

Against dogmatic abstraction: A critique of Cindy Milstein on anarchism

Chris Cutrone

AT THE LEFT FORUM 2010, held at Pace University in New York City in March, Cindy Milstein, director of the Institute for Anarchist Studies, spoke at a panel discussion on anarchism and Marxism, chaired by Andy Grubacic, with fellow panelists Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Andrew Currey. The topic of Milstein's talk was the prospect for the "synthesis of anarchism and Marxism" today. The relation between anarchism and Marxism is a long-standing and vexing problem, for their developments have been inextricably intertwined.

Milstein began her talk by remarking on the sea-change that had occurred over the course of the last "10-20 years," in which the "default pole on the Left" had gone from "libertarian to libertarian," so that now what she called "authoritarian perspectives" had to take seriously and respond to libertarian ones, rather than the reverse, which had been the case previously. Authoritarian Marxists now were on the defensive and had to answer to libertarian anarchists. Milstein commented on her chagrin when she realized that a speaker she found favorable at a recent forum was in fact from the ISO (International Socialist Organization), because the speaker had "sounded like an anarchist." For Milstein, this was important because it meant that, unlike in the past, the Left could now potentially proceed along essentially "libertarian" lines.

Milstein offered two opposed ways in which the potential synthesis of anarchism and Marxism has proceeded to date, both of which she critiqued and wanted to surpass. One was what she called the prevalent "anarchistic activism" today that found expression, for example, in the Invisible Committee's 2005 pamphlet *The Coming Insurrection* and in the rash of campus occupations at the height of the recent financial crisis. While Milstein praised aspects of this contemporary expression of a certain anarchistic impulse, she expressed concern that it also replicated "the worst aspects of Marxism, its clandestine organizing and Vanguardism." Milstein found a complementary problem with the Marxist Left's attempts (e.g. by the ISO, et al.) to "sound anarchist" in the present circumstances, for she thought that they did so dishonestly, in order to recruit new members to Marxism. The way Milstein posed these problems already says a great deal about her sympathies and actual proposals in posing the question of a potential synthesis of anarchism and Marxism. For, in her view, whereas the anarchistic Left of the Invisible Committee and campus activists makes an honest mistake, the Marxists have more nefarious motives. Milstein's critique of the contemporary anarchist politics expressed by the Invisible Committee is expressed in the following way:

chistic politics expressed by the Invisible Committee's manifesto to and associated ethic of "occupy everything" was that, in its extreme emphasis on "autonomy," it is subject to what she called "individualist nihilism," and so lost sight of the "collective."

Milstein sought to reclaim the moniker of the "Left" exclusively for a revolutionary politics that does not include social democratic or liberal "reformist" political tendencies. (She made a special point, however, of saying that this did not mean excluding the history of "classical liberalism," of Thomas Paine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and others, which she still found relevant.) Her point was to raise the question of how it might be possible to achieve a non-authoritarian or "libertarian" version of "socialism," or anti-capitalism informed by Marxism. Milstein identified the problem, common to both Marxism and present-day forms of anarchism, as the failure to properly prefigure an emancipated society in which Marxism and present-day forms of anarchism, as asserted that anti-capitalism was the sine qua non of any purported revolutionary politics. According to Milstein, what was missing from contemporary anarchism, but which Marxism potentially provided, was the "socialist," or revolutionary anti-theoretical analysis of capitalism found in Marx's critical theoretical analysis of capitalism in *Capital*. To Milstein, this was the key basis for any possible rapprochement of anarchism and Marxism.

It is therefore necessary to address the different conceptions of capitalism, and thus anti-capitalism, that might lie behind anarchism and Marxism, in order to see if and how they could participate in a common "libertarian socially" anti-capitalist politics, moving forward. Historically, anarchists have complained of the split in the First International Workingmen's Association, in which the Marxists predominated and expelled the anarchists. The history of the subsequent Second International, which excluded the anarchists, was peppered with anarchist protest against their marginalization in this period of tremendous growth in the revolutionary socialist workers' movement.⁴ The crisis in the Second International that took place in the context of the First World War (1914-18) saw many former anarchists joining the radicals Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky in forming the Third International at the time of the Russian, German, Hungarian and Italian working class revolutions of 1917-19. (For instance, the prominent American Trotskyist James P. Cannon had, prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, been an anarchist militant in the International Workers of the World.)⁵ To be sure, there



Karl Marx in 1839.

Two figures of historical anarchism not mentioned by Milstein in her talk, but who can be regarded in terms of the emergence and further development of Marx's own perspectives on capitalism and socialism, are, respectively, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-65) and Mikhail Bakunin (1814-76). Marx's thought responded in its initial stages to the formulation of socialism by Proudhon, who was perhaps the most influential socialist at the time of Marx's youth. Bakunin, on the other hand, started out as an admirer of Marx's work, completing the first Russian translation of the *Communist Manifesto* while also attempting to undertake a translation of *Capital* (the

⁴ "Abstraction," continues on page 4

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later project was abandoned unfinished). One figure Milstein did mention, Murray Bookchin (1921-2006), who taught her anarchism, was a famous critical interlocutor with Marxism, writing the New Left pamphlet *Listen, Marxist!* (1969) Bookchin was himself a former Marxist, first as a mainstream Third International Communist, later a Trotskyist, before ultimately turning to anarchism out of disenchantment with Marxism. More precisely, it was disenchantment with the practice of Marxist politics that motivated Bookchin's turn to anarchism. Like her mentor, Milstein's approach appears to be motivated by a Marxist anti-capitalism in theory and this relate to the actual historical differences between anarchism and Marxism, in both theory and practice? Marx's critique of capital was formulated and emerged strongly out of his critical engagement with Proudhon's "anarchist" socialism. Proudhon in considered the first "libertarian socialist." Proudhon in fact invented the term "anarchism." He also famously coined the phrase "property is theft." Proudhon, like Marx, engaged and was influenced by not only British political economy and French socialism, but also Hegelian philosophy. Proudhon admitted to having only "three masters: the Bible, Adam Smith, and Hegel." Marx's personal relationship with Proudhon was broken by Marx's critique of Proudhon's 1847 book, *System of Economic Contradictions: or, The Philosophy of Poverty*. Marx's book-length critique was titled, in his typically incisive style of dialectical reversal, *The Poverty of Philosophy*. It is significant that Marx worked towards a critique of Proudhonian socialism at the same time as he was beginning to elaborate a critique of the categories of political economy, through the case of Proudhon's 1840 book *What is Property?*, in the unpublished 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*.

By addressing Proudhon's opposition to capital as symptomatic, and trying to get at the shared presuppositions of both capitalist society and its discontents, historical moment in capital. Proudhon's thought, Marx argued, was not simply mistaken, but, as an acute sympathizer of capital, necessitated a critical understanding of what Proudhon was trying to grasp and struggle through. Marx's "critique of political economy," and attempt to get at the root of capital in "humanity itself," as a historical phenomenon, can thus be said to have begun with his critique of Proudhon.

For Marx, Proudhon offered not the overcoming, but rather the purest expression of the commodity form in capital, in the call to "abolish private property." The unintended effect of the abolition of property would, according to Marx, actually render society itself into one

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Statement of Purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles in the *Platypus Review* range in length from 750–4,500 words. Submissions and inquiries may be sent to review_editor@platypus1917.org. Submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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Imperialism: What is it, why should we be against it?

Kevin Anderson, Chris Cutrone, Nick Kreitman, Danny Postel, and Adam Turl

On January 30th, 2007, Platypus hosted its first public forum, "Imperialism: What is it—Why should we be Against it?" The panel consisted of Adam Turl of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), Kevin Anderson of the Marxist-Humanist group News and Letters, Nick Kreitman of the new Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Danny Postel of Open Democracy, and Chris Cutrone of Platypus. What follows is an edited transcript of this event; the full video can be found online at <platypus1917.org/2007/01/20/imperialism/>.

The question of imperialism remains obscure on the Left. In light of the continued failure of the anti-war movement to end the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with the decline of anti-war protest in the wake of Barack Obama's election, it seems that the critique of imperialism has not been clarified, but only become more impotent in its opacity. Consequently, the Platypus Review believes that this panel retains its salience.

Opening remarks

Adam Turl: To Marxists, imperialism designates the circumstance whereby economic competition among major capitalist countries, driven by finance capital, large banks, and big corporations, leads to political and military competition. This takes the form of an indirect competition for colonies, zones of influence, and trade networks. Take the U.S. invasion of Iraq—it was not just about seizing oil, but controlling the access to oil of potential competitors to America, such as China. So "imperialism" is not just about bad foreign policy, but the necessity for a ruling class driven by competition to pursue such policies. But what force in society can oppose imperialism? My position is that working class people in the United States, whether they work at an auto plant or in an office, have the power and the interest to oppose imperialism.

Unfortunately, most of the 1960s New Left argued that large segments of the American working class benefit materially from imperialism. I do not believe this argument was ever correct, and it has only grown more implausible with age. The costs of imperialism are borne not only by those that the U.S. oppresses abroad, but also by working class people here at home. The benefits of imperialism are almost entirely accrued by the very wealthy here and by tiny groups of collaborators abroad.

Working class people identify with imperialist ideology only to their own detriment. It has been a great weakness of the U.S. labor movement that much of its leadership since World War II has identified with the economic interests of major U.S. corporations, ultimately leading to a massive decline of labor rights in America. Although corporations have reaped huge dividends, workers have benefited from neither the theft of Iraqi oil, nor the exploitation of workers around the globe—quite the opposite, in fact. More than 60 percent of the U.S. population has demonstrated repeatedly in polls that they oppose the occupation of Iraq. Imperialism breeds anti-imperialism: The crisis in Iraq, along with the economic crisis facing millions of workers here at home, has bred opposition to the war.

We face this common situation of having to build an anti-imperialist Left. As American workers begin to question the war, is there a Left to offer a position on the war and imperialism that makes sense? Without this, people will believe the commonsense answers pushed by Democrats, who say the war in Iraq is a policy misstep, rather than part of an imperial project in the Middle East connected, among other things, to America's support of the occupation of Palestine. The Left needs to be rebuilt, and this means creating as large an anti-war movement as possible. With the debacle in Iraq our rulers are facing something of a crisis; now is the time to seize this moment to organize against the war.

Kevin Anderson: Imperialism is a system by which powerful, competing nations are driven to dominate and exploit weaker ones. It is not simply a conspiracy, but a social and economic process rooted in the very structure of capitalism. Modern imperialism seeks to dominate the globe in order to secure markets, cheap labor, and raw materials, a process analyzed by Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg.

Imperialism also has a concrete political and military aspect, but military control is necessary only to secure the access needed for economic imperialism to operate. Imperialism seeks to open up other societies to the penetration of capital, making direct occupation unnecessary and thus uncommon today, which is partly why even some pro-imperialists consider the war in Iraq reckless.

Finally there is cultural imperialism, which has dominated academic discussions of imperialism. Everything from *Indiana Jones* to the way colonized peoples are typically portrayed legitimates economic and political imperialism. Even elite cultural institutions, such as art museums, in the way they organize artwork—e.g., Egyptian artifacts in the basement and French paintings on the top floor—can reflect a fundamentally racist ideology assuring people of their cultural superiority and right to dominate.

Imperialism strengthens capitalism, but it always engenders resistance. Working people have to fight imperialist wars and thus pay its costs, so they resist; naturally, those directly subject to imperialism also resist. Forms of resistance vary, however, from progressive and emancipatory to reactionary: Take Pat Buchanan, who opposes the Iraq war strictly on isolationist grounds, so as to avoid involvement with "inferior races." Imperialism is sometimes opposed by reactionary interests abroad, too, from Al-Qaeda to Serbian nationalists. Of course, generally, imperialism is opposed by progressive movements. It is important for anti-imperialists here, and those in countries directly oppressed by imperialism, to be willing to work together. Today, various U.S. organizations support Chiapas and Bolivia. Such progressive anti-imperi-

alists must continue to oppose imperialism, but must also avoid supporting reactionary forms of anti-imperialism. It is not enough to say simply that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Nick Kreitman: Most anti-imperialists today have no program. At the anti-war marches they organize, groups like United for Peace and Justice advances no concrete alternatives. They simply hand you a sticker reading "Troops Out Now." They do not elaborate on what they want after troop withdrawal, and therefore do not connect this struggle with the question of realizing a more just society. Of course, sovereignty should rest solely with the Iraqis. Yet, even as the war continues, the number of people turning out for protests dwindles because, at least in part, they can see no solution.

The Left needs to resume the responsibility of political leadership, which includes identifying and presenting alternatives to U.S. foreign policy. Only then can we overcome apathy. Unfortunately, the Left has failed to elaborate on what could be done, on how a new Iraq might look, just as, in the 1990s, we failed to articulate a position on how the U.S. should engage Serbia, which misled people to believe we supported Milošević.

We need people to articulate alternatives in the long term and to form concrete plans in the short term to end the occupation. Some are interested in this work, but they have not been trying hard enough to lead the movement, to provide solutions that will help us connect with people.

Danny Postel: The Balkan Wars of the 1990s proved confusing for those who, like myself, came of age politically during the Central America solidarity movements of the 1980s, and who were thus anti-imperialist as a matter of course. As Yugoslavia became engulfed in violence, the paradigm inherited from the anti-Vietnam War movement proved insufficient to understand what was happening. Kevin Anderson and I argued that anti-imperialism was obscuring what was critical at that moment. Unfortunately, support for Milošević on the Left was all too real, drawing in leftists as prominent as Michael Parenti—who helped organize the International Committee to Defend Slobodan Milošević—as well as Diana Johnstone, Michel Chossudovsky, and Jared Israel.

Many on the Left in the 1990s were led down a dark alley, a situation analyzed thoughtfully in "Against the Double Blackmail," an essay by Slavoj Žižek written around this time. There, Žižek argued that leftists needed to oppose both Western imperialism and its false antithesis, ethno-fascist gangster capitalism, which does not represent a form of resistance to but, rather, the mirror image of global capital and Western empire.

Since September 11, one can witness in dismay the return of this tunnel-visioned anti-imperialism that had deeply confused the Left about the Balkans. A critical stance toward myopic anti-imperialism has lost ground given the brazenness of the new era of global imperialism represented by the Bush administration. Despite this resurgence of U.S. imperialism, the example of Iran clearly shows the limitations of adopting imperialism as the sole organizing principal of leftist thought. Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad often employs the language of anti-imperialism, to the confusion of people on the Left. Some even admire him for it, especially when someone like Hugo Chavez embraces Ahmadinejad, the front man of Iran's far right, as a "revolutionary brother."

This is further confused by the fact that the emancipatory demands of Iranian dissidents tend not to be expressed in the idiom of anti-imperialism, but in terms of human rights and secularism, which are undeservedly dismissed as "mere bourgeois rights" by too many Marxists. The Iranian struggle is indeed anti-imperialist, but not to the exclusion of other issues. Student radicals publicly denounced Ahmadinejad for embracing David Duke at a global Holocaust conference at Tehran University [in December 2006]. Those students are saying their struggle is two-fold: It opposes imperialism and internal authoritarianism. Similarly, our struggle should be two-fold. We should struggle against imperialism, to stop the U.S. from attacking Iran, but we should also struggle in solidarity with emancipatory forces in Iran. Anti-imperialism is only half of our equation. It signals what we are against—but what are we for?

Chris Cutrone: Platypus takes its name from the animal because of its incomprehensibility, its resistance to classification. Like our namesake we feel that an authentic Left today would go almost unrecognized by the existing Left or, if recognized, seen only as a living fossil. We focus on the history and thought of the Marxist tradition, but in a critical and non-dogmatic manner, taking nothing for granted. We do this because we recognize our present, the politics of today, as the consequence of the Left's self-liquidation over the course of at least a generation. It is our contention and provocation that the Left, understood in its best historical traditions, is dead. It needs to be entirely reformulated, both theoretically and practically, at the most fundamental levels.

The issue of imperialism provides a good frame for investigating the present international crisis of the Left. Though problematic for the Left for some time, the issue of imperialism has taken on particularly grotesque forms more recently, losing whatever coherence it had in the past. Today, it betrays symptomatically the Left's dearth of emancipatory imagination. The present anti-war movement continues to struggle against the latest war by misapplying the template of the Vietnam War and the counterinsurgencies waged by the U.S. in Latin America. There, the U.S. fought against progressive agents for social change. The same cannot be said today. In addition to confusing the past with the present, the Left now tails after the crassest opportunism of the Democratic Party, for whom the more dead in Iraq, the more they can marginalize the Bush administration.

The Left has abdicated responsibility for a self-aware

politics of progressive social transformation and emancipation. Instead, U.S. policy and the realities it grapples with are opportunistically vilified. Thus the Left shirks serious reflection on its own inconvenient history, its own role in how we got here. The worst expressions of this can be found in the intemperate hatred of Bush and in the idea, unfortunately prevalent in some leftist circles, that the U.S. government orchestrated the September 11 attacks.

We in Platypus recognize that leftist politics today is characterized by its despair over the constrained possibilities of social change. Whatever vision for such change exists in the present derives from a wounded narcissism animated by the kind of loathing Susan Sontag expressed in the 1960s when she said, "the white race is the cancer of human history."¹ The desire for change has become reactionary. The Left has devolved into apologetics for the world as it is, for existing social and political movements having nothing to do with emancipation. Thus the Left threatens to become the new right. Many who consider themselves leftist dress up Islamist insurgents as champions of national self-determination. One recalls Ward Churchill calling the office workers killed on September 11 "little Eichmanns of U.S. imperialism," or Lynne Stewart, the civil rights attorney, saying that Sheik Abdul Rahman, who orchestrated the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993, might be a legitimate freedom fighter.

The Left has lost its basic orientation towards freedom, a problem going back at least as far as the 1930s. The perspective the Left once had on the question and problem of freedom has become occluded in the present. Consequently, the Left has largely decomposed into competing rationalizations for a bad reality that the Left, in its long degeneration, has not only failed to prevent, but actually helped bring about. The sooner we stem the rot on the Left the better, but first of all we must recognize the depth of the problem. This is why we in Platypus are dedicated to investigating the history of the Left's demise, so that an imagination for social emancipation can be regained anew. The Left can only survive by overcoming itself. Seriously interrogating the received political categories on the Left, not least of all imperialism, is essential to establishing a coherent politics with any hope of changing the world in an emancipatory direction. The enemies of social progress have their visions and are pursuing them. Some are more reactionary than others. The only question for us now: What are we going to do on the Left?

Panelists' responses

Kreitman: At times, the Left can degenerate into supporting ethnic fascism. We should not idealize Muqtada al-Sadr or the Iraqi Islamic Party. We need to figure out how we are going to help a democratic, socialist Iraq emerge out of the current mess. If this just means leaving, that is what we should do. But is pulling out going to solve any of Iraq's problems? Or will it just give the next president a pretext to return in five years? We need to identify who our allies are and how we can affect U.S. policy to provide the best of all possible outcomes in Iraq.

Turl: With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transformations in China, anti-imperialism certainly became more complicated. Nonetheless, opposing the imperialism of one's own country still overlaps naturally with political support of organizations and countries resisting imperialism. There are two mistakes made by the Left. One is to associate any and all opposition to U.S. imperialism with progressive politics. The other is what Noam Chomsky writes about in *Military Humanism*, his study of Bill Clinton's interventions in Bosnia and Serbia, which actually found support from so-called leftists. The 1990s broke the post-Vietnam reluctance of the U.S. to invade. I disagree with Chris: I think the Left has more to do than examine our mistakes and despair. The Left is about a process taking place in society, about people radicalizing and struggling against injustice. We need to be engaged with those struggles around the world. There are debates going on in Venezuela today about what the future of that movement should look like. The Left should engage in these debates although, in the U.S., our most important obligation is to stand against our government telling anyone what to do in Venezuela.

Anderson: My interest has always been problematizing what the Left is doing. What alternative to capitalism we offer is connected with the critique of the Left, by the Left. Most would take issue with Ahmadinejad's comments denying the Holocaust, yet many leftists think talking about such things will distract from organizing the next protest. However, every time we do not explore these critical questions, we lose a chance to clarify what our alternative to capitalism actually is. We imply that our political vision may resemble the world desired by *any* of the forces opposing imperialism, regardless of those forces' politics. We have to explore the difficult questions of the Left even as we oppose the occupation of Iraq and affirm our solidarity with progressive movements.

Postel: To clarify, when I said we should be in solidarity with Iranian protesters, I do not just mean, "we Americans." I mean, we on the internationalist left: activists, people of conscience, progressives. Particularly in America, some leftists think that people outside Iran have no role to play in the Iranian struggles, because they come from an imperialist country. We *do* have a role to play: to ask people who are struggling, "What can we do for you?" and "How can we help your struggle?" In general, Iranian progressives do not want financial support from the Pentagon or think tanks. What they *do* want is the support of global civil society, from intellectuals, activists, leftists—that is, from people like us.

Cutrone: The Left is in a bad way when looking at the possibilities for developing a Left in Iraq. Regardless of intention, the U.S. forces in Iraq and the political process that they have protected—the emergence of an Iraqi state through elections—now stand between whatever possibility there is for an Iraqi left, in the long term, and the immediate reactionary opposition from former Baathists, Islamists, and Shi'a paramilitaries. What does it mean to call U.S. policy "imperialist" when, on the ground, that policy is opposed primarily from the right? The Iraqi Communist Party put out a statement saying that, while they were opposed the invasion of Iraq, they now also oppose the reactionary military opposition to the U.S. occupation and the Iraqi government. In other words, they were opposed to the U.S. occupation, but it matters

to them *how* the occupation comes to an end. For, under the current conditions, the U.S. being forced out of Iraq by right-wing sectarians would be a disaster.

The critique of the Left internationally is a form of participation and solidarity on the Left. The Left exhibits some of its worst features on the issue of anti-imperialism. It is constantly trying to figure out where the Left is, what existing group one can point to and say, "This is the Left." Too often this involves dressing up as "leftist" more or less reactionary opposition forces. In so doing, the Left expresses a conciliatory attitude towards the status quo. Against this, I say the most salient form of support *is* critique, and this applies to the preceding historical period, as well: The role of the American left during the Vietnam War should have been to critique the National Liberation Front (NLF) in South Vietnam and the North Vietnamese regime.

Q & A

First, the real job of the anti-war movement in the 1960s was not to criticize the North Vietnamese regime, but to stop the genocidal war in Vietnam, and the movement succeeded. These wars are not just about abstract issues debated in graduate papers. Imperialism takes real lives. The ISO, which I am a member of, never had any problems supporting the Sandinistas against the U.S. and Solidarity against the USSR, because we took for granted that nations have the right to self-determination. This means, first, that activists in the advanced world have to be anti-imperialist as a principle, for it is not just about stopping oppression: We should support struggles against the U.S. because, if the forces of imperialism are defeated and weakened abroad, we can better fight for socialism here. Let's be clear: the "dark alley" mentioned earlier—it was Stalinism. It was the identification, for 60 years, of socialism with totalitarianism and Soviet imperialism. Our task is to redevelop the socialist tradition by unearthing that crap, to make socialism relevant to the millions in this country who want fundamental change.

Cutrone: About Vietnam, during the Tet Offensive the NLF and the North Vietnamese communist regime expended literally thousands of cadres attempting to get the U.S. back to the negotiating table. Is that a form of fighting for social emancipation we can endorse? More broadly, I'm not sure the anti-Vietnam War movement succeeded. To the extent the U.S. was "defeated," this was surely a Pyrrhic victory for Vietnam in light of the lasting devastation it suffered. Moreover, whether America lost or won militarily, the anti-war movement definitely did not win, as Vietnam presents no repeatable model of social emancipation.

The Left "here" and the Left "there" should be seen more in terms of an integral connection and less as a distant solidarity, which is a bad habit we inherit from the 1960s anti-war movement, expressed today in the idea that somehow the U.S. being defeated in Iraq automatically translates into an objective victory for the Left. This simply is not true, unless you think more Democrats in office is a triumph for the Left.

Anderson: The anti-war movement of the 1960s, which I participated in, had collapsed by the time the U.S. pulled out. Soon after, we had Reagan as president. The greater transformations we hoped to make out of the anti-war radicalism just did not happen. This failure was not simply a matter of America being a big, bad, reactionary country. It was because of all kinds of mistakes on the Left, not the least of which being the near idolatry of Mao and the Cultural Revolution.

Turl: You are not going to get a defense of Maoism from me. But still, the anti-war movement of the 1960s forced America out of Vietnam, allowing the Vietnamese people to win. Regardless of the politics of the government in Vietnam that resulted, the U.S. had to remain on the sidelines until September 11. That is a successful movement. Did the movement create socialism? If that is our standard, it will deter our participation in struggles for justice that do not measure up, forcing us into a passive stance.

Kreitman: We on the Left should be wary of trumpeting self-determination as one of our values. In the wake of the 1960s radicalism, defending "national self-determination" sometimes meant that the Left simply threw support to the best armed groups in a particular country, rather than take their politics into account.

The major problem in the 1990s was not that people were cloaking anti-imperialist groups in undeserved left-wing colors, but that the vast majority of leftists were apologizing for U.S. imperialism by supporting U.S.-led "humanitarian intervention." We cannot, as leftists, afford to cease our support of national self-determination.

Postel: Few leftists believed humanitarianism motivated these U.S. interventions, though some liberal centrists may have fallen for that line. Most of us had a complex position on Western intervention in the Balkans. We who supported the Kosovo intervention, myself included, took that position out of a conviction that the consequences, not the motives, would benefit the Kosovar Albanians, as the Kosovar Albanians themselves argued.

Turl: One must differentiate between the politics of the people ruling the countries bombed by the U.S., and the right of the U.S. to bomb people. We make this distinction all the time in the *Socialist Worker*. We don't gloss over the politics of the resistance in Iraq, but we also steadfastly defend the right of Iraqis to resist a foreign occupation and its troops. If there were an occupation of Chicago, I would defend the right of hardcore Republicans to resist that occupation. I wouldn't care that they were right wing.

This relates to the stance of the Iraqi Communist Party, mentioned earlier. If the U.S. troops stand between the Iraqi Communist Party and obliteration, that is only because the Iraqi Communist Party decided to collaborate with the U.S. occupation and, thus, with the biggest imperial power on the planet. It is untrue that the U.S. stands between reaction and the Iraqi people, or that the U.S. troops are defending a nascent democracy, or whatever the propaganda on the evening news says. Most sectarian violence is created or stoked by America. The U.S. deliberately established an Islamic government in Iraq; next, the U.S. consciously decided to stir sectarian violence after it became clear their proxies, like Ahmed Chalabi, did not have a base in Iraq. After that, the U.S. began siding with different sectarian groups, and it is only then sectarian violence escalates. The longer the U.S. military stays, the more sectarian violence

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great “universal capitalist” over its members. For Marx understood “capital” as the contradiction of modern society with itself.⁶ Just as each member of capitalist society regarded himself as his own property, a commodity to be bought and sold, so society regarded itself as capital. As Marx put it, in the 1844 *Manuscripts*,

Communism is the position as the negation of the negation [of humanity in capital], and is hence the *actual* phase necessary for the next stage of historical development in the process of human emancipation and rehabilitation. *Communism* is the necessary form and the dynamic principle of the immediate future, but communism as such is not the goal of human development, the form of human society.⁷

This is what Proudhon, according to Marx, did not recognize about “socialism.”

It is precisely such historical specification of the problems of capital and its discontents, and of any purported attempts to get beyond capital, that distinguishes Marx’s approach from that of anarchism and non-Marxian socialism. In his critique of capital and its discontents, Marx did not pose any principles against others, abstractly, but rather tried to understand the actual basis for the principles of (anti)capitalism from within.

This relates to Marx’s later dispute with his erstwhile admirer Bakunin. Bakunin was most opposed to what he believed to be Marx’s and Marx’s followers’ embrace of the “state” in their concept of political revolution leading to socialism. Where Bakunin, in characteristic anarchist manner, claimed to be opposed to the state *per se*, Marx and his best followers—such as that great demon for anarchists, Lenin,⁸ in *The State and Revolution* (1917)—sought to grasp the necessity of the state as a function of capital, seeking to attack the conditions of possibility of the need for something like state authority in capital itself. Departing from regarding the state as an invidious *cause* of (political) unfreedom, Marx and the best Marxists sought to find out how the state, in its modern, capitalist, pathological, and self-contradictory form, was actually an *effect* of capital. The difference between Marxism and anarchism is in the understanding of the modern capitalist state as a historically specific phenomenon, a symptom, as opposed to a transhistorical evil.

Milstein’s mentor Bookchin provides a good example of this kind of problem in anarchism with respect to historical specificity in opposition to capitalism. Opposed to the individualistic “egoism” of Proudhonian anarchism and of the likes of Max Stirner,⁹ Bookchin sought to find an adequate form of social life that in principle could do away with any pernicious authority. Bookchin found this in the idea, taken from Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), of local communitarian “mutualism,” as opposed to the tyranny of the capitalist state. For Bookchin, the anarchist opposition to capital comes down to a matter of the most anthropologically appropriate principle of society. (It is notable that Noam Chomsky offers a similar anarchist perspective on human nature as inherently socialist.)

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there is going to be and the more reactionary Iraqi politics will become. The only solution is to pull out immediately so that the Iraqis can sort everything out themselves.

Closing remarks

Anderson: Imperialism with a capital “I” lasted from about 1880 until around the 1950s–60s. However, rather than simply ending, colonialism has been replaced by neo-imperialism. So economic and cultural domination persist after political independence, which is why one cannot understand imperialism without talking about capitalism. But, when Lenin wrote his classic work on imperialism ninety years ago, there were five or six competing powers. Since then, capitalism has become simultaneously far more globalized and centralized. The nature of imperialism and capitalism has changed as a result of the emergence of state capitalism, exemplified by the total centralization of Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. Today, there’s one hyper-power: the United States. In many ways, what exactly these changes mean for anti-imperialism remains unclear.

Turt: Marx argued it is not consciousness that determines being, but being that determines consciousness. Our ideas are informed by the reality of our lives. This is true, yet this relation is also falsified in America: Propaganda is relentlessly pumped into this society to ensure the prevalence of ruling class ideology. Of course, such lies contradict people’s everyday experience. Some people start to see the growing contradiction between what they are told and what they experience. Going through a struggle, a strike or an anti-war movement, catalyzes this change in people’s ideas. A significant example of this process at work now can be seen in Venezuela.

In the 1990s we began to see a resurgence of the Left. Here in the U.S., we had the Ralph Nader campaign and the anti-globalization protests in Seattle. Towards the end of the decade labor activity increased, with the UPS strike marking the first clear labor victory for some time. But this leftward momentum was interrupted by the political fallout of September 11, which was not only a tragedy in itself, but a disaster for the Left. It gave Bush and the rest of the U.S. ruling class the opportunity to wage war. But this is all beginning to change. Millions of people are demanding their rights. As long as people are oppressed, they will fight back and challenge the system. The question now is how to organize that fight. In order to rebuild a Left, we need to oppose our government, the dominant imperial power on the planet, every time it invades, occupies, and murders.

Kreitman: The Left has been in decline for at least a generation, primarily because it has not offered compelling alternatives. In the 1980s, as factories in America closed, there was no Left articulating a new model of how to do things. Workers today are complicit in imperialism, even if it is not in their interest as workers, primarily because the Left really has not provided a compelling alternative politics.

Milstein’s diagnosis and prescription for what ails today’s Left is concerned with its supposed lack of, or otherwise bad principles for, proper political organizing, in terms of both an adequate practice of anti-capitalist revolutionary politics and the emancipated society of “libertarian socialism” towards which it strives.

The eminently practical political issue of “how to get there from here” involves an understanding and judgment of not only the “how” and the “there,” but also the “here” from which one imagines one is proceeding. The question is whether we live in a society that suffers from bad principles of organization, extreme hierarchy, and distantly centralized authority, or from a deeper and more obscure problem of social life in modern capitalism that makes hierarchy and centralization both possible and indeed necessary. Where Marx and a Marxian approach begin is with an examination of what anarchism only presupposes and treats *a priori* as the highest principle of proper human social life. Marxists seek to understand where the impulse towards “libertarian socialism” originates historically. Marxists consider “socialism” to be the historical product and not simply the antithesis of capitalism. Marxists ask, what necessity must be overcome in order to get beyond capital? For socialism would be not simply the negation, but also the completion of capitalism. Marx nonetheless endorsed it as such. This was the heart of Marx’s “dialectical” approach to capital.

By contrast, for Milstein, following Bookchin, socialism differs fundamentally in principle from capitalism. The problem with Marx and historical materialism was that it remained too subject to the exigencies of capitalism in the 19th to early 20th century era of industrialization. Similarly, the problem with the historical anarchism of Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin was that it had not yet adequately formulated the proper political principles for the relations of the individual in society. Bookchin thought that the possibility for this had been achieved in the late 20th century, in what he called “post-scarcity anarchism,” which would allow for a return to the social principles of the traditional human communities that had been destroyed by capitalism and the hierarchical civilizational forms that preceded it.¹⁰ Even though Bookchin thought that Marx’s fundamental political perspective of proletarian socialism had been historically superseded, he nevertheless found support for his approach in Marx’s late ethnographic notebooks.¹¹

On the contrary, an approach properly following Marx would try to understand and push further the aspiration towards a socialist society that comes historically as a result of and from within capital itself. Rather than taking one’s own supposed “anti-capitalism” simply as given, a Marxian approach seeks—as Marx put it in a famous 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge calling for the “ruthless criticism of everything existing,” including first and foremost the Left¹²—to “show the world why it is struggling, and [that] consciousness of this is a thing it must acquire whether it wishes or not.”¹³

For Milstein, the problems afflicting today’s “anti-capitalist movement” can be established and overcome in principle *a priori*. According to Milstein, the Left must only give up its “individualistic nihilism” and “conspira-

torial vanguardism” in organized politics in order to achieve socialism. This means Marxists must give up their bad ideas and forms of organization and become anarchists, or “libertarian socialists,” if they are to serve rather than hinder the revolution against capital.

But, as the young, searching 25 year-old political radical Marx wrote (in his 1843 letter to Ruge),

In fact, the internal obstacles seem almost greater than external difficulties. For... the question “where to?” is a rich source of confusion... among the reformers, but also every individual must admit to himself that he has no precise idea about what ought to happen.... [However] we do not anticipate the world with our dogmas but instead attempt to discover the new world through the critique of the old. I am therefore not in favor of our hoisting a dogmatic banner. Quite the reverse. We must try to help the dogmatists to clarify their ideas. In particular, communism is a dogmatic abstraction and... only a particular manifestation of the humanistic principle and is infected by its opposite, private property. The abolition of private property is therefore by no means identical with communism and communism has seen other socialist theories, such as those of... Proudhon, rising up in opposition to it, not fortuitously but necessarily, because it is only a particular, one-sided realization of the principle of socialism. And by the same token, the whole principle of socialism is concerned only with one side, namely the *reality* of the true existence of man.... This does not mean that we shall confront the world with new doctrinaire principles and proclaim: Here is the truth, on your knees before it! It means that we shall develop for the world new principles from the existing principles of the world.... Our programme must be: the reform of consciousness not through dogmas but by analyzing... consciousness obscure to itself.... It will then become plain that the world has long since dreamed of something of which it needs only to become conscious for it to possess it in reality.¹⁴

Marx counterposed his own unique perspective sharply against that of other “socialists,” whom he found to be unwittingly bound up in the categories of capital against which they raged. This has remained the case for virtually all “anti-capitalists” up to the present. Marx grasped this problem of anti-capitalism at the dawn of the epoch of industrial capital that arose with the disintegration of traditional society, but to whose unprecedented and historically specific social and political problems we continue to be subject today.

Marx departed from anarchism and other forms of symptomatic “socialism” with reason, and this reason must not be forgotten. Marx’s task remains unfinished. Only this “clarification” of “consciousness obscure to itself” that Marx called for can fulfill the long “dream” of anarchism, which otherwise will remain denied in reality. | P

Dead Left, continued from page 2

saying he had “left a smell of sulfur” at the U.N., are just so many desperate publicity stunts to get negative attention from Washington. Chavez needs the American threat. It is an awkward situation for him that there are no serious plans for U.S. invasion, and that the days have passed when the Venezuelan Right was strong enough to ask Washington for support like it did in 2003. A diffuse state of emergency is a critical element of the regime’s political effectiveness. If Chavez becomes a non-issue for the U.S., it will become more difficult for him to wield anti-imperialist rhetoric, to blame the opposition for all that goes awry, and to demonize his opponents as agents of imperialism—a practice that reached its absurd nadir when the Chavista UNT organizers accused the Trotskyist labor leader Orlando Chirino of working for imperialist counterrevolution.

From what standpoint does one criticize a “socialist” regime that threatens striking workers with arrest and prosecutes labor leaders who seek to maintain union independence? From what standpoint do we oppose a military strongman who has called Mahmoud Ahmadinejad “brother revolutionary”? Despite the obvious opportunism, ideological incoherence, and anti-labor politics of the regime, the question of whether it is possible to oppose Chavez from the Left is not cut and dried. Although Chavez’s regime is indeed an obstacle for truly emancipatory politics in Venezuela and around the world, it is difficult to even point this out when such emancipatory politics have ceased to exist. As things stand, it is as if the only perspective from which to point out the incompetence, authoritarianism, corruption, and most of all, the hypocrisy of the regime, is from a desire to return to the incompetent, authoritarian, and corrupt neoliberal order that preceded it. And as things stand, such a return is the only possible result of the end of Chavez’s rule. Must the Left simply hold its nose in solidarity for what might or might not be the lesser of two evils? Should it just be glad and thank the heavens that something somewhere looks remotely like its distorted memory of what socialist revolution used to be?

Seasoned personages of the anti-capitalist Left are aware that their politics have run out of steam, and that self-deceiving optimism is the only option. In his book *Pirates of the Caribbean*, the 1960s radical Tariq Ali depicts Chavez, Fidel Castro, and Evo Morales as a new “axis of hope” against the evils of the Washington Consensus. Meanwhile, *Z Magazine* contributor Gregory Wilpert continues to maintain his website venezuelanalysis.com, which reads like little more than the American public relations page for the Chavista bureaucracy. The International Socialist Organization’s Lee Sustar routinely publishes articles in support of Chavez’s PSUV and its Stalinist tactics of absorbing or destroying every other leftist organization. And *Parecon* author Michael Albert found no problem in signing Chavez’s farcical call for a 5th International, presumably failing to notice that among the parties invited was Mexico’s PRI, infamous for its 71-year long iron grip of the country and, among its many crimes, the notorious massacre of hundreds of protesting students in October of 1968.

1. Video of Milstein’s talk at the Left Forum 2010 can be found online at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9GiPNPDLDM>.
2. It is unclear by her “10–20 year” periodization whether Milstein meant this negatively, with the collapse of Stalinism or “authoritarian/state socialism” beginning in 1989, or positively, with the supposedly resurgent Left of the “anti/alter-globalization” movement exemplified by the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle and the World Social Forum starting in 2001 at Porto Alegre, Brazil. Milstein was probably referencing both.
3. Ever since the Marx-Bakunin split in the International Workingmen’s Association or First International, anarchists have characterized Marxists as authoritarians hijacking the revolutionary movement.
4. See James Joll, *The Second International 1889–1914* (New York: Praeger, 1956).
5. See Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left 1890–1928* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007).
6. For example, Proudhon advocated replacing money with labor-time credits and so did not recognize, as Marx noted early on and elaborated in detail later in *Capital*, how, after the Industrial Revolution and the introduction of machine production, labor-time undermined itself as a measure of social value.
7. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), 93. Also available online at <www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm >.
8. Lenin wrote, in “*Left-Wing*” *Communism — An Infantile Disorder* (1920) that,

[D]riven to frenzy by the horrors of capitalism... anarchism is characteristic of all capitalist countries. The instability of such revolutionism, its barrenness, and its tendency to turn rapidly into submission, apathy, phantasms, and even a frenzied infatuation with one bourgeois fad or another—all this is common knowledge.... Anarchism was not infrequently a kind of penalty for the opportunist sins of the working-class movement. The two monstrosities complemented each other. (Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Lenin Anthology* [New York: Norton, 1975], 559–560.)

9. See Max Stirner, *The Ego and its Own* (London: Rebel Press, 1993). Originally published 1845.
10. See Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1970); “Beyond Neo-Marxism,” *Telos* 36; and *Toward an Ecological Society* (1980).
11. These writings by Marx are also the subject of a recent book by the Marxist-Humanist Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
12. Elsewhere, Marx wrote, “Our task is that of ruthless criticism, and much more against ostensible friends than against open enemies; and in maintaining this our position we gladly forego cheap democratic popularity.” [“Gottfried Kinkel,” in *Neue Rheinische Zeitung: Politisch-ökonomische Revue* No. 4, 1850. Available online at <www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1850/04/kinkel.htm>].
13. Marx, letter to Arnold Ruge (September, 1843), in Tucker, ed., *Marx-Engels Reader*, 12–15. Also available online at <www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09.htm>.
14. Marx, letter to Ruge.

For someone familiar with the history of revolutionary politics it is tempting to reproach sycophants as traitors of “real Marxism” or of “authentic socialism.” Certain Trotskyist groups would even go so far as to call these self-deceivingly optimistic intellectuals petty bourgeois anarchists, revisionists, Schachtmanites, Pabloists, or some such deviation. Unfortunately, the truth is more prosaic: the sycophants are not ideologically deviant. They are simply exhausted. They have come to terms with the fact that revolutionary anti-capitalist politics have ceased to exist as a material force in the world and are ready to grasp at the next best thing—their simulacrum. Bolivarian “21st Century Socialism” is the socialism that today’s “Left” deserves. It is the socialism that makes sense in a world where the Left is dead. It is an adequate representation of the state of emancipatory politics today.

The question stands: If authentic internationalist Marxism is dead, from what standpoint does one launch a critique of Chavez and his followers without joining the Venezuelan opposition nostalgic for neoliberalism? The only answer is history: The consciousness that the present has fallen short of what once seemed politically possible, and that this possibility could once again become available. The knowledge that there was once such a thing as an international Left that was able to intervene, transform, and lead social movements around the world in the direction of the overcoming of capitalism. The awareness that the mass politicization of the Bolivarian Revolution, which has put the word “socialism” on the lips of hundreds of thousands of working people, will end up as yet another wasted opportunity if such a Left is not reconstituted.

Admittedly, this standpoint is not much to start with. It is clearly not as immediately gratifying as the self-deceiving “optimism” of supposedly Marxist publications such as the *International Socialist Review* and the *Monthly Review*. But the game they are playing is no more than a spectator sport. Cheering for team Chavez is a way for such post-mortem leftists to hold on to dear life. It is how they justify their existence and convince themselves that they are still serving a purpose: The good fight is still being fought; even if they are helpless, they can be complacent in this helplessness, since they can always look at the next populist strongman or, even better, wait for the next American invasion of a third world country to give them a new lease on life. But if we are to reconstitute an international revolutionary Left, the first step will be to stop kidding ourselves. People continue to struggle, but the struggle to overcome capitalism has not really been sustained. Revolutions with a hope of actually overcoming capitalism around the world are now a distant memory, at best. The current changes in Venezuela cannot contribute to any real revolution until a genuine Left challenges the regime that has instituted them. But such a feat will be impossible if we do not finally get it into our heads that the fatalistic slogan, “¡Patria, socialismo o muerte!” means the exact opposite of the visionary words, “¡Proletarios de todos los países, uníos!” | P

1. James Surowiecki, “Synergy with the Devil,” *The New Yorker*, January 2007, <www.newyorker.com/talk/financia/2007/01/08/070108ta_talk_surowiecki>.

1. Susan Sontag, “What’s Happening in America?” in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Picador, 2002), 203. Originally published 1966.

The dead Left: Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution

M. A. Torres

ONE FINDS QUITE A BIT OF NAME-CALLING among the innumerable articles and blog posts written in criticism of Hugo Chavez and his government. Although most of this invective is not very illuminating, one article by a young, Colombian, Trotsky-ish labor organizer describes Chavez perfectly in two words: a "postmodern Bonapartist."

Chavez, his Bolivarian Revolution, and his project of "21st Century Socialism" are postmodern in the sense that they exist in a discontinuity, in an amnesiac disconnect, with the modernist project of social and political emancipation that started with the bourgeois revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries and withered and died sometime in the late 20th century. Since this project of freedom is inseparable from the politics of the revolutionary socialist Left, to say that Chavez's politics are postmodern is simply to say that it is post-Left. He is not a liberal. Nor is he a Marxist. He has never theorized or organized proletarian revolution like Marx and Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin, or Trotsky did. He has never even advocated for a "people's war" like Mao or Che. One hesitates even to brand him a Stalinist. While Stalinism was, in Trotsky's words, "the great organizer of defeats" for the working class, one would be hard pressed to call Chavez a "great organizer" of anything of such historical significance. Indeed, he is best thought of as more effect than cause. While Stalinism made Marxism into a dogma, the only dogma of the Bolivarian Revolution is whatever notion happens to cross Chavez's mind at the moment. Chavez's ideology is so versatile there is seemingly nothing it cannot take on board. From time to time, it even makes gestures in the direction of LGBTQ and women's rights. This, however, should not be seen as anything more than mere posturing, since in Venezuela abortion is still illegal, and Chavez embraces numerous openly homophobic allies such as Evo Morales, Fidel Castro, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

There are no coherent, historically self-aware political principles to the politics of Chavismo. It is bricolage, a precarious construction: Some '30s vintage Pop Frontism mixed together with a little '90s anti-globalization, molded upon an armature of '60s-style developmentalist Third Worldism, and then sprinkled with equal parts "communitarian" participatory democracy, "multiculturalism," and ascetic anti-consumerism. (A touch of anti-Semitism is added as and when necessary.) Although this incoherent composite can sometimes be cynical and performative, more frequently it tends to be semi-conscious and nearly involuntary—made up of vestigial impulses whose purpose has been forgotten, having been inherited from an older political project, now decomposed beyond recognition.

The historical discontinuity between Chavez's politics and the revolutionary Left of the 20th century is not only theoretical or ideological; it is also practical. Chavez the politician emerges from no labor background or popular movement. He hardly participated in any leftist organizations before being elected president in 1998. In fact, the Left in Venezuela was dead and buried long before he appeared on the scene.

The story of revolutionary politics in Venezuela is short and dismal. In the late 1950s, the Communist Party of Venezuela [CP] formed a popular front with the Social Democratic Party of Democratic Action [AD] to defeat a military dictatorship and to establish, for the first time, a representative democracy in the country. But the communists were soon abandoned by their erstwhile allies. AD and the Christian Democratic Party [Copei] joined forces to exclude the communists from Venezuela's political life. At this juncture, some of the more impatient communists, galvanized by events in Cuba, armed themselves and took to the hills. The guerrilla war that followed, planned with the help of Che Guevara himself, was a disaster. Many young Leftists died, the CP was criminalized, and Moscow, largely responsible for this turn of events, scolded the revolutionists for getting lost in their dreams of Cuba. Anti-imperialist "national liberation" fighting between guerrillas and the Venezuelan government continued into the mid-1970s, having now little to do with socialist politics. Meanwhile, the CP shriveled as its cadre began its exodus into Eurocommunist-style parties or "third way" social democracy.

It was not until the late 1980s, years after this Cuban-inspired hara-kiri, that Chavez stepped onto the Venezuelan political stage. From the beginning his political career was ideologically unengaged and organizationally disconnected from the history of the Venezuelan Left. But, in fact, this discontinuity is one of the traits that gives Chavez his appeal, especially for his American and European supporters. This is because Chavez seems to stand at a remove from the Left's sordid history of failure. He appears to offer a fresh start to the intellectually and politically exhausted, while also letting them have it both ways. For although Chavez basks in the fresh air of ahistoricism, he never ceases to piously, if disjointedly, rehearse all the old certainties and comforts. "21st Century Socialism" is appealing because it authorizes its supporters' unwillingness to reflect upon the failures of its 20th century predecessor without denying them the moral self-satisfaction of remaining true to the good old cause.

Hugo Chavez came of age in the 1970s and 80s as a military man who believed that the decaying institutions of the Venezuelan government could only be fixed by a strong dose of military discipline. His early ideas of national regeneration had little to do with anti-imperialism and still less to do with socialism. At the time of his failed coup in 1992, they amounted to the belief that the causes of poverty and suffering in Venezuela were the result of nothing more than bureaucratic corruption, so that all that was needed was a strong hand to make the state into a more equitable and efficient redistributor of its wealth.

The young Chavez was right about one thing: in the late 1980s, the Venezuelan state was decaying. The old clientelistic petro-state, which for three decades had produced little political freedom but great stability and a relatively high standard of living, was corroding from within due to corruption and loss of revenue resulting from falling oil prices. The subsequent delegitimization came to a head in 1989 with the explosion of popular anger called the "Caracazo." The debt crisis of the 1980s forced the newly elected

Carlos Andres Perez government to restructure the country's economy along neoliberal lines and to accept an IMF package that caused a sharp and sudden rise in the cost of living. On the day of the Caracazo, people from the slum city of Guarenas woke up to find they could no longer get travel to work because bus fares had doubled overnight. Arguments over the new fares became fights, fights became riots, and riots became massive protests and widespread looting in the neighboring capital city of Caracas. The government cracked down hard and the frenzy of state violence that ensued was of a magnitude such as Caracas had never seen. In the end, some 3000 people were killed, most of them at the hands of Venezuelan security forces.

Despite its tragic dimensions, such a spontaneous, unfocused and disorganized uprising can hardly be called a political movement. And yet, American and British Chavez enthusiasts treat the Caracazo as if it was, as if the rioting masses in Venezuela, who had never heard of Chavez at this point, had somehow been clamoring for a Bolivarian Revolution back in 1989. But the Caracazo was no proletarian uprising, nor even an anti-globalization movement; it was a hopeless rebellion against hopelessness, a desperate protest against the desperation that flowed from Venezuela's rapidly worsening economic situation and bankrupt political system.

The attempt to turn the Caracazo retrospectively into a proto-Bolivarian mass movement derives from anxiety at the fact that no social movement led to or culminated in the Bolivarian Revolution. When he won the 1998 election six years after his failed military coup, Chavez was not the popular leader of a social movement. He was popular because Venezuela's political system had lost all legitimacy. People lacked faith in state institutions. Unsurprisingly then, in 1998 Chavez's support was not drawn exclusively from the working poor, but came from all social classes. Voters responded to Chavez's message that, as a strong executive, he would be able to shake up corrupt state institutions and save the nation. Chavez's road to power was thus Bonapartist in that he presented himself as the ideal Venezuelan national who is necessary to reorganize a state in crisis, someone who would discipline decadent elites and facilitate reconciliation between social classes. Yet the qualification of "postmodern" should be added to this Bonapartist because, unlike Napoleon III or Benito Mussolini, Chavez was not the product of the failure of an emergent revolutionary Left. Rather, he is the result and expression of the creeping decay characteristic of a political order vacated by the Left.

At the time of his bungled military coup in 1992, Chavez was no socialist. Nor had he become one when he won the election in 1998. He was still not a socialist when, from 2002 to 2004, sectors of the ruling class banded together with a large majority of Venezuelan organized labor in an attempt to topple him, first by a military coup, then by organizing a lockout of the oil industry, and finally by demanding a recall referendum. The reason for their hostility was not that they feared

about the government one way or the other. The device was highly successful and it taught Chavez a lesson he has not forgotten: He could outflank his enemies and maintain his grip on power not through appeasement, but through polarizing Venezuelan society through radical rhetoric and programs for which he alone was responsible.

From 2005 on, Chavez was able to seriously weaken the opposition by making support for the regime a precondition for benefitting from the government's petrodollar largesse. At the same time, more frequently than before, Chavez took recourse to intimidation and direct attacks against his regime's opponents. While the most widely publicized case of this new aggressive attitude, the shutting down of the right-wing anti-Chavez TV station RCTV, was itself an unwarranted assault on free speech, other manifestations of this new willingness to intimidate opponents were even more sinister. There was, for example, the "Lista Tascón," a database of the 2,400,000 people who signed the petition for the recall referendum. Many on this list were fired from their jobs, banned from working in the public sector, and denied issuance of official documents. Use of these and similar techniques of polarization accompanied the change of strategy that Chavez announced at the 2005 World Social Forum to begin work towards a new "Socialism for the 21st Century." It seems, then, that the radicalization of Chavez's discourse after 2004 is little more than part of the regime's more aggressive and polarizing approach. Like the clientelistic spending and the electoral bullying, the turn from nationalist Bolivarianism to "21st Century Socialism" is an instrument of the regime's larger strategy to foster a "with us or against us" political atmosphere in Venezuela. Those who oppose Chavez, from the Right or from the Left, are no longer just traitors to the nation, but also traitors to socialism and agents of American imperialism.

"21st Century Socialism" and the "revolutionary process" Chavez has spoken about for more than five years now consists primarily of intermittent and radical gestures disguising a system that is very similar to the old pre-Chavez welfare petro-state. Venezuela remains a mixed economy in constant need of foreign investment. This is evident from the way the government continues to avidly court potential American investors. This is also demonstrated, more perniciously, by the government's practice of aggressively cracking down on inconvenient labor activism, such as the recent intimidation of protesting workers from Mitsubishi, a firm with which Chavez's regime has many close ties. The bourgeoisie has not been expropriated, nor will it be. Aside from Chavez's now complete control of the key petroleum industry, expropriations have been primarily symbolic or have served as means of punishing political enemies. They have not significantly changed the economy. As an article in *The New Yorker* put it in 2007,

If this is socialism, it's the most business friendly socialism ever devised... The U.S. continues to be Venezuela's most important trading partner. Much of this business is oil: Venezuela is America's fourth-largest supplier, and the U.S. is Venezuela's largest customer.



Supporters hold up cutouts of Chavez at a rally.

that Chavez was becoming a socialist or that he might establish a socialist state; they were simply alarmed that his reckless spending, his power-driven nationalization projects, and his unpredictable interventions into legislative matters were producing an environment that was bad for business.

Critics and supporters alike recognize that it was not until the aftermath of the recall referendum of 2004 that Chavez began to move steadily leftward. Only then did he adopt the new rhetoric of "Socialism of the 21st Century." In the aftermath of the coup and lockout debacles of 2002–03, Chavez's popularity had hit its lowest point. He had become weak, his attitude towards his enemies conciliatory. But in the months leading up to the referendum, he discovered a new form of opportunism to rapidly increase his support, especially among the urban poor. A few months before the vote, while flush with income derived from the post-Iraq invasion spike in oil prices, Chavez embarked on a massive program of social spending that targeted sectors of society known as the "ni-ni's" (neither-nors). These were poor or lower-middle class people who did not feel strongly

But the flow of trade goes both ways and across many sectors. The U.S. is the world's biggest exporter to Venezuela, responsible for a full third of its imports. The Caracas skyline is decorated with Hewlett-Packard and Citigroup signs, and Ford and G.M. are market leaders there. And, even as Chavez's rhetoric has become more extreme, the two countries have become more entwined: trade between the U.S. and Venezuela has risen thirty-six per-cent in the past year.¹

There is no dictatorship of the proletariat here, and the government certainly has no intention of "withering away." In fact, Chavez's state functions more or less like the old AD and Copei regimes, projecting its power through the selective, top-down redistribution of oil-wealth. The difference is mainly rhetorical. Chavez makes poverty relief programs into "missions"; welfarist measures like economic stimuli for small businesses and the building of housing projects are rebranded as "revolutionary" institutions of a "new social economy." Of course these initiatives, notably the relief missions, are most welcome to those who benefit from them. They have had significant success in alleviating

extreme poverty, particularly through subsidized food and free healthcare. Were the Chavista regime to dissolve, this much needed aid might cease. But this should not obscure the fact that these programs render their beneficiaries politically powerless. Because they are intended to be politically demobilizing, this generosity comes at a very steep price. Besides, the anti-poverty initiatives have proven difficult to sustain, decreasing substantially since the economic crisis of 2008. If there were to be a significant fall in oil prices, a situation the regime has not yet suffered, the aid would probably vanish altogether without its recipients being able to do much about it. This is not socialism over-coming the tyranny of poverty. It is a charity that, for the moment, has remained affordable and politically beneficial to a government that holds all the cards.

Other programs, the ones that are actually supposed to empower the "people," are even more problematic. This is especially the case with the "communal neighborhood councils." It seems that Chavez has keyed in to the fact that it has become fashionable on the contemporary "Left" to replace the working class with the "community" as the agent that will overcome capitalism, and to replace internationalism with localism. The regime represents the neighborhood councils as a new form of "communal participatory democracy" destined to overcome the "elitism" of bourgeois representative democracy. These councils are localized organizations, strictly party affiliated and exclusively funded by the state, where a group of families from a neighborhood are selected to lead community work on neighborhood development and local infrastructure. Their political scope is extremely limited: they make decisions on repairing streets or building houses, all the while remaining completely dependent on the state. In this environment, "participatory democracy" simply consists of the elimination of the secret ballot and thus the monitoring of opposition within the councils. Ultimately, these organizations have been a boon for Chavez, since a law has recently been passed in which Chavez's government can overrule decisions made by local elected officials such as mayors. Since Chavez is in complete control of these councils, they have become a useful tool for him to keep disgruntled officials in check, whether they are members his own party or affiliated with the opposition.

Then there are the cooperatives, which are also touted as the basis of the new "social economy." Despite the rhetoric of non-capitalist, "endogenous" development, these cooperatives function chiefly as sources of cheap, temporary labor for the public sector. Small groups of workers are given financial and logistical support to enter into short-term contracts with private companies, but as often as not they end up working for PDVSA, the state oil company. Since members of these cooperatives are legally not considered workers, but self-employed associates, their labor is exempt from labor laws and subject to super-exploitation. As a result, they are often paid less than minimum wage. The cooperatives go out of business or lose government patronage if they attempt to improve their conditions.

The fact that enthusiastic observers of Chavez's "revolutionary process" see such initiatives as the way to overcome capitalism says more about the observers' understanding of capitalism than it does about the process itself. For such enthusiasts, capitalism equals the Washington consensus and IMF-enforced neoliberalism. In their imagination, a charitable, paternalistic state that constantly violates workers' right of association seems to have replaced the dictatorship of the proletariat as the road to socialism. This is especially shameful for self-avowed Marxist supporters of Chavez such as Tariq Ali and Alan Woods, who are either not paying attention or just playing stupid with respect to El Comandante's approach to labor.

Chavez has been an enemy of union autonomy and organized labor from day one. As early as 1999, he suspended all collective bargaining in the public administration and petroleum sectors. The state has frequently intervened in union elections, and refused to recognize leadership unsupportive of the government. Even before they backed the coup attempt, Chavez tried to destroy the old AFL-CIO affiliated Confederation of Venezuelan Workers (CTV). More recently, he has succeeded in strong-arming the National Union of Workers (UNT) to surrender their autonomy and join his newfangled United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). As with the Mitsubishi case, Chavez showed his willingness to use the police to put an end to politically inconvenient mobilizations, strikes, and factory takeovers. As he put it with cynical bluntness in one speech, "We need the party and we need the unions, but we can't let each do as they please. Unions are just like parties, they want autonomy and they want to make decisions. This is not right, we didn't come here to fumble around. We came here to make a revolution." When UNT joined Chavez's party it crippled the union for years, and today the leaders who opposed the union's surrender of autonomy have been purged. At the moment, the UNT, now headed by Chavista organizers, is considering dissolving itself altogether. To replace it and other unions, Chavez now proposes a new program of "workers councils" which, despite their revolutionary-sounding name, will be no more than servile government organizations meant to monitor and ultimately eliminate the authority of pesky labor activists. Autonomous political action by the working class is, at this point, under a full-scale assault in Venezuela.

The Bolivarian Revolution christens everything it does with high-sounding revolutionary names. Union-busting government organizations get the name of "workers councils," party-dependant neighborhood associations become "participatory democracy," and unfinished housing projects in depopulated areas are trumpeted as visionary "socialist cities." Chavez has renamed the familiar tools of holding onto power, by drawing heavily upon the vocabularies of 20th century socialism. This has been most obviously the case with the regime's use of the language of anti-imperialism. Chavez's clownish anti-American antics, such as calling Bush the devil, and