriation; between rising productivity and the stagnation of mass consumer demand; between surplus value, surplus capacity, and surplus population; between use value and exchange value; between anarchical competition and monopoly domination; between owners and workers; expropriators and dispossessed; exploiter and exploited; between endless speculation on futures, and futures that are coming to a hellish end.

Whatever resolution or stabilization may be possible with respect to this or that particular crisis, marxism teaches us that the underlying dynamics of the system will continue to perpetuate the possibility – indeed the necessity – of crises, so long as the system exists, so long as we do not find a way to overthrow and transcend it. As David Harvey has said, capitalism doesn't solve its crises; *it just moves them around*. The “solutions” of today's crises lay the bases for future ones, just as the neoliberalism, deregulation, and financialization that were the ruling class's “solution” to the previous profitability crisis of the 1970s set the stage for this latest Great Financial Crisis and Recession. So “successfully” did global capital roll back labor's power (through union-busting, through outsourcing and computerization, regulatory capture), so “successfully” did capital increase the rate of profit, and so “effectively” did capital undermine the Keynesian state apparatus (itself a capitalist “solution” to the previous capitalist crisis of the 1930s), that the ruling class is now faced with an over-abundance of accumulated capital on the one hand, a cash-strapped and debt-burdened mass of worker/consumers, on the other, and a state hen house so captured by capitalist foxes that it seems increasingly incapable of managing the system in a rational manner (even from the standpoint of long-term ruling class interests). As Marx observed, “the ultimate limit to capital is capital itself.” Could it be that the much-maligned commodification of the “democratic” political process itself (see the recent *Citizens United* Supreme Court ruling for the latest turn of this screw) may find its true significance not so much in the indignation it inspires in those who are appalled by such corporate capture of the political system – though this too – as by the way in which this spectacular campaign-finance infusion renders the capitalist state (at least in the US) increasingly and transparently

dopey, that is, incapable of strategic crisis-management?⁴ In this context, the potential – the opportunity – for an outright *legitimacy crisis* for the ruling class and its system grows.

It is worth underlining – as several contributors here do – that, from the standpoint of the masses of people on earth, even capitalism’s “good times” have been and will continue to be an ongoing source of life-crisis. It is a *vampire’s* health that this system seeks; it requires blood on which to feast. Its “progress” is akin to the progression of a *virus*; the earth and living creatures get to play the hosts. Capitalism’s incapacity to figure human needs (especially but not only the needs of the poor and the working classes) into its operations may be on starkest display during “times of crisis,” when homeless people huddle in sight of vacant foreclosed homes and when unemployment lines extend across tottering bridges that beg for repair and through the shadows of shuttered factories; but it is, in truth, an endemic feature of the system – present in “good” times and “bad.”

The increasingly acute contradiction between the growth imperative of this system and the natural limits of planet earth itself merely makes this always crucial point even more urgent.⁵ The *exchange value* calculations that structure this production system, and the society which supports it, render considerations of *use value* external, moot, mere sentimental conversation. To those, then, who make it their place to rally for “more jobs,” or who are eager to return things to “normal,” or who hope to restore the system’s ability to “grow,” we must ask: *How much more of such “growth” can our planet and its peoples take?* Even if it were hypothetically possible to “solve” the system’s current myriad economic crises and to thus “restore” the growth rates associated

⁴ One recalls the words of Guy Debord: “Once the running of a state involves a permanent and massive shortage of historical knowledge, that state can no longer be led strategically.” *Comments of the Society of the Spectacle* (Verso, 1990), p. 20.

⁵ For a very recent discussion of new evidence concerning the imminent crisis that capitalist carbon burning poses to this planet’s climate, see the paper “Climate Variability and Climate Change: The New Climate Dice” 10 November 2011 by James Hansen, M. Sato, and R. Ruedy. The bottom line of their convincing argument is that extreme “outlier” heat events, such as the Texas-Oklahoma heat wave of 2011, which were almost unheard of until recent decades (affecting much less than 1% of the earth’s surface before 1980), have now become present over 10% of the earth each year. If present trends of carbon burning continue, we should expect such events to become the new summer norm for much or even most of the warmer regions on earth by 2050.

with the “golden age” of 20th century capitalism,⁶ to do so would but bring on escalating crises – environmental crises, social crises – of a kind without precedent. As a recent radical Canadian documentary puts it: *Capitalism IS the Crisis*. As an insightful sign put it at an Occupy Wall Street rally last month, “The system isn’t broken . . . It was *built* this way.” To which, I would only add that it is in part because the system is now “broken” – so racked with crisis upon crisis – that more and more of us, even in “the belly of the beast,” can see clearly how it was built “in the first place.”

III. The Current Crisis Conjuncture of (White Supremacist, Ecocidal) US Capitalism

Though recognizing the general crisis tendencies of capital remains essential, grasping the particularities of the current crisis are crucial as well. Among the contributions in this special issue are two important articles dealing with the contemporary conjuncture of US capitalism from different, but complementary, vantage points. The first of these has already been mentioned, Jeffrey B. Perry’s “**The Developing Conjuncture: Some Insights from Hubert Harrison and Theodore W. Allen on the Centrality of the Fight against White Supremacy.**” Perry’s article – fit to be a short book in itself – takes up a number of key tasks. For starters, it offers an informative, penetrating discussion of the ways in which race and class inequalities continue to be bound up in contemporary US capitalism. Whether one considers statistics of poverty or unemployment, incarceration or malnutrition, the racialized nature of the current economic crisis – and of the “normal” functioning of US capitalism generally – can hardly be overstated. This sharp analysis of contemporary conditions sets the stage for a timely, in-depth reconsideration of the lives and the writings of Ted Allen and Hubert Harrison, two radical figures that have for too long been marginalized within both

⁶ It must be noted here that this “golden age” that was only made possible in the first place (for those who enjoyed it – the revolutionary peasants of Vietnam, for instance, saw only the downside of the boom in defense spending) by the worldwide devastation represented by World War II, not to mention the compulsion to capitalist reform represented by the existence of the Soviet-led socialist bloc and the spread of (often Communist-led) national liberation movements across the colonized world.

the discourse of the left and that of academic theorists of race. Each of these life-long socialist, anti-racist activists – neither of whom were academics – offers powerful insights for us today. Perry, who is himself a leading expert on both Allen and Harrison, situates the strikingly parallel arcs of their thought. In different contexts, each thinker traced the origins and the significance of white supremacy throughout US history. Each argued – on the basis of this historical analysis, and against the grain of most radicalism of his day – for the need to make anti-racism a central plank in the socialist platform.

According to Allen, the invention of “the white race” and the conferring of various forms of “white race privilege” are best understood as directed towards the creation and maintenance of a “ruling class social control formation.” This formation has played a crucial role in maintaining ruling-class hegemony, especially during periods of systemic crisis and popular rebellion, that is, when the legitimacy and the right to rule of the ruling capitalist class is open to contestation. Harrison and Allen each showed how ideas and social institutions that instill and promote such white privilege and white supremacy fundamentally have weakened the proletarian movement in the United States, especially at several key junctures. White supremacy, then, is deeply contrary to the interests and the needs of workers of *both* African and of European descent (among others). Not only are the practices and ideas of white supremacy ugly and morally wrong; they alienate “white” workers from African Americans, and throw “chalk” in the eyes of “white” workers by encouraging them to see their “white” capitalist exploiters as their allies and friends. In late 2011, within a new moment of widespread social revolt, Harrison’s and Allen’s focus on the historical role of white supremacy as well as their anti-white supremacist politics demand broad and serious reconsideration. Such reflection on past radical practice and theory is crucial if today’s activists are to avoid the tendencies and blind spots that have weakened, compromised, and divided past popular movements for fundamental social and economic change in the USA.

One question that emerges for me in the wake of Perry’s important restorative intervention is how the ruling class social control formation of the white race may be changing in form or function today, as the US population becomes increasingly multinational, with such a growing dependence on immigrant workers, (Latin Americans, South and East Asians, etc.) as to clearly problematize the always crude and arbitrary

lines of the US racial system. My own sense of this mix is that issues of criminalization, citizenship, and of legal status increasingly provide the “color” scheme for contemporary ruling-class social control, as a new shade of “whiteness” is dyed from the blood on the barbed American wires.

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A second major conjunctural intervention in this issue takes the form of a team-authored article that addresses both the economic and ecological crises of capitalism in their dialectical relation. In **“Moment of Transition: Structural Crisis and the Case for a Democratic Socialist Party,”** Michael Roberto, Gregory Meyerson, Jamey Essex, and Jeff Noonan argue for understanding the present conjuncture as representing the unfolding of a “terminal crisis” for global capitalism. They elucidate key aspects of the current socio-economic situation within the United States, as well as the paradoxes of capitalist growth, in terms of its worldwide environmental impacts. Their article, while not a party program or manifesto per se, is a call both to think the structure of the contemporary situation in a deep way – one that exposes the limits of liberal, Keynesian, and reformist approaches to the crisis – and to push on, theoretically and practically, to key questions of transitional socialist *agency*. In foregrounding the need for such revolutionary system-change – indeed the need for a socialist *party* of a new type – their contribution takes socialism beyond the point where much academic Marxist and even nominally socialist discourse tends to leave it, namely as a distant “horizon” devoutly to be wished, or else as the subjective fuel that is to drive forward social movement activism for reforms within the confines of the current system.⁷

As a call for a democratic socialist party that is not yet and not quite the declaration of such a party – in this editor’s assessment, the piece is more like a deeply informed call for the enactment of a committed, collective *process* aimed at forming such a party – “Moment of Transition” sits in productive tension with another important and timely article included in this issue, namely Dan DiMaggio’s **“Road Maps, Dead Ends, and the Search for Fresh Ground: How Can We Build a Socialist Movement in the**

⁷ This article is now available in pamphlet form, for \$3.00 USD. Please email Michael Roberto at <mrobt@aol.com> if you would like to obtain a bound copy.

21st Century?” A critical reflection on the current state of existing socialist organizations within the United States, DiMaggio’s contribution comes out of almost a decade’s work in *Socialist Alternative* (SA), one of a number of extant socialist organizations – some calling themselves “parties” others as “pre-party formations.”⁸ Written soon after his own exit from SA, DiMaggio’s essay is not just an insider’s account of one organization, but also an analysis of structural tendencies (limitations, redundancies) that cut across the existing socialist scene. It is also an attempt to think through these existing limits, failures, and challenges, towards new openings, new opportunities, and new potential forms of socialist organizing. DiMaggio charts “dead ends” (especially interesting is what he calls the “small business mentality”), while marking out some new potential “road maps”; his piece is not just a cautionary tale, but also a timely reflection on future strategy. Thus, despite his ultimately negative (if sympathetic) assessment of the prospects for the existing socialist groups, DiMaggio’s approach unites with Roberto, Meyerson, Essex, and Noonan (and one hopes, others!) in the broad call to recommit to rebuilding a socialist party movement, on the solid ground of a fresh analysis of contemporary conditions (objective and subjective both).⁹

What then are some of the key elements of the current crisis that are relevant to orienting a new socialist movement in the United States?

The “Moment of Transition” team argues that an intensification of fascist processes is not only a major feature but even a structural necessity of the current crisis of capital (that is, barring a socialist revolution that transforms the mode of production itself). Also vital is their argument that a serious socialist movement today needs to be not only an *eco*-socialist movement, but also a movement that takes food politics seriously, one that wages a struggle for a new ethics of life value, and that approaches energy questions in as scientific and materialist a way as possible.

⁸ Readers can find Socialist Alternative’s homepage and their newspaper *Justice* at <http://www.socialistalternative.org>.

⁹ An excerpted version of DiMaggio’s essay was published (with permission) – and vigorously debated (with 78 comments as of 10/28/2011) – on the radical-revolutionary website, the **Kasama Project**, <http://www.kasamaproject.org>. See: <http://kasamaproject.org/2011/05/17/dead-ends-road-maps-building-a-new-socialist-movement/>.

Politically, a key contention of “Moment of Transition” (MT) is that “we are now in a period when capitalism, especially U.S. capitalism, can no longer grant reforms in any significant sense, due to the particulars of its decline. So, then, it follows that a party that fights for democratic-socialist values in a transitional stage will in effect be a revolutionary party.” Similarly, the authors argue “that the objective conditions that allowed revolutionary socialism to turn into social-democratic reformism are no longer present; the possibility for another historic compromise of social democracy is now off the table. In short, social democratic reformism in the United States is dead. What were once considered reformist struggles are now objectively revolutionary insofar as the system literally cannot accommodate them.”

Undergirding this bold argument is their comparative analysis of the current capitalist crisis. “Unlike the 1930s,” they note, “this depression in the making is the product of a moribund empire now in the grips of a structural crisis that offers no prospects for recovery – unless recovery means wider imperialist wars, and greater regimentation of labor and social life at home.” That is to say, US capitalism is not just reluctant but structurally incapable of producing anything like a “New New Deal,” due to its deep indebtedness and its waning international competitiveness, as well as the anomalous “subjective” factors, which constrain ruling class discourse and action in ways that appear to exceed even the immediate and “objective” necessities of the situation, from the standpoint of capital.¹⁰

In a way, alongside the stark pessimism of this conjunctural analysis, there is a kind of subjective optimism here, based in the belief that, other than the steel club of repression (which as we have seen recently in Oakland and New York, is as likely to fan the flames of revolt as to smother them), the capitalist class has relatively few tricks left in the bag.

Is it possible, however, that this seemingly structural intransigence and inflexibility of contemporary US capitalism – and the apparent short-sightedness of the

¹⁰ To this list of constraints, one might also add the interdependencies of capitalist globalization, which arguably pull against a return to outright inter-imperialist world war – China-bashing and the US-led military assaults on half a dozen East African and West Asian countries, notwithstanding.

political establishment – is as much a reflection of the long-standing weakness of contemporary labor, socialist, and communist movements as it is of any built-in constraints and underlying fragility of the system as such? Is it the case that even in the face of mass movements aiming to “make corporations and the rich pay their fair share” – the *Occupy* movement emerges as a test-case here – the US government and capitalist firms will still find themselves structurally incapable of shifting funds from the bank accounts of millionaires and billionaires into public school budgets or infrastructure-based jobs programs? Is US capitalism cut off from Keynesianism henceforth for structural reasons, or merely for more contingent reasons of politics and ideology? (And what is the relationship between the *structures* and the *contingencies* here?) Do the objective realities of inter-imperial capitalist competition bar such strategic concessions altogether or merely pull against such measures to a degree? To put it provocatively: are the leading capitalists as desperate and hamstrung as some suggest, or are they merely – for the moment – arrogant and greedy to the point, one wonders and hopes, of vulnerability and political de-legitimation (which would be to say, of hubris)?

It is but one more exciting aspect of the present developing world revolt against finance capitalism (aka “Wall Street”) that we may see such hypotheses, which might have seemed merely academic just six months ago, tested before our very eyes. Indeed we can ourselves test them! Some questions can only be answered in practice, through struggle (and the summation of that struggle).

While the “Moment of Transition” team’s case that the capitalist system will be stuck in deep crisis for an extended period places them in the company of most mainstream as well as radical commentators, it is also important that we not underestimate the resources and the flexibility (co-optive and disruptive as well as repressive) of the system we are up against. A correlative to this would be that we must not neglect the need to cultivate not only resistance to immediate attacks of the system but also the kinds of revolutionary, socialist, indeed communist, subjectivity that will be necessary to sustain a movement for global egalitarian system-change, in light of the repression but also the concessions and other attempts to confuse this movement, which, despite the constraints on the system, are still likely to come. Barack Obama’s recent “Jobs Plan” here provides perhaps the latest example – even as its coupling with the Bi-Partisan

Budget “Super-Committee” tasked with enforcing a new round of “belt tightening” suggests the largely gestural aspect of this election year stimulation.¹¹

How exactly these “reformist” struggles can make the transformation from objectively (or potentially) revolutionary, to subjectively (and actually) revolutionary is a question that Roberto, Meyerson, Essex, and Noonan do not address directly, even as they make a material contribution to framing it. In short: what is the relationship between “transition” and “revolution” here? Is this “socialist transition” to be conceived chiefly in incremental and evolutionary terms, as the accretion of local liberated zones (here the Occupations come to mind as footholds), the growth of campaigns around “transitional demands,” or attempts to defend “progressive” programs or legislation from austerity – quantity turning into quality, over space and time, through a kind of “dual power” approach? Or, rather, are we to conceive this transition in terms of a qualitative break (or a series of such breaks), including revolutionary ruptures (the launching of an insurrection, the overthrowing of the state, the expropriation of the expropriators, etc.)? And if the latter, how does an awareness of this need for revolutionary rupture inform how we think about radical organizing today? How ought one to relate to the existing state at its various levels? What ought to be the relationship between these two dynamics (reform and revolution), each of which may be operative simultaneously? What is to be the proposed Democratic Socialist Party’s relationship to this dialectic of immediate “reform” struggles and autonomous localism, on the one hand, and more self-consciously national and international revolutionary efforts, on the other? Perhaps these too are irreducibly practical questions that cannot be theorized adequately in advance of experience, experimentation, discovery, struggle, and summation. (Once again, the Occupy movement presents itself as a laboratory for such experiments, experiments in which those who are true to the militant spirit of Marx assume the role of test subjects, not only observers.)

¹¹ Indeed, to the extent the Super-Committee, even in the face of the mass revolt of Occupy, continues to strip an expected \$1-3 trillion from social programs, the MT thesis gains in plausibility.

Writing well before the outbreak of Occupy Wall Street, the MT team help us to raise these and other vital questions, while calling for readers to bring the imperative of system change and the banner of socialism boldly into existing fight-backs and reform battles, as well as into the emerging terrain of Occupy.

At the very least, the co-authors' penetrating take on the constraints limiting capitalist concessions suggests a couple of things: 1) we can expect that as fight-backs continue to emerge (around social security, around Medicare, against the austerity of the "Super Committee," around education, or elsewhere) they will likely encounter escalating levels of force from above rather than easy accommodation from the ruling establishment; 2) that we should expect any number of "creative" capitalist schemes for inculcating a "new normal" of heightened exploitation; 3) that there is no shortage of places to dive into revolutionary socialist or anti-capitalist work, at the present time. That is, since the system's ability to accommodate the social movements is greatly reduced due to its structural constraints in the present conjuncture, *many* of its links may be weak, if they are tested; it might then seem counter-productive for us to spend too much time agonizing on a theoretical plane over which is "*the* weakest link," as if there were only one or two; and 4) that the role of a socialist party-movement may be not so much that of bringing the proper ideas to the struggle – since these struggles already are incipiently ("objectively") revolutionary, raising demands that the system cannot meet – but helping to build and to link up, to sustain, to support those struggles that are emerging. To borrow the terms of Alain Badiou: a militant subject would help the radical currents of the movement – those aspiring to truth, to universality, and to the satisfaction of human needs – to maintain fidelity to the emancipatory Event of their emergence, in the face of opportunities for compromise, exhaustion, betrayal. The mission of socialist (and communist) movers, then, would be to help make explicit and sustaining those life-affirming social(ist) values that are already implicit in the struggles to protect or extend rights and access to needed resources to all, nationally and internationally. A vital role emerges: To render the socialist – the egalitarian, the communist – *unconscious* of these fights *conscious*, to help local movements become trans-local, so that coordinated and strategic activity becomes possible and so that the movement can know its own (and be spurred on by the vision of its own) potentiality, which is to say, so that it can come to

recognize (and thus to become) what it in fact, already *is*.¹² As Marx and Engels put it long ago in the *Communist Manifesto* (a text, we should recall, that came into being during a prior moment of unprecedented urban uprisings and mass organization): to help bring out *the universal in the particular, the global in the local, the future in the present*.

Julie Tarrant's essay "**Class and the New Family in the Wake of the Housing Collapse**" further charts the prospects, challenges, and dangers facing an emerging anti-capitalist movement, by focusing on the realm of social reproduction. Tarrant incisively attends both to the ideological mystifications and to the material determinations around "family life." Against the grain of those analysts of gender relations who one-sidedly celebrate the development of the post-nuclear family as a kind of liberation, Tarrant offers a sobering dialectical analysis of the relationship of freedom and un-freedom in the family as determined within contemporary capitalism. Just as significantly, at a conceptual level, Tarrant offers a persuasive defense of classical Marxist analysis, reminding us of how much – theoretically and politically – can depend on the proper interpretation of an absolutely essential concept – for instance: *class*. In the face of those neo and post-marxists who have distanced themselves from a concept of *class as exploitation* and of *capitalism as a distinct mode of production* (one in which the very notion of *production* itself is fundamentally altered – and skewed – by a subordination of use values to the accumulation of exchange value), she offers a radical critique of influential attempts to "rethink" Marxism. Tarrant further offers a lucid material survey of the economic forces facing and framing US households in the context of the Great Recession, drawing out practical and historical implications of her theoretical argument.¹³ Not only her particular conclusions, but also her method of dialectical and materialist engagement are instructive. Maintaining a close focus on her particular field, Tarrant is nonetheless able to highlight the conceptual and political problems with reformist approaches that amount to attempting to humanize capitalism, or achieve communism

¹² I write this statement about "socialist subjects" in the knowledge that Badiou himself tends to reject granting socialism any privileged ontological status. Indeed he attributes the defeat of the 20th-century movements in no small part to the socialist particularity curtailing communist universality.

¹³ For a revealing recent breakdown on US household incomes and subsistence expenditures that supports and brings up to date Tarrant's view, see "Half of Americans in Poverty? The Facts Say It's True," by Paul Buchheit. *Common Dreams*. Dec. 27, 2011 <<http://www.commondreams.org/view/2011/12/27-0>>.

without a revolution.¹⁴ Whatever the objective basis for reformism may or may not be today, Tarrant's essay points to some of the ways that reformism remains a tendency on the "subjective" side, even within intellectual and political tendencies that call themselves Marxist.

IV. Confronting the Ecological and Energy Crisis

Less debatable than the demise of the basis for reformist compromise in the United States is the glaring incapacity of global capitalism to meaningfully address, let alone resolve, the interlocking environmental crises now facing humanity and other living things on planet earth. As John Bellamy Foster, Fred Magdoff, and others associated with the journal *Monthly Review* have been arguing for years now, capitalism's continuing "business as usual" constitutes, in effect, a "war on the planet." Updating Rosa Luxemburg's famous epic choice – "Socialism or Barbarism?" – they have written that humanity now faces a historic and unprecedented choice: "Socialism or Exterminism?"¹⁵

It ought to be to the great rhetorical and political advantage of the revolutionary left today that an eco-anticapitalist case can be made clearly, simply, in popular language: *How can a system whose basic principle is endless growth continue on forever on a finite planet without causing crisis upon crisis?*¹⁶ *What organism that we know of grows forever?* As Victor Wallis put it in *Monthly Review*, it does not require a great deal of expert knowledge or special study to recognize that *maximum* is not the same as *optimum*.

But just as the development of a socialist economic program needs to grow beyond a critique of capitalism's current practices, so "Moment of Transition" asserts, an

¹⁴ The argument in this essay is now available in expanded book form. See Tarrant, Julie P. *The Material Family*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2011. Print. *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* 74.

¹⁵ For a recent, concise, and lucid overview of Foster's ecological critique of capitalism, see the text version of a speech he recently gave at Occupied Wall Street, "Capitalism and Ecological Catastrophe" <<http://www.energybulletin.net/stories/2011-11-05/capitalism-and-environmental-catastrophe>>.

¹⁶ "Endless accumulation" here in the sense of both *without limit*, and *without rational direction*.

ecosocialist movement needs to produce, disseminate, debate, amend, and ultimately, to implement, alternative proposals, models, and plans for how to run things differently, as the rule of capital is broken. And while it is very important not to let secondary contradictions be hoisted above primary unities – those on the radical Left must find ways to work together to expose and to defeat the common foe, tackling the principal contradiction of the day, and thus, by doing so, opening up the actual political and historical space wherein all those secondary contradictions come to *actually matter* – these practical discussions, about how to run socialist society – ecologically speaking, energy-wise – need to be openly aired. However potentially “divisive” such topics may be, now is as good a time as any to broach them.

* * *

In the wake of the collapse of last year’s environmental summit in Copenhagen, capitalism’s demonstrable incapacity to make even basic strides towards ecological sustainability becomes Socialism’s opportunity, insofar as a habitable earth remains humanity’s necessity. Indeed, insofar as it is within the realm of energy and ecology that capitalism’s anarchic barbarity is becoming most acutely and definitively acknowledged, (and insofar as cynicism about the possibility of re-organizing industrial civilization prevents the already pervasive negative awareness of capitalism’s limits from becoming positively socialist-revolutionary), to that extent, developing and popularizing a scientifically valid, serious eco-socialist energy plan – a plan for how modern life could actually go on beyond capitalism – becomes a key aspect of the present hegemonic struggle to win people to socialism in the first place. It is not just a matter for “after the revolution.” To the contrary, it may be in part by convincing broad strata of people (including scientists, engineers, and others) that a properly conceived eco-socialism can in fact resolve the energy and environmental contradictions that both a reckless capitalism and an insufficiently materialist green movement cannot address, that the revolution itself will become possible. Without such serious proposals and plans – without the plausibility of *possibility* – broad strata will remain unconvinced of the feasibility of socialist transition. Whatever particular mix of energy sources, reorganization of production and reproduction, and/or conservation that a serious ecosocialist plan ultimately promotes, the principle of our movement now and going

forward must be to encourage reasonable discussion and broad, informed debate based in close study of the relevant, available evidence and historical experience. The stakes are too high here to let emotions and inherited doxa rule the day.

That said: it seems a safe bet that no part in the current issue will attract more controversy than the second section of this MT essay, authored primarily by Gregory Meyerson, in which he argues that *nuclear power* (yes, nuclear power) *needs to be seriously considered as a part of this ecosocialist vision*. Meyerson here calls for a radical rethinking of the green common sense that pervades much of the Left today.

This section of the essay, it should be said at the outset, is not so much “pro-nuclear,” as it is pro-*evidence* when it comes to weighing the available evidence concerning available sources of energy. According to Meyerson, the need for seriously reconsidering nuclear emerges in relationship to: 1) a frank recognition of the acute nature of the climate crisis created by industrial capitalist-driven global warming, and 2) a thorough, critical examination of renewable energy sources, in particular solar and wind. An implied third premise of his argument is that to abandon industrial civilization altogether in the form of a radical power down, as advocated by anarcho-primitivists as well as those in the “Deep Green Resistance” movement, would involve such catastrophic human impacts (including even mass human die-off) as to warrant relegating such a plan to a last ditch scenario, to be avoided if at all possible.

Concerning the second basis, which is likely to be less familiar to readers of this journal, Meyerson argues that the resource demands and the sheer spatial footprint of the infrastructure necessary to collect renewables, these so-called “fuels from heaven” (as Evo Morales has called them), have been widely and dramatically underestimated.¹⁷ Even more importantly, the *intermittent* nature of these power sources (“the wind isn’t always blowing; the sun isn’t always shining”) makes them – in their current, and foreseeable forms – extremely inefficient, and, indeed, even altogether *non-viable* as a consistent source of base-load power, on a national, let alone a global scale. Considering the sky-high carbon emissions and the immediate dangers represented by fossil fuels,

¹⁷ It is worth noting that Morales’ Bolivia itself is deeply dependent on the burning of natural gas.

and especially by *coal* – associated not only with deadly mining practices, but with pollution that alone kills hundreds of thousands of people per year – the question emerges: *Where (if anywhere at all) can global society potentially derive socially necessary base power in a way that does not amount to killing off the planet and our species?*

Lacking such a base power source, it is difficult to see how humanity can avoid the need for a radical power-down, requiring essentially the end of industrial society altogether, a possibility which, like nuclear power or renewables, should not be rejected out of hand, but weighed carefully in terms of its benefits, and its costs, its opportunities, and its dangers.

Meyerson's case builds upon the important scientific work of James Hansen, Barry Brook,¹⁸ and others, but goes well beyond these figures by connecting their serious, evidence-based critique of renewals (and their appraisals of new developments in nuclear power) to a radical critique of capitalism, in terms of the latter's built-in imperatives towards anarchic competition and endless growth. This essay-section constitutes a rare attempt to fuse marxist critical perspectives with not just an open-ness to, but a sophisticated understanding of, nuclear energy. It represents a synthesis (and an open-ness) that is long overdue, notwithstanding and in fact all the more important in light of its likely counter-intuitive, indeed sacrilegious appearance for radical greens, including many eco-socialists today.¹⁹

There have of course been a number of serious concerns raised about the safety of nuclear energy and the dangers of radiation (and the trustworthiness of state energy agencies to manage them), especially since the recent Fukushima disaster in Japan earlier this year, and with good reason. Meyerson addresses a number of these reheated anti-

¹⁸ See Barry Brooks' website *Brave New Climate* at <<http://www.bravenewclimate.com>>.

¹⁹ For instance, in an otherwise excellent recent article by John Bellamy Foster, alluded to above, he discusses (and dismisses) nuclear energy in a single sentence as “a Faustian bargain if there ever was one.” (No argument or evidence provided, or required.) Indeed, it should be admitted that acknowledging the argument for nuclear power does threaten to complicate the persuasive rhetoric Foster here deploys, namely that which opposes an *endlessly growing, centralized capitalism* to the *sustainable decentralized socialism*. The elegant simplicity of contrasting *Growth vs. No Growth* would no longer satisfy, as the essence of sustainability shifts from the presence or absence of “growth” to *the type* of growth, the *sort* of energy, the *kind* of centralization, etc.

nuclear arguments carefully – if not always gently – refuting each, soundly, at least in this editor’s view.

On a more ideological plane, it has been argued and no doubt will be argued again that for self-professed eco-socialists to advocate nuclear energy at this particular historical moment is strategically mistaken. To do so, some will say, is to choose (perversely) to swim against the current, when the tide is (finally) turning against Big Energy, Big Nuclear, and the state that represents them. Consider for instance the recently elected Green Party’s announcement to shutter Germany’s nuclear reactors, or the recent referendum against the nuclear plans of Italy’s Berlusconi, where some 90% of voters said “No.” Hardly a week has gone by since Fukushima but that Amy Goodman’s esteemed *DemocracyNow!* program has offered yet another frightening possible scenario involving nuclear radiation’s alleged or assumed effects on the population (a pattern of coverage that, it must be said, has also led to the neglect of the actual, verifiable human tragedy of this 2011 disaster: the *tens of thousands* of people killed, the *millions* displaced *by the earthquake and tsunami* – not by the nuclear plants’ safety failures, which have yet to produce a single verified fatality).

Considering such attitudes, it is tempting to fall back on an old joke repopularized by Slavoj Zizek. A man drops his keys in the dark. A second man finds him looking for them later, under the streetlight. “Why are you looking for your keys here?” the second man asks, “Didn’t you leave them over *there*?” To which the hunched searcher replies: “Yes. But it’s much easier to see here under the light!” *It is* no doubt much easier to look for the ecological key where the light is presently brightest. But what good is it to concentrate on supporting the well-lighted (widely televised!) efforts to find the key to a sustainable energy transition if the key in fact lies elsewhere? In an age of superficial coverage and surface appeals, the urge to build quickly must not lead us to found radical hopes on sand.

Asked some months ago for his response to the Italian referendum against developing nuclear power plants, Meyerson called the vote “tragically misinformed.” As he explained the poll results:

It’s simple. The realities of our situation with renewables have not registered on

the public consciousness because renewables (wind and solar I mean) are not producing appreciable power and people have electricity due to fossil fuels and nuclear imports so they are not faced with the immediate consequences of their decision. And frankly won't be [until it is too late]. What would constitute an irrefutable, nearly self-evident slap in the face concerning this energy position?

Meyerson went on to add that despite or even because of the decision not to develop nuclear power plants in Italy, Italians are increasingly likely to purchase their electricity from *France*, where nuclear generation of electricity is the norm (and where CO2 emissions, it's worth stating, are among the lowest in Europe). In a rather darkly pessimistic vein, he then went on:

The "hope" position around renewables will be nearly impossible to dislodge until it's too late or close to it. At this point, not only will nuclear appear necessary. So will massive planned genetic and bioengineering.

Criticizing what he calls the "opportunistic populism of the left," Meyerson closed, quipping, "How about a similar response to polls around *evolution* or *revolution* for that matter?" In the view of this editor, Meyerson raises a crucial point here about the dangers of catering to public opinion, in matters of scientific or political truth.²⁰

Still, on a still more abstract level, it might be argued that to keep open the possibility of expanded "clean" energy production (here in the swollen belly of the beast especially), signals a mistake in ideological orientation. It is, some will claim, to short-circuit (or detour) the much-needed collective process of radically reconceiving socially necessary energy production and consumption (and the cult of endless accumulation), whether with regard to consumerism, to transportation, to housing and city planning, to agriculture, to leisure, etc. The ecological/energy crisis, one can argue, provides the ideal opportunity to expose (in a popularly accessible way) the stark limits and ultimately toxic

²⁰ It is to be hoped that the massive confidence inspired by the Occupy movement will counteract this desperate clinging pessimist opportunism of the left; we must make space in our Free Universities for serious discussions about any number of controversial topics.

implications of capitalism's growth imperative, and thus of the need to radically alter our very ways of life. Doesn't the clarity of the impending energy-environmental crisis dramatize the need for radically rethinking and reorganizing social life from top to bottom? "*Endless Growth = Death of Planet*". . . *What could be simpler?* Why clutter or confuse popular consciousness? Why douse post-Fukushima fury by arguing for the prospect of better, cleaner energy expansion? Critics might argue, with sincerity and good reason—and even setting aside the possibility of future nuclear disasters—that the planet, and the myriad life forms on it, cannot withstand the prevailing mode of production, and its attendant waste and mass consumption levels, even if all of this were to be powered exclusively by some sort of "clean energy." Thus it would follow that our primary goal at present should be to figure out how to radically *reduce* energy and resource consumption, as well as waste, by any and all available avenues, and precisely *not* to be encouraging discussion of how we still might manage to produce yet *more* energy (and hence more consumption and waste, etc.).

As radical greens well know, CO₂ emissions, global warming, and climate change, potentially catastrophic as they are, constitute *but one* piece of the environmental crisis that we now face. The ecocidal implications of capitalism, its reduction of nature and humanity to sheers means of accumulating exchange value – to *commodity* and to *externality*, if you will – can likewise be seen in the epidemic of species extinction, soil erosion and the rupturing of the nitrogen cycle, the increasing acidification of the oceans, the rise of various sorts of toxicity, etc.²¹ There *is* here a real danger of *any* green technological fetishism, not just among those supporting the transition to nuclear power, but among those pushing for renewables as well. A similar fetishism of decentralization also calls for critical scrutiny. It needs to be underscored that shifting to CO₂-free power sources alone will do little to nothing to address several other geo-ecological thresholds that we are on the verge of crossing. Technology alone is not going to save us. (All of this, it bears emphasizing, Meyerson is well aware of.) Moreover, as Meyerson argues, from the simple standpoint of implementation, a worldwide shift to clean energy – whether renewables, nuclear, or some geographically attuned mix of the two – remains a

²¹ According to Foster's recent writings, we are facing *nine* separate planetary tipping points, three of which – global warming, species extinction, and the disruption to the nitrogen cycle – have already been breached.

utopian fantasy so long as the implementation and dissemination of available technologies is constrained by the law of value, with its global anarchy and its myopic focus on bottom-line competition trumping meaningful cooperation at every stop. That is, capitalism must be transcended, and the forces and relations of production radically transformed, not only because its endless expansion amounts to a “war on the planet,” but because under capitalism it is impossible for us to even begin to deploy already available palliative or preventative “green” technologies in a genuine and rational way, not to mention an internationally and socially just one.

It may be true that framing the energy debate in terms of “How we can meet current (or future) global demand for energy, without producing so-much CO₂ that we kill off half the species on the planet, including our own” runs the risks of naturalizing the current consumption patterns of consumer capitalist as if these are humanity’s genuine “needs.” Who is to say that current energy usage patterns and levels are in any way necessary or justified? Or that we couldn’t get along on less, much less, and that we wouldn’t even be better off for it? And so on . . . This editor is very much in sympathy with such concerns and questions. Indeed, the later sections of this co-authored essay (lead authored by Jeff Noonan) argue for defining *human needs* in a fairly strict, and even a narrowly biological sense, in a way that opens the door to a massive reconsideration of currently understood so-called “needs” and wants in light of socialist values of sustainability, equality, and solidarity.²²

That said, the point remains: if we are going to root our visions for a future eco-socialist society in a materialist framework, then thinking about where future power can and cannot – must and must not – actually come from remains a necessity. Further, the view that the ecological-environmental crisis can be handled by focusing on demand-side reductions alone appears to me to be not only factually untenable, but symptomatic of a leftism that is allergic to taking responsibility for the running of society (including actual production, with all the messy and difficult dilemmas that entails), one that prefers to focus on building “resistance” and niche lifestyle alternatives on the margins of a production system thought to be too compromised and impure to be directly engaged . . .

²² My thinking on this front has benefitted from many a lengthy conversation not only with Greg Meyerson, but with issue-contributor Carl Martin, as well.

or taken over and run differently. It is a Left that sees ecological and social transformation as *a matter of giving up the (“western”) goal of exerting control over nature*, rather than, say, *a matter of exerting collective control over nature in a radically more enlightened, more equitable, more sustainable, and more internationally just way.*²³ This is a Left that tends to focus on the realm of consumption rather than production, a Left that, for all its professions of international solidarity and multicultural sensitivity, tends to lose sight of the fact that for many people on earth (over a billion in fact) the most immediate problem is not that they consume *too much* electricity, but they have *little to no access* to electricity at all. Billions of people on earth now suffer from a painfully *low* level of daily consumption – too little food, too little clean water, too little decent housing, a poverty of personal possessions, a complete lack of access to modern forms of transportation or communication, etc.

As Meyerson explains, current world energy consumption is 15 Terawatts (TW). However, if the seven billion people on earth were to consume as much energy as an average European (not the average American, who uses double this amount), that would bring the total global energy *up* to 30TW. This is assuming no further population growth, and an end to the capitalist growth imperative, following a massive global redistribution

²³ For a recent example of this approach, which conflates capitalism with growth with the urge to control nature, and which deploys a binary of green-decentralization vs. capitalist-centralized energy expansion in such a way as to dismiss nuclear energy without serious consideration, see Naomi Klein’s otherwise quite informative and insightful Nov. 9, 2011, *Nation* article, “Capitalism vs. the Climate.” <http://www.thenation.com/article/164497/capitalism-vs-climate>. As she writes,

The fact that the earth’s atmosphere cannot safely absorb the amount of carbon we are pumping into it is a symptom of a much larger crisis, one born of the central fiction on which our economic model is based: that nature is limitless, that we will always be able to find more of what we need, and that if something runs out it can be seamlessly replaced by another resource that we can endlessly extract. But it is not just the atmosphere that we have exploited beyond its capacity to recover – we are doing the same to the oceans, to freshwater, to topsoil and to biodiversity. The expansionist, extractive mindset, which has so long governed our relationship to nature, is what the climate crisis calls into question so fundamentally. The abundance of scientific research showing we have pushed nature beyond its limits does not just demand green products and market-based solutions; it demands a new civilizational paradigm, one grounded not in dominance over nature but in respect for natural cycles of renewal – and acutely sensitive to natural limits, including the limits of human intelligence.

Though it has its insights, this shifting of the discussion from the realm of “hubristic” science to the realm of “humble” limits and “respect” for nature is arguably itself a symptom of the idealism of the anti-nuclear green left.

of wealth and resources (a global rebalancing to make up for colonialism, etc.). How far can we reduce this amount through various collective efforts to reconceive, streamline, and clean-up consumption patterns? 10%? 20%? 50%? 80%? Where will such energy reductions come from? Certainly, there is no shortage of realms to reconceive and reconstruct. Agriculture, Housing and Urban Planning, Transportation, Conspicuous Consumption of the Rich, Leisure, Industrial production itself, Waste recycling and down cycling. But how will the savings add up? Which is to say: How much power will we continue to actually need? And how much can we afford to produce without further damaging ourselves and the environment past the point of sustainability and survivability? The point remains that this energy must come from *somewhere* – somewhere besides fossil fuels – and we do ourselves and others no favors by resisting a reasoned, logical, evidence-based debate about all available power sources, a debate that needs to encompass their costs, risks, dangers, etc. as well as their benefits, proven abilities, future prospects. At stake here is among other things what type of future we can honestly envision for ourselves and for others under a post-capitalist, global eco-socialism.

Just as important, however, may be the methodological stakes of this debate. That is, since Marx and Engels, scientific socialism has aspired to fuse the goal of socialism and communism with the world as it actually exists, not as we have been told, or would like it to be. The utopian horizon of a liberated future must not bleed into utopian delusions about the ground on which we presently stand.

In a time of “disaster capitalism,” when actual, staged, and perceived crises and emergencies abound, impatience with reasoned debate and with the evaluation of empirical evidence – even at times *panic* in the face of events – are understandable and predictable responses. We can expect such panic to sweep through many sectors of society, in ways foreseeable and not, and we should certainly expect such confusion and impatience to be actively encouraged by reactionary elements, deliberately as well as matter of routine. But if the revolutionary project is not to be swept up in the winds and consumed in the flames of panic and opinion, such non-materialist approaches must be consciously struggled against.

V. How to figure the Future? The Dialectics of Nature and Children in the Age of Terminal Capitalism

Even if we bracket the grotesquely influential know-nothing pseudo-science of climate denialists and the toxic confusion of corporate green-washing, the political meaning of the environmental crisis, with its projections of imminent *future* planetary breakdown, is not self-evident; it too takes its meaning in part from that which lies beyond it. This is to say, in order for consciousness of climate catastrophe to give rise to revolutionary, anti-capitalist, socialist, or communist impulses, it requires a mediation – one that we cannot take for granted within the cynical context of a terminal capitalism that interpellates cosmopolitan subjects as detached, autonomous individuals caught in an endless present, without common history or future. To put it bluntly: *Why should we care about those who will live on this earth after we leave it?* From an ecosocialist perspective, we might formulate this mediation as a new radical need: namely, the need to cultivate a social and political imagination capable of sustaining intergenerational solidarity, and/or, a felt connection to Nature.²⁴

This need throws into stormy relief currently fashionable trends in American critical theory, particularly a strand associated with Lee Edelman's provocative and influential polemic, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke, 2004). *No Future* takes aim at the notion of collective futurity itself – most especially what he calls “reproductive futurity” as figured in the all-pervasive image of “the Child,” which Edelman identifies as a bad utopian figure masking a repressive, hetero-normative narcissism that rules, and seeks to endlessly reproduce, the present. The imperative to “protect the child,” and to “insure the future,” which for Edelman lies at or near the beating heart of contemporary American culture and politics (from right to radical left), is simultaneously a self-defeating, self-deconstructing imaginary attempt to fill the inevitable grave of the Signifier with projected future presence, as well as a veiled but violent call to force actually existing queers and non-heterosexual reproducers into actual graves; they are the figures which hetero-normative futurity simultaneously depends upon

²⁴ Arguably, such a need for an imaginary connection to some figuration of future generations is a key feature of revolutionary subjectivity itself, insofar as such a revolutionary project demands of its subjects a willingness to give of their time, their energy, and even their very lives for end goals that many revolutionary subjects will not in fact even live to see.

and seeks to destroy. Such queers, in their very refusal to reproduce, are figured within this “hetero-normative futurist” discourse as “threatening the children,” indeed, as endangering “the Future” itself. The shocking radicalism of Edelman’s argument (a post-structural one indebted to Lacan and DeMan) is that in stark contrast with liberal and assimilationist calls for the safe civic inclusion of the homosexual or the queer within the body politic,²⁵ Edelman instead calls – in a tone that frequently reminds one of a manifesto – for the queer to become what it (always already) is: the embodied specter that rightwing discourse can’t help but conjure. He calls his readers not, in other words, to shy away from, but to boldly affirm the radical negativity that the queer cannot but come to represent in contemporary American culture.²⁶

Edelman’s book is given a rigorous reading and a dialectical critique in this issue by **Kevin Floyd** in his article “**The Importance of Being Childish: Queer Utopians and Historical Contradiction.**” Bringing together Georg Lukacs’ notions of totality and reification, with the subversive critical project of queer theory, and in so doing expanding upon work which he develops at length in his remarkable book *The Reification of Desire* (Minnesota 2009),²⁷ Floyd teases out the particular non-identity he discerns in *No Future*’s own argument, namely its deployment of the figure of Theodor Adorno, whose own utopian figuring of childhood and death (most notably in his classic, indispensable, *Minima Moralia*) contradicts Edelman’s in important ways. In a superb and generous work of immanent critique, Floyd locates in Edelman’s “anti-utopian” polemic a misrecognized and historically symptomatic mode of utopian thinking. It is the hope of this editor that Floyd’s essay represents but the first of many serious exchanges within and between the often ostensibly distinct, but in fact deeply connected, “camps” of marxism and queer theory, here in the electronic pages of *Cultural Logic*.

For Adorno, as Floyd makes clear, the Child is a Utopian figure, yes, but not in the false-positive sense that offers the subject a fantasy of fullness, immortal plenitude

²⁵ A recent example of such efforts at civic inclusion, one not discussed by Edelman, would be the effort to include gays openly in the imperialist US military; see for instance the recently hailed “progressive victory” scored against the homophobic policy “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

²⁶ One is of course reminded of the famous opening passages of *The Communist Manifesto*.

²⁷ Floyd, Kevin. *The Reification of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2009) <<http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-reification-of-desire>>.

and ever-recurring sameness. Rather, its utopian valence inhabits a more negative and dialectical mode. In *Minima Moralia*, as Floyd illuminates this text, the child haunts the subject of the present as a peculiar, puzzled and puzzling figure, one who exists at the rough edge of the intersection of past and present, essence and appearance, a figure that helps to conjure a lived sense of the boundary between use value and exchange value between the worlds of play and of work, lingering in the space between what Marx referred to as the formal and real subsumption under capital. The child(ish) figure here serves not to blackmail endless reproduction of the same, but to defamiliarize the “adult” world of commodified capitalist relations – that is, to make that very “sameness” look “different.” Adorno’s children remind us of how strange our “normality” once appeared; this then becomes an allegory for how odd it may appear again, “in the light of redemption” following a revolutionary rupture in social relations. If the child forms an ideological bridge from past to present to future in *Minima Moralia*, it is precisely as an extrapolated site of potential rupture, not as an oppressive enforcer of continuity.

If they remain fantasies and conjured memories, not literal descriptions or even accurate memories based in actual experiences, the function of Adorno’s children is radically different from the “Child” in (contemporary culture according to) Edelman’s *No Future*. Indeed to protect the children (or the *childishness*) in Adorno’s discourse would mean precisely *not* to suppress those “queer” things and people who (appear to) threaten the normative order of late capitalist life, in the name of making the world a “safe place for kids to grow up in” (or for any other reason). It would mean, rather, to defend the space in the present from which such estrangement of what passes for “normal” can grow and flourish. It might mean cultivating spaces for the “inner child” in each of us “adults” (to use a cliché), as the seeds from which a radically different type of future might sprout, a new strange spring come forth. Such would be a way of living up to Adorno’s call to cultivate vantage points which render the current world order “as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light” (*Minima*, 247).

Pressing further, in an age where the current scientific evidence suggests that the very livability of planet Earth for future generations is threatened by currently dominant (and thoroughly naturalized) capitalist industrial processes, the figure of the future, even the more domesticated reference to “our kids and grandkids” and “our grandkids”

grandkids,” is not simply a repressive one that shores up currently (hetero) normative practices and institutions. It is, rather, a contradictory figure, one that contains both critical and conservative potentialities in relationship to the situation we now face. NASA scientist and global warming activist, James Hansen, for instance, titles his recent book, *Storms of My Grandchildren* (2009). The book is by turns a personal narrative of disillusionment with establishment politics and a proto-apocalyptic attempt to reach a popular audience with the crucial science about global warming and what must be done to avert a total climate catastrophe. The point here is that the figure of threatened future generations does not necessarily demand that we shore up and reproduce current practices and institutions; it can just as well authorize their disruption, indeed, their de-legitimization and overthrow.²⁸ Much depends on how the “threat” itself is understood.

In this context, as we dialectically appraise figures of Futurity and Nature in this moment of crisis, we should critically revisit Walter Benjamin’s famous claim in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” that both the working class’s “hatred and its spirit of sacrifice . . . are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors *rather than* that of liberated grandchildren” (Theses Xii, emphasis added). However pertinent these words remain as a critique of the reformist gradualism of the Second International and the SPD in Germany (and its historical descendants), today, in this era of ecocide, when the future generations are themselves threatened with a kind of “slavery” whose “chains” are being molded by a toxic mix of contemporary production practices, perhaps it is rather one-sided. The vulnerable child, so often a figure invoked to repress and to silence practices – whether intellectual or sexual – that would allegedly “threaten innocence” (and the dominant order innocence veils), may take on a very different valence as that helpless child is imagined looking back at us from the edge of the smoldering social abyss. This figure of the future child, who is being enslaved and impoverished so that capital can continue to realize surplus value in the present, becomes one that can license rebellion and dissent, not just conformity and consistency.

²⁸ Hansen’s own text and political practice don’t press quite this far . . . yet. Nonetheless he presents us with a case of someone who, though he has not yet given up on the foundational institutions of American governance, is straining against these loyalties as he comes to see that they have more or less been captured “by the special interests” of Big Coal and Big Oil.

Yes, the contradictoriness of “looking out for the kids and grandkids” does imply a reactionary potential as well. The crises (ecological, economic, political) of the present and future alike will prompt – are already prompting – many people to cling closer and more conservatively than ever to various traditional ideas and social forms, including, obviously, the hetero-normative reproductive family (as well as the existing state apparatus). It is suggestive to examine any number of apocalyptic Hollywood films in which the disasters’ – meteorites, earthquakes, super-storms, alien invasions, epidemics – main ideological work is not to call into question present social practices so much as to underscore the importance of “family values.” Indeed, it might not be too cynical to suggest that in many of these films’ Crisis provides just what the imaginary family needs to counteract the centrifugal and fragmentary force of late capitalist life – nothing short of imminent apocalypse being up to the task of salvaging the post-nuclear unit . . . or at least a simulated fantasy of such nuclear bliss: in short, *disasterbation*.²⁹

As disturbing and provocatively jam-packed with images of crisis and apocalypse as these Hollywood films are, they tend to be quite conservative. Consider for instance how they depict the government, military establishment, and an array of Father Figures as basically sound and ethical in their allegiance to the common good – however slow to “get” the message they may be, and however dwarfed their powers become against the raging force of Mother Nature. In a majority of cases (as Žižek has argued) such films culminate in the salvation and reconsolidation of a Family Unit, even if, as in *Deep Impact*, this reconnection happens at the foot of an on-rushing super-tsunami. Sure, half of the northern hemisphere has been covered with ice, the Himalayas have unleashed landslides subsuming the entire Indian sub-continent, with hundreds of millions of deaths, but the important thing is: our beloved protagonist’s family made it out alright, even unscathed! The Family Unit survives. Indeed, in most cases, the climactic calamity has helped the Family to come together and to overcome their pre-apocalyptic, but very post-lapsarian estrangement and dysfunction. There’s nothing like a crisis to remind us of what is most important, and to make you feel in full once more the fact of your own good fortune. (After all, we too might have been one of those digitally generated extras to be lost down the lava vents – how lucky we are not to have been!) In these films the

²⁹ I would like to thank my friend Tim Lis for coining this clever phrase.

drama of global existential crisis becomes the opportunity to reconstitute human love and connectedness that has been made all but impossible by the hustle and bustle, the scattering in time and place, of modern life. More often than not, this reconstitution is achieved by falling back on pre-existing social forms and ideologies, rather than by creating new ones.³⁰ To press on this structure of feeling a bit: we might say, “Thank God for the comet – unlike any human force on earth it at least holds the promise of reuniting us once again,” if only in the flames of our mutual destruction.³¹ Far from cultivating a collective consciousness and a political desire to meet the challenge of cascading apocalypse, the subtext of these films might well be: “Have no fear, the intolerable alienation of your everyday lives will not last indefinitely; Global Warming and Climate change will Save Us!” And, indeed, *they might*. The coming ecological catastrophe provides a test case of what Jean Paul Sartre called “the third,” an outside force whose threatening gaze compels two otherwise opposed human beings to come together as one.

The sad reality, however, is that while oncoming ecological disasters may be spoken of in universal ways that “bring us all together” against a “common threat to humanity and civilization as we know it,” the ways in which these crises are already becoming manifest is rather different from the giant comet upon which we can all focus

³⁰ It is easy to wax cynical here, as for instance Slavoj Žižek does in his published treatment of this theme, discussing these disaster movies as case studies in the lengths to which Hollywood will go to produce a heterosexual couple or family unit. No social theme, not even the rupture of the Russian Revolution, he argues with reference to Warren Beatty’s *Reds*, is so subversive that it cannot be appropriated and domesticated in the service of a good ole Hollywood romance! His point, which is also in evidence in his markedly one-sided criticism of James Cameron’s *Avatar* – his critique of *Titanic* is more compelling – concerns how little such background stories really matter in relation to this primary narrative goal. And his cynical angle yields its truth; after all, if we come to feel that the disasters coming our way will help us to come together and to reunite in ways that we have longed for, if we are reassured that we will be able to die in the arms of those we love when the ship goes down, then what really do we have to fear from disaster? Why ought we even to work to avert them?

And yet surely there is also a positive utopian side to the attraction such disaster films exert, one having less to do with the romantic love story, than with the longing for a great collective project itself. On top of this there is a negative utopian side, a kind of unconscious desire to witness the utter destruction of the current world order – as represented by the toppling of the Statue of Liberty, the disintegration of the White House, etc. – and the clearing of the earth’s surface so that some remnant of humanity can start anew and try again . . . this time bearing in mind the preciousness and vulnerability of human civilization itself.

³¹ Give or take a few thousand well-connected persons for whom there is space in some secret titanium time capsule (perhaps the only place in these films where some fleeting recognition of class inequality enters the frame).

through a single camera-eye. Barring a radical break from contemporary social relations and ideologies of capitalism and imperialism, they are likely to exacerbate existing conflicts and tensions, not alleviate them. The catastrophe does not immediately appear as coming from without, but often, to those mired in oppressive relations, from the “other” and “from within.”

Similarly the growing worldwide environmental catastrophe has seen and will continue to see a swell of people or states not only “thinking globally” but also “acting – and thinking – “locally” in ways that are destructive of international solidarity, cooperation, and sustainability – “the Personal” can become a block on the Political. The point, then, is *not* that the figure of the Family, or of the Child – or of the coming Catastrophe for that matter – is essentially subversive, radical, or progressive, but that we need to read these figures dialectically, historically, strategically, recognizing their contested and contradictory valence in this time of crisis.

Seldom a slave to consistency,³² Zizek, against the grain of his own cynical reductions of disaster films, has advocated that we seize upon the eschatological “End of Times” frame, deploying a secularized version of the Christian narrative whereby the Moment when all is about to be Lost – the Crucifixion of Christ on the cross, that moment at which we are confronted with the abyss of our own mortality, the vulnerability of the very biosphere we depend on – is also the Opportunity for our Redemption . . . which is to say, in this context, for the rethinking and revolutionizing of everything, from our very identities to our collective social relations. Redemption and Revolution here are to be understood not as a teleological completion of a pre-ordained tragicomic narrative of History, but rather as the appearance in disaster’s shadow of a radical subjective freedom (a subjectivity that is no longer vested in the current order and that further recognizes it stands to lose all unless everything is changed).

The optimistically voluntarist catastrophism here has led Zizek to invoke Mao’s famous declaration that “All is chaos under heaven. The situation is excellent.” Indeed, Zizek the provocateur seems to me correct to challenge with this maoist phrase the radical liberal sensibility that in many respects is still hegemonic on the Euro-American

³² For an incisive, yet also sympathetic and comradely critical account of Zizek’s shifting positions on key philosophical issues see Bruno Bosteels’ chapter on Zizek, “In Search of the Act,” in *The Actuality of Communism* (Verso, 2011).

intellectual Left – a sensibility that, in times of crisis, (when, as Yeats put it, “the center cannot hold”) strives in practice for the restoration of the stability, security and “normalcy” of the old order now perceived to be slipping away. Such a Left generally fails to see the possibility of the new – the vulnerabilities of the current order and its ideologies, the potentiality of new forms of subjectivity – inherent in the crisis itself. In the United States, this Left conservatism manifests itself in movements for the maintenance of restoration of the social welfare state, the “middle class,” the “golden age of capitalism,” the corporate-union-government compact, or for state Leadership that we can trust.³³

This is not to say that those social welfare entitlements still enjoyed by workers in the US or elsewhere should be given up without a fight, or somehow stigmatized as trappings of the “labor aristocracy,” as if losing them would itself constitute a beneficial purification of the proletariat to come, or whatever. Not at all. Far from it. The cutbacks must be exposed, the legitimacy of the life-line cutters challenged. Solidarities must be woven to meet the attacks that will continue to come. We need to help defend our neighbors, to take care of one another. Nonetheless, there remains a difference between (on the one hand) mounting a principled defense of hard fought gains and concessions with an eye towards a new polarization and a still deeper radicalization – all the while knowing that it is likely the case that many of these particular battles will be lost, since, after all, *we do not actually control the system* or its representatives as things are presently configured – and (on the other hand) the construction of a movement that puts all its hopes in the restoration of a past order that is . . . *not coming back*. In addition to setting people up for disappointment (and often engaging in mystifying nostalgia), the latter approach risks cultivating a learned blindness to the possibility that it is not the victory but the *defeat* of these present struggles that may open the path for the truly revolutionary struggles that lie ahead. Or, perhaps even more crucially, to the possibility

³³ Symptomatic of these lowered horizons would be the recent *Socialist Register* 2011, “The Crisis this Time” in which most of the contributors confine their political prescriptions to building fight-back movements and pressuring the existing state apparatus to distribute the social surplus in more just ways. While there is some consideration of how so the current financial and economic crisis may evolve into a legitimation crisis for capital, there is little to no discussion of what this possibility should mean in practice for socialists.

that the real and most promising battle-lines may emerge elsewhere, in a diagonal relation to where the enemy currently charts its advance.³⁴

In the United States and other historically imperialist countries, this desire to “turn back the clock” is particularly problematic and contradiction-ridden. Calls for the defense or restoration of special privileges for “the middle class” or for “hardworking American families” abound, often taking forms that implicitly or explicitly exclude major sectors of the working class, the non-white, the non-US born, the undocumented, the unmarried, the queer, etc. And yet it would be a tragic ultra-leftist mistake to cede the anger, confusion, and hurt that permeates broad swaths of the white US working and middle classes to the likes of the Tea Party, Ron Paul libertarianism and a resurgent racist populism. Or to insist that resistance to this system come forth fully formed as self-consciously “working class” or Marxist from the get-go.³⁵

VI. Living the Time of Crisis: Temporality and Revolutionary Subjectivity

One danger of thinking in terms of the imminent possibility of crisis and catastrophe (in terms of “Socialism OR Barbarism”) is that such thinking can lull us into a kind of *either/or* logic. Thus anti-Civilization poet-activist Derek Jensen fumes in a recent column over correspondence he has received from those “allies” who “know how bad” the crisis is but who ask “Why even bother?” to build resistance now, when things have in all likelihood gone “too far” already. Once things go past a certain point: once the tipping points by expert calculations have been passed, once we’re doomed to 3 degrees Celsius of global warming, then what’s the point in waging a bitter fight? Why spend all that human energy in frustration trying to bail and plug and take command of a ship that is already sinking? Why not just enjoy the music until the ship goes down? – a

³⁴ Again “Occupy” looms large, as an offensive, not simply reactive movement; it has in a sense “taken the fight to the enemy.”

³⁵ As Noam Chomsky of all people has reminded us in a recent article (based on a speech given at the 2010 Left Forum) the home-grown American anti-tax suicide bomber, Joe Stack, who last year flew a small plane into the IRS building in Washington D.C. cited the *Communist Manifesto* as one of his two favorite books. One wonders how a thoughtful radical intervention could have altered the tragic, terroristic trajectory of Joe Stack.

cataclysm that may not even strike until the next generation, anyway: making ours perhaps the last generation on earth to have the chance to “live it up” before the shit hits the climatic fan. And so on . . . What such a viewpoint neglects is at least two-fold: 1) catastrophe (environmental) is not just something that will hit in the future, but something that is already hitting all sorts of people right now, in ways variegated by geography and by social class; and 2) that there is catastrophe and there is CATASTROPHE; there are increments and degrees of disaster here upon which human practice may exert meaningful effect. That is to say, even if, at this or that point, it is all but assured that the waters will rise . . . *How high* will they rise? Will this or that island survive? Will there be a sea wall built, or boats to save this or that million people?

We might add a third, more ideological, problem with thinking in terms of “all or nothing” (“Socialism or Barbarism”), namely that it can obscure the political opportunities latent in the dark times to come. This is to say that, contrary to being socialism’s *alternative*, as the famous phrase suggests, *capitalist barbarism may prove to be –as it has in the past –socialism’s (or communism’s) stepping stone . . .* not just its opposite, but its precondition. To this point in history, has it not been in and through and often in part *because of* the devastation of massive world wars that revolutionary opportunities have opened and that *actual revolutions* have managed to emerge and to win power? Think Russia following WWI, China and the global decolonization movement following WWII.

Along these lines we might reverse another of Zizek’s recurring, provocative formulations, namely his appropriation of Dupuy’s ideas about the temporality of apocalypse. Following Dupuy, Zizek argues in several places that to bridge the contradiction between what we “know” (“Climate crisis is upon us!”) and what we are able to “believe” (“The earth still looks basically the same to me!”) and thus to short-circuit the psychological denial of the coming catastrophe, we should come to accept that apocalyptic future as our own, imagine ourselves as a part of it, and then insert ourselves into the pre-history of that fallen future, posing the question: *What could we have done in the past to avert such a disaster? . . .* We should then act accordingly in our own present.

This may be a useful mental exercise. Such reframing of the present through the positing of a retrospective dystopic future gaze can be an aide in getting beyond the

coercive and horizon-buckling urgency of today's prevalent "Just Do It"-ism of the Left, which seizes on the immediacy of present crisis (after crisis after crisis) in such a way as to endlessly defer (and even actively suppress) both the theoretical analysis and the strategic thinking that are necessary to understanding and to changing, not just this or that particular situation, but the Situation itself. Indeed, in a perverse-as-ever updating of Herbert Marcuse's memorable comment, from *One Dimensional Man*, about the ways that the threat of nuclear annihilation actually aided the very ruling forces that were responsible for proliferating the danger, it seems clear today that in much mainstream discourse, the very immediacy and urgency of the environmental crises often function to protect the very capitalist system and interests that are the main drivers of the crisis: and not just because of the skyrocketing sale in green-washed commodities and biofuels. To paraphrase the billionaire owner of Stonyfield organic yogurt as he self-servingly puts it in the recent documentary *Food Inc.* "We don't have time to end *capitalism*. We need to take action to save the planet now." How convenient for him and for his class! How inconvenient for those being strangled and starved by this system on a daily basis! Taking a sober, long view to establish imaginary solidarity not just with the immediate victims of current crises, but also with those who will live our future, can be a valuable move in this crisis-cluttered cultural environment.

But perhaps the true revolutionary temporality today would not only accept that fallen future as our own – and thus give up a denialist hope in things remaining the same, and so keep from becoming mired in blind particularities of the Now – but would then *press further*, beyond crisis-*prevention*, onto a strategy oriented towards making the best possible political preparations so as to take advantage of the catastrophes that are coming. In such a way, revolutionary subjects may become better prepared to take actual advantage of those radical opportunities that will be made possible by the compounding of present crisis trends. To counterpose Zizek's favorite line from Mao, about "chaos" being "excellent," we might then cite another *Little Red Book* line, just as relevant to our moment: "Hope for sunshine. *But build dikes.*" To hold both maoist temporalities in one's head at the same time – to seize the political advantage of today's chaos, while erecting structures that can withstand the rising waves of future catastrophes (political and social as well as environmental), while, at the same time, working to ameliorate those

disasters which may be preventable, keeping solidarity with not only those now breathing but those yet to be born – such is the global temporal rack of crisis upon which revolutionary subjectivity finds itself today.

Zizek has argued that, far from abandoning the concept of the proletariat, what we need in this moment is an existential radicalization of the concept so that it encompasses not simply the class of wage-workers exploited directly by capital at the point of production, but all those human beings and those aspects of humanity whose very substance is now threatened by the penetration and colonization of capital, with its escalating attacks on the commons of culture and of nature alike.³⁶ The *proletariat*, as he traces it back to the early Marx, philosophically represents the emergence of *substanceless subjectivity*, the site of exclusion (and alienation) at the heart of the system that is also the basis for a potentially universal freedom that transcends that system. Zizek suggests here the revolutionary negativity and (communist) potentiality that inheres anywhere that people stand opposed to capital's privatization, alienation, commodification, or exploitation of that which rightfully belongs to all, not simply to their particular group, but to all. Zizek goes on from this radical point to criticize the nostalgic and pastoral figurations of "Mother Nature" that are prevalent within the ecological movement, legible in statements such as Evo Morales' declaration of the "Rights of Mother Earth." Zizek's concern is that such comforting maternal fantasies may bar us from grasping the reality – and foreclose proletarian possibilities for truly radical action – within our situation.

But, to add one more dialectical twist, if it is possible that even that conservative shibboleth of "family values" can take on a radical edge in these end times in which we live, why doesn't the same go for "Mother Nature"? Why cannot a pastoral fantasy become the springboard for critical, indeed, for *proletarian* thinking about capitalism today?

Tristan Siple offers a deft dialectical reconsideration of the concept of Nature in both Marxism and in pastoral literature in his essay "**Proletarian Pastoral Reconsidered: Reading Mike Gold in an Age of Ecological Crisis.**" Situating Gold's

³⁶ The open-endedness of "We are the 99%" comes to mind here; one need not be a wage-laborer to be expropriated, let alone outraged, by this system's depredations.

Jews Without Money (1930) in relationship to the current ecological crisis, Siplely brings forth a strikingly fresh reading of the well-known but often misunderstood novel, calling our attention especially to the critical and utopian figures of space, land, nature, and environment in Gold's text. His essay is an eye-opening treatment of a rich dimension of proletarian literature that has generally been neglected, even where such literature hasn't been overlooked entirely. The result is a valuable intervention into both ecocriticism and into Marxism. Not unlike Kevin Floyd's double-edged dialectical foray into Marxism and queer theory, Siplely argues against both a Marxism that views place and nature as merely the stage upon which human politics are played out and against an idealist or nostalgic ecocriticism that elides the social struggle that cuts across actual places. He proposes to "formulate a properly Marxist ecocriticism, or, ecocritical Marxism, which would integrate an understanding of ecology into the sociological critique of literature, holding the image of nature in tension as both an ideological screen and literal historical referent. Such an analysis," he explains, "would explore how ideas about the land, and the land itself, are shaped by the logic of capital, but also how concepts of nature, and the biosphere itself, play active roles in these processes." In this spirit, Siplely takes Gold's novel not simply as an object for critique, but itself as a *form* of critique, a refreshing approach that explores how contemporary critics of radical literature may have as much to learn from the theoretical work of these earlier writers, as they have to "teach" them.

Further reframing Gold's 1930 "Depression-era" novel as in fact a narrative of the "boom years" of the 1910s and 20s, Siplely shows how for Gold – as for Marxism – "The central point is that the capitalist mode of production creates a state of crisis for social and ecological systems *whether or not* the economic system itself is in crisis." As he puts it "The squalid existence of immigrant laborers on the Lower East Side [depicted by Gold] is an effect of the success [not the failure] of capitalist production. These are the system's 'good' times." Siplely concludes by noting that "the conflicted state of the pastoral points to the duality of economic and ecological "crisis," as both a moment of great destruction and a moment of political opportunity."

* * *

The truth that perpetual social life crises underlie capital's "good times" as well as "bad" comes through clearest of all through examining how things stand in the Global South. Here, crisis is not the exception to the rule but rather the norm, and not, as someone bourgeois commentators would have it, due to a *lack* of capitalist investment, but to an abundance of such capitalist predation of the most unrestrained kind. In his contribution, "**Revolutionary Solidarities: Countering Capitalism's Emancipation Narrative,**" Kanishka Chowdhury critiques contemporary narratives that deflect, naturalize, or otherwise reify social crises, particularly in the so-called Third World. Among those pervasive discourses he examines are those of individualism, entrepreneurialism, environmentalism, "socially responsible" capitalism, and humanitarianism. Such discourses function ideologically, both in the capitalist metropole and in the Global South. In the former they create a charitable and liberal mask to obscure the imperialist dynamics of the system; in the latter such "emancipatory" interventions of transnational capital function not only to mystify, but also to fragment the people, dividing masses into competing entrepreneurial blocs, preying upon one another, or encouraging dependency thinking among the oppressed. In each of these discourses, the agency proscribed for the subject-to-be-emancipated is framed in ways that are thoroughly depoliticized, if not rendered altogether passive. As Chowdhury writes, "Empowerment, as Aradhana Sharma points out, "has become a ubiquitous term and a buzzword in transnational development circles. An anti-imperialist, radical, leftist, and feminist language that arose out of social movements, empowerment has now been embraced as a panacea – a means and an end of development" (2). Yet, as Chowdhury continues, "The reform narratives . . . although addressing crucially important crisis points in capitalism – the rise in food prices and rampant inequality of income – are qualitatively different from a narrative that recognizes the fundamental contradictions inherent in capital: these reform narratives postpone crisis, or externalize it, in effect supplementing the divisions of class society rather than resolving them." The stripping away of such mystifying narratives is a crucial step towards addressing (and resolving) those actual historical, class contradictions which exist.

The deployment of crisis rhetoric as a means of containing and evading class contradictions is not confined to discourses of imperialism, either. In "**Crisis**

Management in Higher Education: TCM and the Politics of Crisis at the University of Florida,” Kim Emery calls our attention to the ways in which the rhetoric of “crisis” and “crisis management” has become a fixture of public discourse here in the United States, including on university campuses. Recounting a particular campus and state-wide struggle, she examines the way that politicians and university administrators have created and exploited situations of “crisis” to force through changes to their institutions, at the expense of students, teachers, and other campus and off-campus workers. Tracking the creation of a climate of crisis, variously referred to as “the new normal,” or as a semi-permanent “state of exception” where things previously unthinkable are now not only thinkable but unavoidable, Emery’s essay helps to reveal how “crisis now marks not a failure of management, but one of its modes.”

VIII. Summoning the Spirits of the Past: Critical Reflections on Historical Marxism and Communism

Alongside Kevin Floyd’s essay, a number of other writers in this issue critically revisit the discussions and debates of so-called Western Marxism in the 1930s and 1940s. **Carl Grey Martin** helps us to rethink the political valence of Walter Benjamin in his essay “**Exhuming Brecht,**” a review of Erdmut Wizisla’s book, *Brecht and Benjamin: the story of a friendship* (Libris, 2009). Foregrounding the way in which Wizisla’s work challenges long dominant characterizations of the relationship between Brecht and Benjamin, Martin draws our attention to key correspondence and counterpoints between these two long-standing intellectual and political interlocutors. For decades, the study of Benjamin has been shaped (one might say, impoverished) by those who have depicted Brecht as a kind of red aggressor exerting “dangerous” influence on the more sensitive intellect of Benjamin.³⁷ With Wizisla, Martin argues for the importance of contesting hostile portraits of Brecht’s pro-communist politics, both because they falsify the

³⁷ Here we may include not only Adorno and Hannah Arendt, but Gershom Scholem, and even Lee Edelman himself, who, interestingly enough, concludes *No Future* with perhaps the latest version of this classic move, citing Benjamin’s response to Brecht’s passion regarding the “Children’s Poems” as one last suggestive swipe at the radical left for being consumed by the very same “fascism of the baby face” that drives the radical right.

complex relationship between these two radical thinkers, and because, today, Brecht's lifelong commitment to communism remains an inspiration and a much-needed provocation to renewed radical commitment.

Rich Daniels in his contribution to the volume explores the implications of Theodor Adorno's thought for ethics and ethical ideology in the contemporary moment. Building on Adorno's point that "wrong life cannot be lived rightly," and against the grain of much contemporary commentary, Daniels insists upon the fundamentally materialist and Marxist orientation of this frequently appropriated, oft-quoted thinker. If there is an ethical imperative in Adorno, as Daniels presents him, it includes the need to locate one's own thinking in a historical and materialist framework, and to attend to the particular suffering perpetuated by the current state of things. In these times, for Daniels, that means reckoning in a deep way with the militarism, imperialism, and general administrative barbarism that characterizes the ruling institutions of our historical moment.

In this Adornian spirit, Daniels recognizes the inadequacy of an "ethical" approach that remains focused on (blaming) the individual(s), one which locates responsibility for the state of society on this isolated level. As Adorno put it so memorably in *Minima Moralia*:

Reactionary criticism often attains insight into the decay of individuality and the crisis of society, but places the ontological responsibility for this on the individual as such, as something discrete and internal: for this reason the accusation of shallowness, lack of faith and substance, is the last word it has to say, and return to the past of its solace (*MM* 148).

Against such reactionary criticism (pervasive today as ever), Adorno argues for the necessity of exploring the crisis at the individual level, but in such a way as to trace the "decay" of the individual and the "crisis" of society to their true causes, which are social and historical, which is to say: products of contemporary capitalism. What reactionary defenders of the "individual" (and we still have plenty of them!) fail to discuss is the role

that the very socially mediated ideology of *individualism*, the “*principium individuationis*” plays in driving the very decay they decry.

As Žizek has provocatively put it more recently, the “individual greed” that is today on display in predatory Ponzi schemes like Bernie Madoff’s or those of the financial banksters (whose criminality has been exposed by Matt Taibbi and others), is not the source of corruption in an otherwise good system. It is more adequately seen as analogous to the pre-programmed laugh track of a television sit-com; it is the appearance of subjectivity that is already hard-wired, necessitated by the workings of the system itself; a special effect, not an unintended corruption, let alone the cause of it. We might then push Žizek’s metaphor further and say that to watch the capitalist spectacle unfold, and then focus our criticism on the *greed* of the participants, is like sitting back and subjecting yourself to some stupid sit-com (over and over again) getting all worked up each episode to the point of complaining: “How on earth do all those stupid people in the audience laugh at those dumb jokes?!” Which is, of course, not to say that the jokes *are not* dumb, or that the CEOs and bankers are not greedy, and sleazy. (They are.) But they are best understood as a social and historical sleaze, which seeps not out of their individual sinful human hearts, but out of the very pores and gears of the system that makes such sleaze not only possible but necessary. If television is the idiot box, then capitalism is the greed and sleaze machine.

Adorno, in *Minima Moralia*, further speaks to that other equally prevalent means of short-circuiting social criticism: cynicism. If reactionary ethical criticism serves the system by figuring social corruption as internal to individuals (and so outside of the capitalist relations), cynicism figures the corruption as so ubiquitous as to be beyond treatment, indeed, beyond critical comment. As Adorno writes, in such cynical times:

Criticisms of tendencies in modern society is automatically countered, before it is fully uttered, by the argument that things have always been like this. Excitement – so promptly resisted – merely shows want of insight into the invariability of history, an unreasonableness proudly diagnosed by all as hysteria. The accuser is further informed that the motive of his attack is self-aggrandizement, a desire for special privileges, whereas the grounds for his indignation are common knowledge, trivial, so that no-one can be expected to waste his interest on them.

The obviousness of disaster becomes an asset to its apologists – what everyone knows no-one need say – and under cover of silence is allowed to proceed unopposed (emphasis added).

In light of the suffocating hold of cynicism today, which has certainly not abated, and perhaps even intensified since Adorno's time, it becomes a critical need in these times not only to attend to those utopian nodes (such as the figures of Nature and Futurity) which we have examined above, but also to closely attend to those moments in History (however brief) that have disrupted, challenged, or run counter to the common cynical sense that "things have always been like this." In this context it becomes especially important to attend in an all-sided way to what Bruno Bosteels has called the *actuality* of *communism*. Certainly we should not neglect the vital ideas and analyses of Critical Theory and Western Marxism, but neither should we simply dismiss the actually existing Communist movement (or socialist experiments) of the 20th century, and those communists movements that still survive in the 21st. (In this sense, while utilizing these important thinkers, we need to transcend the political orientation of much of Western Marxism itself!)

Indeed, whether we are conscious of it or not, our approach to and our sense of the possibilities for the future – of Marxism, of revolution, of movement, of emancipation – is not only informed by our sense of the current crises of capitalism, but by our sense of past crises as well. This past includes not only the prior crises of capitalism – the 1930s, the 1970s, the 1890s – but also quite crucially, those crises on and of the radical (communist) left. How so we grasp the nature, causes, and effects of the faltering, defeat, and undoing of the emancipatory communist movements of earlier eras impacts in a very basic way how we see (or do not see) the communist project moving forward. How we grasp the actuality of past communist experience frames our sense of communist possibility (or impossibility) in the present.

For example: What went wrong with Soviet Socialism, and with the Communist movement of which it was the major foothold, that it so reverted to capitalism and the restoration of (such a brutal form of) class rule? Were the weaknesses or failures of Soviet economic policy attributable to problems with socialist state planning as such?

Similarly, was the political violence in the USSR – the purges, the great Terror of 1937-38, the Moscow Trials, etc. – proof to the fundamental flaws in Marxist or Leninist notions of “the dictatorship of the proletariat” or of the very idea of Communist Party rule? Or, in either separate case, were there contingencies, factors (internal and external) that precipitated this derailment of the first extended communist experiment? And if so what were they and how did they interrelate with one another? (Similar questions can and ought to be asked with respect to the Chinese experience as well.) To what extent can the first wave of modern communist attempts be updated and extended, improved upon and applied to contemporary – not to mention geographically disparate – conditions? To what extent do we need to go in fundamentally different directions to achieve a global society emancipated from exploitative and oppressive class relations? In short: what are the actual lessons (positive and negative) that this oft-slandered history contains for us?

In this spirit, the present issue takes several extended looks back into the radical past, offering rigorous critical re-examinations of both Soviet history and US communist culture and politics (politics which, during the 1930s and 40s, were, of course, often influenced and inspired by developments in the USSR).

No contribution to this special issue – perhaps not even Meyerson’s argument for eco-socialist nuclear power – is likely to be as “controversial” as **Grover Furr** and **Vladimir Bobrov**’s eviscerating critique of Stephen Cohen’s influential biography of Bukharin. Through a meticulous investigation of the secondary and primary source materials of Cohen’s 10th chapter, which deals with the 1930s period, as well as through study of textual evidence that has only recently been made available from the Soviet archives, Furr and Bobrov not only refute – point by point – the historical foundation of Cohen’s account, in effect exploding the prevalent narrative concerning Bukharin’s alleged innocence, trial, and execution. In the process, they render suspect the broader intellectual (one is tempted to write: *ideological*) paradigm of the “Stalin period,” a paradigm that continues to exert great influence in the field of Soviet Studies, as well as across the American Left. Rather than offer a summary of Furr and Bobrov’s lengthy piece here, I will simply state that I would find it hard to imagine that readers of this journal could carefully consider Furr and Bobrov’s detailed critique of Cohen without

having a number of their operative assumptions regarding the Stalin-era Soviet Union rendered deeply problematic, if not unsustainable.

Just as steeped in close scrutiny of the empirical evidentiary record regarding the Soviet Union is **Joseph Ball's** essay **"In Defense of Planning: On the Restoration of Capitalism in the Soviet Union."** Ball's central point in this major intervention is that a close analysis of the "the post-war fate of the Soviet economy does not undermine the case for socialism." Ball contends that "As capitalism goes through its latest global crisis, it is incumbent on the Left to once more make the case for the socialist, planned economy." Similarly, as the ecological crisis throws both the endless and anarchic nature of capitalist growth into stark and frightening relief, the need for a serious reconsideration of socialist planning grows. While it would be naïve to think that the "5 year Plans" of the Soviet Union can supply us with ready-made models and methods for managing our own national or global socialism, particularly in an era where the orientation towards economic "growth" itself needs to be radically rethought, this history deserves fresh attention. Ball's exploration of the political and economic contradictions in the Soviet system not only problematize residual cold-war ideology, but also offers lessons that remain very relevant to future socialist planners, however different our priorities or inherited conditions may be. We ignore the successes, the struggles, the conundrums, and the failures of our predecessors at our peril.

Christopher Vials in his essay **"Fight Against War and Fascism and the Origins of Antifascism in US Culture"** turns our attention to the major anti-racist and anti-fascist commitments and contributions of the CP-led movements of the mid-20th century United States. In fact he traces the first English usage of the critical "racism" to a 1930s Communist publication. That such a foundational and "common sense" critical left term as *racism* has such a recent, and such a partisan origin, serves as a valuable reminder of how the emergent communist and radical movements of the early-to-mid 20th century were breaking *new* ground, developing new understanding, and concepts to map their particular political conjuncture as well as the historical and social forces that framed and shaped it. The "old left," whatever its limitations or missteps, was not simply playing out or "applying" some inherited "marxist" orthodoxy, it was not just following

existing “road maps” but creating new paths while walking – or attempting to walk – a fresh revolutionary road.

Vials complicates and contradicts pervasive and reductive views of the CP-led antifascist left as narrowly focusing on economic class, to the exclusion of other cultural factors, including race, gender, and sexuality. Through a critical survey of the important popular front magazine, *Fight*, he demonstrates how the anti-fascist unity constructed by Communists and others brought together a range of perspectives dealing with a host of interrelated (anti-fascist) issues. Vials follows such critics as Michael Denning who (in his magisterial *Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture*) have emphasized the degree to which the Popular Front encouraged and enabled a pluralism of Left thinking and expression, relatively independent of whatever official Comintern line predominated at the time. In a radical spin on the old dictum that “necessity breeds invention,” Vials argues that the crisis posed by fascism was in some respects beneficial to left thinking. As Vials puts it: “To counter this new threat [of fascism], its left-wing opponents developed new explanatory models that dispensed with orthodox economic reductionism and did away with teleological notions of their own inevitable victory.” One hopes that that the immediacy of the current crisis prompts such creative radical (re)thinking in our own era.

Certainly, however, even as we seek to renew interest in and memory of the anti-fascist left of the 1930s we must also learn lessons from the historical fact of its defeat and dissipation. To what extent, we might wonder, were the very strategies for facilitating popularization and liberal-progressive coalition-building in part to blame for the ultimate vulnerability? To put it another way, did the communist movement of this time not in a way run into the “Donut problem,” where its focus on building its peripheral elements and broad allies left it without a clear or adequate core? To what extent did the practice of the Popular Front – however understandable, and even successful it may have been in many ways – reflect back as theory into the party in ways that did not prepare it at all well for the post-war situation, and the great anticommunist repression that would soon come? However we adjudge such political questions, Vials essay remains a valuable contribution to this timely discussion.

Bringing us up to the present, with a keen eye on the past, **Benjamin Balthaser** in his essay, “**Re-Staging the Great Depression: Genre as Social Memory in Darren Aronofsky’s *The Wrestler*,**” offers a brilliant discussion of the ways in which “The Thirties” are remembered (and suppressed) within contemporary mainstream US discourse, especially in film. Taking off from the insight that remembering is often co-constitutive with forgetting, as well as Walter Benjamin’s insistence of the need to fan the spark of hope found in the past, Balthaser offers a lucid analysis of two recent “fight” films, *Cinderella Man* and *The Wrestler*, each of which evoke the 1930s boxing narrative, though they deploy its motifs in radically different, politically opposed ways. While *Cinderella Man* may be the more obvious “Thirties” film in terms of its classic Depression era setting and boxing motif, Balthaser argues convincingly that Aronofsky’s *The Wrestler* embodies the best radical “Thirties” spirit of social realism for our time, while the former film encourages an insidious white “working class” populism and an implicitly racist politics of masculine individualism that is more reminiscent of Father Coughlin than of Mike Gold or Paul Robeson. Balthaser wonderfully teases out how *The Wrestler* explores and exposes the complex workings of ideology, class, solidarity, and false consciousness in an era of pervasive (and often cynical) performance . . . an era that continues, cynically, to reproduce the macho ideology of “the fair fight” long after most have come to know that the fight is fixed.

Last but certainly not least, **Barbara Foley**’s contribution to this issue raises fundamental questions about the literary representation of the 1930s – and of the Left – in and through the work of one of America’s most influential writers, Ralph Ellison. It gives me great pleasure to be able to offer *Cultural Logic* readers the excerpted introduction of Foley’s ground-breaking new book, ***Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man*** (2011, Duke University Press), with permission from the publisher and author (herself a frequent contributor to *CL*). *Wrestling with the Left* is a study of such great interest as to warrant not just a brief treatment here, but a full length article treatment, in my own essay contribution to the issue, “**Invisible Possibilities, Invisible Tragedies: or, Re-Reading the Great American (Anti)Communist Novel**” Readers are encouraged to consider obtaining the full volume of Foley’s study at <http://www.dukeupress.edu/Catalog/ViewProduct.php?productid=18573>>. If this issue

helps to broaden and deepen intellectual engagement with Foley's important book, it will have served a valuable purpose.

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In closing, I would like to thank my fellow editors of *Cultural Logic*, especially David Siar and Gregory Meyerson, for entrusting me with the reins of this unique journal, which I read and admired for years before coming on board as an editor in 2009. They have offered much guidance and support (as well as patience!) in this endeavor. Support and encouragement of various kinds has likewise been provided me in this endeavor by my loving wife and partner, Danielle Herget, and by my father and "mass line" mentor, David T. Ramsey. Considerable patience has been extended by a number of contributors, who have been waiting all too long to see their words here appear. I can only hope that for editors, contributors, and readers alike, this belated 2010 issue on "Culture and Crisis" will be found to have been worth the wait.