

Questioning The Left: Current Leftist Theory and the Collapse of the Left. How to Rebuild Leftist Policies

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Theme: [History](#)

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*Below is a transcript of an email interview I did with writers **Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker** and **Michael J. Thompson** who co-authored the article [“The Treason of Intellectual Radicalism and the Collapse of Leftist Politics”](#) which appeared in the Winter 2015 edition of the academic journal *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture*.*

In the interview, we discuss the problems of current leftist theory, the collapse of the left, and if there is a way to rebuild leftist politics.



1. You write early in the article that “Today, leftist political theory in the academy has fallen under the spell of ideas so far removed from actual political issues[.]” Do you think that this is a failing that is solely in the academy? It seems that it is a widespread failure by the left as a whole, that they are more focused on the theoretical than anything that is truly concrete.

We agree that the problem is not solely with the academy. It is important to look at the academy because the kind of work that is done in the academy is, in part, often a reflection of what people think they can achieve on the ground. The main issue seems to be that moral revulsion has supplanted the critique of social mechanisms that produce the problems that outrage people. It is also important to stress that moral revulsion is not a substitute for, nor an equivalent of, political action and political strategy. The key, as we see it, is to understand that politics is about shaping not only the mentality of citizens and the norms of culture, but more crucially about organizing the legitimate power of the state to enforce laws that prevent social injustice and expand the horizon of social justice. This requires understanding the mechanisms of politics, of elections, of the law, of constitutional interpretation, and so on. The contemporary left has abandoned these concerns and has instead decided to view them as attributes of a system that needs to be rejected. This is simply absurd and, in our view, anti-political.

We also think that there is a problem with what theory has become. The only reason that a cleavage has developed between theory and practice is because the function of theory has

been abandoned. It is important to recognize that what is now touted as theory is not actually theory. Theory plays a vital role in diagnosing and critiquing concrete political problems. People like Zizek and Badiou do not have theories. Their work is so convoluted and self-referential that there is no link to the concrete. It masquerades as theory. They are able to create their own fan clubs and say whatever they want because they purposefully construct so-called theories that allow them to evade critical evaluation. Esotericism has become a virtue unto itself. From this standpoint, the aversion to theory is understandable. So-called theory has become a world for the initiated. This is a distortion of theory. It is merely the flipside of a society that can dismiss evolution as “only a theory.”

2. You say that social movements are not focused on “unequal distributions of economic and political power which once served as the driving impulse for political, social and cultural transformation.” What would you say to those who push back on this idea and argue that there is a deeper analysis than just class?

There is more to social power and domination than class, it is true. But movements for transforming social and cultural forms of exclusion – for women, minority groups, gay rights, etc. – have all occurred within the confines of the liberal state. Class is the one category that has gotten worse over the past 40 years, not better. Radicals need not only to be able to call into question the backward, provincial views of the racist, the homophobe and the anti-feminist, but also to tie this into a more general theory of what a free, just society ought to be able to achieve and to be able to understand that ending these kinds of exclusion lead us to some radical kind of emancipation, but simply leave us within the liberal-capitalist consensus.

Radicalism must be able to craft a more comprehensive vision of what a free, just society would look like. But it must keep in view the fact that economic power, the power of elite interests, are behind many of the cleavages in race, for instance. That propertied interests have had something invested in preventing blacks from moving to white neighborhoods; that they have been behind the decisions to de-industrialize urban American cities, which has had an enormous destructive effect on contemporary black communities, and so on. The killings of black men that have elicited so much outrage over the past year cannot only be attributed to racism. They occupied a specific class status. Likewise, one of the interesting things about recent writings that have recast sex work as an expression of feminist self-assertion, is that they entirely ignore the fact that it is working class women who are compelled to do this work. Racism, homophobia, and sexism are social realities, but we must recognize that the vulnerability to violence and exploitation of these people is exacerbated by their class status.

Identity is simply not a stable enough concept to ground a radical politics. Corporate power can often back culturally liberal causes such as gay rights, or the symbolic issues of the Confederate Battle flag. But what remains after these (liberal) changes in our society and culture is economic power: the power to shape our educational system, to organize social production and consumption, and to chart the values of the society more generally.

3. Expand upon the statement: “This new radicalism has made itself so irrelevant with respect to real politics that it ends up serving as a kind of cathartic space for the justifiable anxieties wrought by late capitalism further stabilizing its systemic and integrative power rather than disrupting it.” What exactly do you mean by this? Also, couldn’t some push back and argue that in many ways, this new radicalism is disruptive, as can be seen by the Black Bloc, activists fighting

against the Keystone XL pipeline, and those who engage in direct action?

This was not meant as a critique of those who participate in direct action. Direct action becomes the only means for combating injustices when concrete political programs fade away. What is worrying is the way direct action has supplanted political strategy much in the same way that so-called theory has become fetishized in and of itself. Our critique questions the political salience of these actions as a general political program. Neo-anarchism has become a model for political activity on the left. It has claimed for itself the mantle of engaged politics. We think this is a grave error.

When demonstrations occur, they are more often than not spaces for moral rage, not for political programs. Take the Civil Rights movement. Yes, there were symbolic acts of direct action, but these were integrated into a more general movement that included a political strategy to influence political elites, crafting ideas for legislation to be enacted, as well as a new cultural understanding of civic rights. To isolate ourselves to direct action without a larger movement, without a more radical program for action, for what you want to implement in a positive way through institutions, is simply not radical politics. This is the “cathartic space” we refer to: it grants a moral self-righteousness to the individual who has genuine anger against society. But we should not confuse this with the hard work of political action that has in view the transformation of society through the shaping of law, winning elections, and so on.

Look at modern conservatives as an example. During the 1960s, they were a political, cultural and intellectual minority. Their ideas for destroying public schools (Milton Friedman championed the school voucher idea, considered insane at the time), for constitutional interpretation, for economic liberalization and privatization, and so on were policy non-starters. Now they have reframed American political life. Look at the last two vice presidential Republican candidates. As patently imbecilic as Sarah Palin and Paul Ryan are, the fact that such people are able to run in national elections and advocate political policies evidences how fringe ideas gained some degree of public approval because there is no rational radical left to oppose them. Radicals have no ideas about how to combat these policy imperatives, and this is simply absurd. How can we talk about radical politics that has any efficacy if we oppose the state, taking law, political parties, and so on seriously as mechanisms for change? Not to do so is to suffer from a kind of infantile disorder. This makes Leftists surrender their place in politics to the right. The dangers are real.

4. Do you think that class politics have weakened in the post-industrial age due to the fact that there was an illusion that one could move above their current station as well as had more access to credit and high tier goods? [Compared to the industrial age where one knew that they would always be a worker on the factory floor.]

The transition from a productivist to a consumerist paradigm of economic life is a crucial explanatory variable for the docility of American political consciousness. The basic inequality of our society is just as bad as it was during the gilded age, but the overall size of the economic pie has simply gotten larger. There is just more wealth to be concentrated in the hands of elites. Reconciling individuals to this system has been a long process of legitimating the economic system and the values that underpin it. The weakening of labor class struggles is partly due to economic and sociological shifts. The main thrust is still, we think, ideological: There is no reason why new forms of labor - service, professional,

freelance, and so on – should not be protected from the kinds of extractive power that private control over capital requires. The fact is, capitalism has changed some of its contours, but still remains fundamentally the same in the sense that it requires the exploitation of labor for expanded growth and accumulation.

The problem is that the political critique of capital needs to be kept in view. We need to ask again what the purposes and ends of our economy ought to be, to establish a critical discourse on what is necessary and what is merely a means for the opening up of new spaces for profit.

5. Would you say that the problem with the language that many radicals use is that there is an obsession with using the correct terminology rather than actually engaging in meaningful work? That the language in and of itself is an end?

I've also thought that this has made it easier for opponents to infiltrate such groups.

What are your thoughts on that?

Words matter, no question about it. But words without concrete concepts simply create confusion at best and mask imbecility at worst. Language does not create reality, but it can distort it. What the left needs is a coherent connection between the basic values that define its ends and the concepts and ideas it seeks to put out in the world. It needs to see that moral ideas and values require some translation into political reality and this is never going to be perfect or ideal. What makes a rational radicalism salient, what keeps it alive, and what will allow it to breathe new life into the world is its orientation to political reality. The correct terminology is useful if it can explain reality.

If the focus is on language at the expense of establishing a link between language and reality, the issue is not so much that opponents will infiltrate radical movements. On the contrary, opponents will actually be able to draw people out of radical movements. An anti-statist left can be drawn to an anti-statist right, especially when right-wing opponents of the state seem to enjoy actual electoral successes. Even more, it can prevent the formation of a larger, more integrated movement since the fetish of language simply splinters our politics. This is why an objective science of politics is needed by radicals, not language, moral rage, or anything else. An objective vantage point anchored in political principles of social emancipation is what a mature radicalism should seek to achieve.

6. You bring up the fact that “Liberalism has been highly successful at incorporating many of the social movements that have emerged throughout the twentieth century.” However, do you think that liberalism is now failing since we are seeing the rollback of rights for women and minorities, the welfare state, jobs for working-class Americans, and the like?

It's not evident that rights for women and minorities have been receding. It is, however, demonstrably true that political rights are simply not enough. You need to reshape economic life to grant them any full social meaning. Blacks have been excluded by income just as much as by overt racial exclusion from migrating out of decaying cities to more affluent areas with superior public goods such as education. Civic and cultural rights are expanding, but at the expense of economic rights that give them any kind of real significance and meaning. The civic equality for excluded groups satisfies the narrow

demand for recognition, but it does nothing for the richer need for creating a social context for genuine human growth and forms of modern social solidarity.

The emphasis on cultural liberalism as opposed to economic liberalism has also allowed the welfare state to be slowly chiseled away. What is needed is a conception of economic justice that allows for the concrete development of individuals, that grants all equal access not only to “opportunity” but to the means for self-development and for human growth. This is what liberalism cannot provide and what radicalism must insist upon.

7. Would you argue that liberalism has effectively defanged a number of previously radical movements and essentially acted as a co-optation of these movements on an ideological and strategic/tactical level?

Liberalism has historically been able to reconcile every major social movement into a more general legitimacy. But it has done this not only because of its basic principles, but also because it is good for business. It is good for Wal-Mart to get women out of patriarchal structures of domestic life because it gives it a cheap labor force to exploit. The same can be said about ending homophobia in the workplace. Liberalism allows for the erasure of pre-liberal forms of inequality, but protects the class inequalities of bourgeois life. It has had more success in allowing women, minority groups of all kinds inclusion into our political and cultural life. But radicalism must push beyond liberalism: it must question the generic values and norms that pervade our reality not simply because they exist, but interrogate them on the basis of their ability to expand or to contract the realm of human development.

None of this means that liberal values are irrelevant, quite the opposite. Radicals need to be vigilant against pre-liberal norms and practices: against racism, homophobia, gender discrimination, and the like. But it must insist that these categories be tied to a concept of the public good, that they are not simply interests of minority groups, but part of a general public good to live in a society of self-development, expression, difference and non-exploitation. The main issue is that economic forms of domination and exploitation are more universal and more damaging in modern societies. The destruction of the planet, the amount of human waste (both as refuse and as “wasted” forms of life), the cultural realities of alienation, the withering of artistic and cultural life – all of it is tied to the increased, wasteful commodification and consumerism of late-capitalism. Radicalism needs a more unified theory of all of this, and it needs to see the stakes clearly.

8. Please expand upon the collapse of Marxism within a US/Western context and how that has created both a political and intellectual vacuum which the liberal left has come to fill. It seems that there has been a massive collapse not only due to the triumph of global capitalism and the corporate state, but also inner conflicts and, most importantly, the attack on the Marxist left by the state itself.

Of course the decline of Marxism is a complex, highly debated narrative. There was good reason for members of the New Left in the 1960s to move away from categories of class since the overt racism of many unions and the labor movement made alliances with them odious. But the reality is, the fall of the Soviet Union, the emergence of neoliberalism as a resurgent form of capitalism, and the new cultural mentalities cultivated by an empty, commodified culture have all come together to create a fertile ground for a post-marxist (postmodern, poststructuralist, and, simply post-rational) intellectual environment. Mediating institutions like unions have been eroded; the suburbanization of several generations of people since the 1950s has atomized consciousness, and a unified

culture industry has exerted strong pressures on the values and norms of the population.

Historically, Marxism was a challenge to the liberal state. When it went into decline, it ceased to be a threat. There is no longer need for the state to attack the Marxist left. Right-wing pundits might sound the alarm that President Obama is a socialist, but this is only a rhetorical tactic for trying to oust Democratic politicians from office. As for internal disputes, true believers of different sectarian castes mainly dominate them. Dogmatically invoking Marx or the Marxist theorists of past is not, on its own, sufficient to a revitalized radicalism. Their ideas are resources that can be built upon to confront our contemporary crises. Indeed, this is precisely what the best theorists did.

About all of this, the core values and ideas of Marx still have a lot to say and to explicate. What we tried to call into question in our article was the lack of real political depth to the new radical intellectuals and their ideas about particularist forms of identity, puerile anti-statism, and abstract notions of freedom. What is important is that we see that advanced capitalism has been able to destroy the very foundations and resources needed to advance a coherent, politically viable form of critique and movements for enlightened, rational, progressive political change. Our polemic was aimed at those that do not realize that the conception of leftist politics they endorse are molded from the very stuff that ought to be critiqued.

9. Do you think that there is any way to reverse this trend of the Left falling further and further into the abyss of political irrelevancy?

Yes, there is a way. Rediscover what politics actually is. It is not a path to utopia. It should not be a means to only vent frustrations. These are the qualities of a dogmatic and fractured left. Concrete political engagement through social movements directed at concrete aims forges solidarity. Part of why Occupy Wall Street was initially so successful was because it seemed to create solidarity around the issue of economic inequality. It got people out onto the streets. Part of why it failed was because, in its rejection of demands, it did not show how protests could lead to meaningful change. This was not true of the civil rights movement or the labor movement. In the midst of the AIDs crisis, gay rights activists protested to demand government action. Feminist activists mobilized to try to get the Equal Rights Amendment passed. These examples of movements were inspired by liberalism, but they attest to the fact that movements need an object. Recognizing that the state is an institution that can be used to serve the public good and is not some abstract apparatus gives the radical left a concrete object.

A rational radical politics would have the effect of exposing the irrelevance of anti-modern and irrational theories. It would marginalize self-righteous rebelliousness. A left that is concerned with realizing the public good has no use for self-indulgent flights from reality. It was in response to these dangerous and alarmingly prevalent distractions that we wrote our essay. A left that has nothing to say about the real world, material interests, mechanisms of exploitation, political policy, or the function of institutions in serving the public good will fall into the abyss of political irrelevance. But these are tendencies on the left that have come to prominence over the last forty years. It is not an accident that these tendencies occurred in tandem with the revitalization of capitalism. Yet, we believe that the current morass can and should serve as an impetus for making people articulate a rational radical politics, rather than encourage people to retreat into the kinds of theoretical incoherence, chic radicalism and cynicism, and romanticized rebelliousness that simply uphold the status quo.

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