CHAPTER 6

Opposing Authoritarian Populism: The Challenge and Necessity of a New World System

Charles Reitz

[A]uthentic freedom, i.e. freedom from the reactionary prejudices of the imperialist era (not merely in the sphere of art), cannot possibly be attained through mere spontaneity or by persons unable to break through the confines of their own immediate experience. For as capitalism develops, the continuous production and reproduction of these reactionary prejudices is intensified and accelerated, not to say consciously promoted by the imperialist bourgeoisie. So, if we are ever going to be able to understand the way in which reactionary ideas infiltrate our minds, and achieve a critical distance from such prejudices, this can only be accomplished by hard work, by abandoning and transcending the limits of immediacy, by scrutinizing all subjective experiences and measuring them against social reality. In short it can only be achieved by a deeper probing of the real world.

—Georg Lukács (1938/1980, 37, emphasis added)
6.1. Radical Social Change Requires ‘A Deeper Probing of the Real World’

Georg Lukács understood in the 1938 run-up to Germany’s fascist political ferocity that freedom from the reactionary prejudices of authoritarian populism required theoretical understanding that penetrates beneath empirical facts and phenomena, discerning the underlying dialectical systems generating the observable economic, social, cultural and ecological/data. So, when we read a contemporary journalist report the following: ‘Today’s American fascists are far less educated than the fascists of the Third Reich, and they’re proud of their ignorance – they’re defiantly stupid and mediocre and resentful of hard working educated people of colour, immigrants, and women. And that defiant ignorance has gotten into the American bloodstream,’ let’s understand how the bitterness got there. Racial animosity and anti-immigrant scapegoating are being orchestrated today in service to the troubled system of American capitalism as weapons of economic stabilization and social control. An earlier wave of counter-revolutionary super-patriotism and resurgent white supremacy had served this function right after World War I. The 1919 Palmer Raids and larger ‘Red Scare’ (the federal-state-local campaigns of police-state intimidation and deportation against suspected socialist activists and immigrant radical democrats) taught us that a culture-wide build-up of ugly political and racial prejudice can repressively reinforce the ‘sanctity of the prevailing order of society.’

Law-enforcement-led authoritarian populist mobs like the KKK simultaneously demonstrated that nothing was ‘sacred’ when it came to the deportations and criminal frame-ups of immigrants and radicals, not to mention the 1919 mass lynching of 237 black men in Arkansas: unionizing sharecroppers and the returning black veterans supporting them. This kind of 100% Americanism, thus deployed, characterized also subsequent waves of government-supported political repression and mobilizations of bias against centre-Left activism during the 1930s Depression, the 1950s McCarthy period, the 1960s civil rights era, and the anti-Vietnam War movement. Social critic Henry A. Giroux (2018) rightly points out that: ‘Mainstream politics is now dominated by hard-right extremists who have brought to the centre of politics a shameful white-supremacist ideology, poisonous xenophobic ideas, and the blunt, malicious tactics of Islamophobia. On the other side of the political spectrum, the Democratic Party operates in the service of the war machine, financial elite, and various registers of the military-industrial-academic-surveillance complex’ (Giroux 2018, 3). We must also understand the political economic foundations of the phenomena he reports.

Dynamic structural interconnections and real material inter-dependencies exist in society and in nature. Only this ‘deeper probing of the real world’ makes theory critical. Postmodernism sought to evade structural-systems analysis by asserting that truth has no foundation, and mere language games are the stuff of philosophy. Nietzsche and Wittgenstein taught the postmodernists (Lyotard,
Baudrillard, Foucault, and Hardt and Negri are intended here) how to challenge objectivist theories of knowledge by deconstructing ‘metaphysics’ into language, and how to debunk reflexivity and grand narration in speech in favour of a relativist epistemology and a banal functionalist analysis. Postmodernism’s linguistic turn is actually an anti-foundationalist evasion of philosophy and critical political economy. Against it, Peter McLaren has urged us to ‘take the struggle over the social division of labour as seriously as we do the struggle over meaning and representation’ (McLaren 1997, 13). Similarly, radical educationist Michael Apple contends: ‘There are gritty realities out there, realities whose power is often grounded in structural relations that are not simply social constructions created by the meanings given by an observer’ (Apple 2001, 56).

This means we need to investigate the underlying structural determinants of the dominator systems that characterize global cultures, and envision from the conditions of the present intelligent choices about real possibilities for our future. What follows is a compressed account of my research exertions over the last few years to do just that. My work here traces the structural and systemic origins of intensifying racism and sexism as economic and political weapons. As a countermeasure, it offers a new political and philosophical vision by synthesizing key features of the work of Georg Lukács, Herbert Marcuse and Aldo Leopold for insights into what is going on today and in terms of the promise of what I call Green Commonwealth to build a new world system.

‘[T]he system transformation that now appears to be developing […] may be replacing parliamentary democracies by right-wing nationalist repressive regimes in many countries.’ Paying particular attention to the structural and systemic origins of today’s deployment of authoritarian populism and the intensifying use of racism and sexism as economic and political weapons, I wish to reclaim Herbert Marcuse’s critique of pure tolerance and offer a new political and philosophical vision drawing on Marcuse’s radical socialist intellectual legacy.

The task at hand is to understand the global architecture of wealth extraction that undergirds today’s intensifying inequalities of class, race and gender. My objective is to theorize the origins and outcomes of contemporary patterns of economic and cultural oppression in the U.S., including the polarizing tendencies of contemporary authoritarian populism and its design of discord here and abroad. I desire to focus our political engagement in ways that can actually eliminate the injury and suffering involved. Political progress requires that we are able to identify what we are against, and explain why. Just as importantly, we need a strategy to negate the negations and go on the offensive for the changes that can support and extend race and gender equality, labour freedom, economic abundance, peace, and communal well-being.

Global finance capital is in crisis. So too are the economic worlds of ‘the 99 percent’ in the United States, Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Now more than ever we must examine the conditions that perpetuate the increasingly
stressed and volatile realities of our political, economic, and cultural lives. Corporate globalization has intensified social inequality and cultural polarization worldwide. Increasing globalization correlates directly with growing inequality both within and between nations (Sernau, 2006).

Herbert Marcuse, forty years ago, warned of the global economic and cultural developments that are now much more obvious given capitalism’s crescendo of economic failures since 2008. Political and philosophical tendencies that are often referred to as ‘neoliberalism’ and/or ‘neo-conservatism’ in much analytical work today, Marcuse clearly understood back then as organized counter-revolution (Marcuse 1972).

Marcuse (1972) saw preventive counter-revolution as an assault undertaken by an increasingly predatory capitalism against liberal democratic change, not to mention the radical opposition (1975/1987a, 172).

The Western world has reached a new stage of development: now, the defense of the capitalist system requires the organization of counter-revolution at home and abroad […] Torture has become a normal instrument of ‘interrogation’ around the world […] even Liberals are not safe if they appear as too liberal […] (Marcuse 1972, 1)

Today this entails: the police-state USA-PATRIOT Act, global terror wars, a ‘money-is-speech’ Supreme Court, and intensifying political economic inequalities, never neutral, having been captured by the forces of class, race, and gender exploitation. Within the current forms of unfreedom that are yet called democracies, real crimes by the right are tolerated by the state in practice – such as systematic police brutality, depriving millions of Americans from comprehensive health care, treating asylum seekers as criminals, implementing the death penalty in a racially biased manner, supplying arms and training to governments and armed groups around the world that commit torture, political killings and other human rights abuses, etc. (Amnesty International, 1998).

Today the New Right or Alt-Right is asserting a putative political need for a democratic society to maintain an absolute tolerance of abusive and even assaultive speech – as protected forms of ‘dissent.’ If we all have a de jure right to express any opinion in public, the de facto condition is that left opinions are usually marginalized and often suppressed, while right-wing ones, which benefit the ruling class, are given free play. ‘This pure tolerance of sense and nonsense. …’ practiced under the conditions prevailing in the United States today ‘… cannot fulfill the civilizing function attributed to it by the liberal protagonists of democracy, namely protection of dissent’ (Marcuse 1965a, 94, 117). ‘To treat the great crusades against humanity […] with the same impartiality as the desperate struggles for humanity means neutralizing their opposite historical function, reconciling the executioners with their victims, distorting the record’ (Marcuse 1965a, 113).
Writing of the Nazi organizers of institutionalized violence, Marcuse said: ‘ … if democratic tolerance had been withdrawn when the future leaders started their campaign, mankind would have had a chance of avoiding Auschwitz and a World War […] Such extreme suspension of the right of free speech and free assembly is indeed justified only if the whole of society is in extreme danger […] Withdrawal of tolerance from regressive movements before they can become active; intolerance even toward thought, opinion, and word, and finally intolerance in the opposite direction, that is toward the self-styled conservatives, to the political Right – these anti-democratic notions respond to the actual development of the democratic society which has destroyed the basis for universal tolerance. The conditions under which tolerance can again become a liberating force have still to be created’ (Marcuse 1965a, 110–111).

Champions of an abstract First Amendment freedom, like Kors & Silverglate (1998) and Horowitz (2006a; 2006b; 2000), acquiesce when confronted with evidence of the discriminatory effects of abusive speech. They do not seem to think that an absolute right to abusive speech is profoundly problematic in a culture like ours where there is no shortage of verbal vilification and acts of race and gender persecution. In sharp contrast Marcuse argued that the doctrine of pure tolerance was systematically utilized by reactionary and liberal forces to abuse equality guarantees and derail or destroy the possibility of democratic egalitarianism (Marcuse 1965a).

6.1.1. No ‘Pure Tolerance’ of Hate Speech

The New Right is now using ‘[t]he charge of imperiling free speech … to silence oppressed and marginalized groups and to push back against their interests’ (Stanley 2016). In 1965 Marcuse called out what is now more widely recognized as ‘the free speech fallacy’ (Stanley 2016). Marcuse’s partisanship is clear:

The small and powerless minorities which struggle against the false consciousness and its beneficiaries must be helped: their continued existence is more important than the preservation of abused rights and liberties which grant constitutional powers to those who oppress these minorities. (Marcuse 1965a, 110)

Today, Herbert Marcuse’s critical refusal to tolerate abusive speech/action constitutes one of the timeliest aspects of his critique of politics. During the mid-1960s, Marcuse met Brandeis student Angela Davis, and began an intellectual/political relationship that lasted well-beyond her student years (Davis 2013, 2004). He published his anti-racist essay, ‘Repressive Tolerance,’ at that time (1965a), and dedicated it to students at Brandeis. This contains insights and elements that make it extremely pertinent as we debate how to best protect human
rights in this era of acrid backlash against the progress of the multicultural/intercultural education reform movement.

Given also the contemporary heightened awareness of the regularity of police killings of unarmed black men in the U.S. after incidents such as Ferguson, Baltimore, Cleveland, New York City, and elsewhere, Marcuse’s condemnation of the violence of repression demands renewed attention. In 1965 Marcuse condemned the violence that actually prevails in the ostensibly peaceful centres of civilization: ‘it is practiced by the police, in the prisons and the mental institutions, in the fight against racial minorities […] This violence indeed breeds violence’ (Marcuse 1965a, 105).

More recently, a strategy for the defense of equal civil rights and intercultural solidarity with victims of hate speech has been developed by authors like Dolores Calderón (2006), Christine Sleeter and Dolores Delgado Bernal (2003), Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (1997), Mari Matsuda, Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1993), and John K. Wilson (1995). They claim that freedom of speech is not absolute, and must be viewed in the context of its real political consequences.

Donald Trump’s presidency has brought these issues to the fore, full force, in 2017:

Donald Trump has a particular taste for the degradation of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities and women […] as a way of personal sense of racial, sexist, and patriarchal entitlement. And as he degrades, he plays to those very same entitlements in the base that elected him.?

Despite Trump’s individual psychology or pathology, it is the system’s politics at work here. Politics unleashes the ‘new normal’ through changes in the media, the law, the economy, education, etc. Trump’s ascendancy is only the most recent brash expression of the predatory political economy of race, class, and gender – and the earth-killing tendencies latent in the essential contradictions of capitalism. This essay unlike so many others today is not about Trump; it is about the challenge and necessity of a new world system.

Marcuse foresaw the end of capitalism precisely at a time of its greatest productive capacities and its greatest wealth accumulations. He believed he could discern U.S. societal disintegration from what was actually happening in the process of production itself. First, is the increasing unproductivity of those who control ‘the destructive and wasteful development of the productive forces today’ (Marcuse 1974/2015b, 33). As far back as 1974 he pointed out that the Pentagon was the nation’s biggest single industrial enterprise with 14.2 million workers directly or indirectly dependent on military spending. ‘[I]f you throw together – which as an orthodox Marxist you might well do – unemployment and employment for the military services, you arrive at the following figures: a total of over 25% of the labour force, i.e. 22.3 million, were either unemployed
or dependent on military spending directly or indirectly’ (Marcuse 1974/2015b, 42). This is a capitalism of wasted abundance. This is a capitalism with a frantic bourgeoisie aware that the preponderance of congealed labour (capital goods) over living labour is intensifying the tendency of the rate of profit therefore to fall. Never content to receive less than maximal returns, capital is today as always hungry for valorisation, seeking yields above average rates of profit. Hence there is wild speculation in search of maximum returns, and investment has also become more and more militarist and predatory; profits are still most soundly generated by wasteful war production. Likewise, any limited prosperity among war production workers is eluding masses of people whose conditions of life are becoming increasingly precarious.

Marcuse’s condemnations of U.S. military aggression, its need for an ‘enemy,’ the irrationality of U.S. economic waste, destruction, and wealth distortions, etc., are particularly timely and deserve invigorated attention across this nation’s campuses as well as in other cultural and political circles today. His political-philosophical vision, cultural critique, and social activism continue to offer an intelligent strategic perspective on such current concerns as repressive democracy, political and racial inequality, and education as social control – especially where issues of alienation, war, oppression, critical inquiry, critical media literacy, and civic/revolutionary action are involved. Marcuse’s key ideas in One-Dimensional Man [ODM] (1964) countered the paralysis of criticism that pervaded advanced capitalism in the U.S. (Reitz 2016b).’The fact that the vast majority of the population accepts, and is made to accept, this society does not render it less irrational and less reprehensible’ (Marcuse 1964, xiii). ODM’s critical Marxism sought to break through the ‘pre-established harmony between scholarship and the national purpose’ (Marcuse 1964, 19). He maintained that the most important duty of the intellectual was to investigate destructive social circumstances – and be engaged in activities of transformation toward justice and peace (Marcuse 1975/1987a, 182).

The Frankfurt School’s Critical Theory is sometimes criticized as having a narrowly Eurocentric focus (see Outlaw 2013; Gandler 1999). ODM expanded the cultural perspective through Marcuse’s effort to encompass certain broadly critical projects already underway in the U.S.: the demystification of the vaunted myths of affluence and melting pot assimilation in American life (see Gordon 1964). Marcuse understood the reigning Anglo-conformity and WASP patriotism and militarism in the U.S., as well as its economic instrumentalism, as single-dimensional insofar as these were oblivious to the problematic nature of prevailing social and economic relations. If abundance for all was a capacity of advanced industrial society, this was effectively cancelled by forces of capitalism. Affluence for some was the privilege of the propertied. ‘In the contemporary era, the conquest of scarcity is still confined to small areas of advanced industrial society. Their prosperity covers up the Inferno inside and outside their borders … ’ (Marcuse 1964, 241); see also Marcuse’s address, ‘Liberation from the Affluent Society’ (1967/1968). Marcuse understood the limits
of liberal democracy (Farr 2009, 119–36), and how the notion of the ‘affluent society’ actually masked a gravely unequal, patriarchal, and monocultural form of domination. Of course, the conventional wisdom within the nation itself was largely oblivious to its own racism and other forms of prejudice. In many ways it continues to be.

From 1944–1950 Horkheimer and Adorno, working with the American Jewish Committee, published a five-volume series, Studies in Prejudice. The fifth volume, Prophets of Deceit, written by Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman, was furnished with a foreword by Herbert Marcuse when it was re-issued in paperback in 1970. Like Lukács in 1938, Marcuse stresses here that any mobilization of bias must be understood concretely within the social context of contradictory economic and political conditions (see Jansen 2013).

The year 1963, just before ODM’s publication, marked the culmination of the U.S. civil rights movement with its black-led (i.e. SCLC, CORE, and SNCC) bus boycotts, lunch-counter sit-ins, freedom rides, voter registration campaigns, and the March on Washington. These anti-racism efforts also involved the support of many radical and progressive whites, especially students.

In 1964 in ODM, given the background of recent and high profile lynchings, bombings, and murders of blacks in the U.S. (Emmett Till; Medgar Evers, the four girls in Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist church), Marcuse wrote: ‘Those whose life is the hell of the Affluent Society are kept in line by a brutality which revives medieval and early modern practices’ (Marcuse 1964, 23). As Nina Simone was singing ‘Mississippi Goddamn’ and castigating the ‘United Snakes of America,’ ODM famously concluded:

… underneath the conservative popular base is the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors […] Their opposition hits the system from without … it is an elementary force which violates the rules of the game. When they get together and go out into the streets, without arms, without protection, in order to ask for the most primitive civil rights, they know that they face dogs, stones, and bombs, jail, concentration camps, even death […] The critical theory of society […] wants to remain loyal to those who, without hope, have given and give their life to the Great Refusal. (Marcuse 1964, 257)

Above and beyond Marcuse’s admiration for the bravery and leadership represented by the U.S. civil rights movement, Marcuse stressed that New Left radicals were not only conscious of a socialist economy’s potential to eliminate want and misery; they put a new emphasis on quality of life, not just a secure subsistence. Marcuse prized this ‘emergence in the individual of needs and satisfactions which can no longer be fulfilled within the framework of the capitalist system, although they were generated by the capitalist system itself’ (Marcuse 1974/2015b, 53). These included the struggle for the restoration of

What is at stake in the socialist revolution is not merely the extension of satisfaction within the existing universe of needs, nor the shift of satisfaction from one (lower) level to a higher one, but the rupture with this universe, the qualitative leap. The revolution involves a radical transformation of the needs and aspirations themselves, cultural as well as material; of consciousness and sensibility; of the work process as well as leisure. The transformation appears in the fight against the fragmentation of work, the necessity and productivity of stupid performances and stupid merchandise, against the acquisitive bourgeois individual, against the servitude in the guise of technology, deprivation in the guise of the good life, against pollution as a way of life. Moral and aesthetic needs become basic, vital needs and drive toward new relationships between the sexes, between the generations, between men and women and nature. Freedom is understood as rooted in these needs, which are sensuous, ethical, and rational in one. (Marcuse 1972, 16–17)

Marcuse links the transvaluation of values to radical system change. Kellner (1984, 339) notes that the transvaluation of values represented the new Reality Principle that Marcuse projected in Eros and Civilization. An echo of Nietzsche's critique of any morality of subservience – this was an 'Umwertung aller Werte' in the direction of a greater appreciation for joy, exuberance, and freedom in living (Reitz 2017, 29n). Marcuse was among the earliest radical writers to focus on issues of ecological ruin, see for example 'Ecology and Revolution' (1972/2005b), much more on this below. Given the general destructiveness of modern society, Marcuse recognizes the need for a reconciliation of alienated humanity with the natural world, a pacification of the struggle for existence. In his estimation this requires a change in the conditioned needs of individuals – away from those which promise compensatory satisfactions (generated by the mechanism of repressive desublimation) within a totally commercialized and commodified life – toward New Sensibilities. He saw the existing structure of needs is being subverted.

6.1.2. The Popular Expression of Discontent: Marcuse's New Sensibility

As early as 1975 Marcuse maintained:

… capitalism destroys itself as it progresses! Therefore no reforms make sense. The notion that the society, as a whole is sick, destructive, hopelessly outdated, has found popular expression: 'loss of faith' in
Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism

the system; decline in the work ethic, refusal to work, etc. [...] The general form of the internal contradictions of capitalism has never been more blatant, more cruel, more costly of human lives and happiness. And – this is the significance of the Sixties – this blatant irrationality has not only penetrated the consciousness of a large part of the population, it has also caused, mainly among the young people, a radical transformation of needs and values which may prove to be incompatible with the capitalist system, its hierarchy, priorities, morality, symbols (the counter-culture, ecology) ... (Marcuse 1975/2015a, 304–307, emphasis added)

This is from Marcuse's 1975 typescript 'Why Talk on Socialism?' His philosophy, practically from the beginning, addressed the deep roots of the capitalist system's functioning and its crisis: the commodification of labour, burgeoning inequality, wasted abundance (especially in war), lives without meaningful purpose, and the inadequacy of one-dimensional American liberalism. Marcuse understood as single-dimensional, any perspective that is oblivious to the problematic nature of prevailing social and economic relations. One-dimensionality is the triumph of a 'happy consciousness' grounded in the suffocation and repression of life's internal inconsistencies and contradictions. Yet pockets of protest created a New Sensibility comprising an oppositional philosophy and politics:

Changed/needs are present, here and now. They permeate the lives of individuals [...] First the need for drastically reducing socially necessary alienated labor and replacing it with creative work. Second, the need for autonomous free time instead of directed leisure. Third, the need for an end of role playing. Fourth, the need for receptivity, tranquillity and abounding joy, instead of the constant noise of production [...] The spectre which haunts advanced industrial society today is the obsolescence of full-time alienation. (Marcuse 1979/2011, 211).

6.1.3. Marcuse's Critical Economic Theory: Labour and Alienation

Marcuse developed a critical study of work and social alienation looking at economic activity within the total complexity of other human activities and human existence in general. Marcuse's critical social theory has special relevance to U.S. culture today centring on his analysis of the commodified labour process as a structural source of social inequality and economic crisis, and the power of labour to liberate itself from commodification and exploitation to make commonwealth the human condition. I shall expand upon the concept
of commonwealth below, which I derive from Marcuse’s critical philosophy of labour and his radical eco-socialism.

I have sought in *Crisis and Commonwealth* (Reitz 2013/2015) to recover Marcuse’s philosophy of labour from its relative obscurity. In *Philosophy and Critical Pedagogy* I have defended Marcuse’s view that the felt needs of *sensuous living labour* insist upon political movement from the minimal to the radical goals of socialism (Reitz 2016a, 127–28, 155). I also attempted there to develop a labour theory of ethical action and commonwealth and show how this undergirds Marcuse’s desire to *rehumanize* the labour process and our very mode of existence (Reitz 2016a, 125–48).

Sensuous living labour is my term for the elemental form of the human material condition that I find theorized within in the social philosophies of Marx and Marcuse. *Labour* here is not to be reduced to any form of class circumstance. Sensuous living labour is the substrate of our being as humans. It is the foundation of our affective and intellectual capacities (and vulnerabilities), biologically developed within history. As a species we have endured because of our sensuous appreciation of our emergent powers: the power to subsist cooperatively; to create, communicate, and care communally within what Marx called a *Gemeinwesen*, and which I call a *commonwealth*. Our earliest proverbs, fables, and riddles teach the survival power of partnership and cooperation and the categorical ethical advantages empathy, reciprocity, hospitality, and respect for the good in common. Humanity experiences the satisfactions/dissatisfactions derived from our bio-ecologically generated economic, aesthetic, intellectual, and moral standards gravitating toward the humanism of a communally labouring commonwealth. Having brought into being these universalizable value criteria, our cultural, political, and emotional conditions can be characterized critically as *authentic* (when consistent with the *fullest potentials* of our species being, i.e. what Marx called our *Gattungswesen*) or as *alienated* (when social power structurally distorts or denies humanity such authenticity).

If living labour creates all wealth, as John Locke (1690/1983) and Adam Smith (1776/1937) have maintained, then it creates all the value that is under capitalism distributed as income to labour (wages and salaries) and to capital (rent, interest, dividends, and profit). Marx and Marcuse stressed that labour is a *social* process, that the value created through labour is most genuinely measured by socially necessary labour time, and its product rightfully belongs to the labour force as a *body*, not to individuals as such, i.e. grounding a *socialist labour theory of ownership and justice* (Reitz 2013/2015, 19–41, 175–204).

Marx and Marcuse encompassed the theories of Locke and Smith within a larger philosophy of labour. Where Locke and Smith saw individual labour as the source of private property, in an atomistic (Robinsonian) manner, Marx recognized that all humans are born into a social context. Humanity’s earliest *customs*, i.e. communal production, shared ownership, and solidarity assured that the needs of all were met, i.e. including those not directly involved
in production like children, the disabled, and the elderly. This right of the commonwealth to govern itself, and humanity’s earliest ethic of holding property in common, derive only secondarily from factual individual contributions to production; they are rooted primarily in our essentially shared species being as humans, as sensuous living labour.

As I see it, a commonwealth arrangement of the state and economy means to hold, control, and conserve resources as elements of the public domain. It means to eliminate rent-seeking and the for-profit financial industry as modes of privilege, distribute incomes without reference to individual productivity according to need and as equally as feasible, substantially reduce hours of labour, and make possible, through socialist general education privileging no single culture or language, the well-rounded scientific and multicultural development of the young. If we say the human species is a multicultural species because humans have lived in a variety of geographical settings in various historical circumstances, we mean to acknowledge that a diversity of cultures has emerged. Certain of these cultures, as with the Anglo-American imperium, have displaced and dominated others in contravention of the egalitarian commonwealth principles advocated here.

Real structured interconnection exists in our economic lives. Economic theory can be called critical only if it penetrates beneath empirical economic facts and given ideologies to discern generative economic and labour structures that are neither obvious nor apparent. Usually concealed, the structure and dynamics of the value production process are to be made visible in their material form. This crucial dynamic undergirds the over-appropriation of capital and the intensifying dehumanization accompanying the vastly unequal distribution of wealth in the U.S. These economic structures are at the root of this country’s recurring recessions and economic depressions. The recent global economic dislocations demand a re-thinking of critical theory with greater focus on issues of our economic alienation and dehumanization, the powers of our commonwork and commonwealth, and the rehumanization/intercultural solidarity of world politics.

Over the last several decades there has been a regression in the comprehensiveness and materiality of critical philosophy. This is true in particular given the postmodern penchant to reduce social theory to aesthetic theory. A comprehensive critical social theory must stress the centrality of labour in the economy. It must help us to apprehend the dialectic of the historical and material world and the changing social condition of humanity within it. It must theorize the origins and outcomes of economic and cultural oppression and be engaged politically with the Labour force to end them. I offer a more rigorously historical and material alternative perspective.

The fuller potential and power of labour, as recognized by Locke and Smith, challenges the presumption that capital produces value, the view that profit unilaterally accrues as a reward for the contribution of the investor/employer. Labour provides the total value added in the production process. Profit is a subtraction from the overall value produced. A critical appreciation of work
turns right side round the empiricist assertion that employers are paying their employees, and demonstrates that employees are paying their employers.

Inequalities of income and wealth have been increasing over the last three decades in the United States, a tendency established well before the current economic fiasco in the banking and real estate industries. Middle range households have lost the most in absolute terms, about 20% of their wealth between 1984 and 2004. These middle range losses are the toll of capitalist globalization.

The Americanization/globalization of the world-wide economy aims at the overall reduction of payrolls on the global assembly line, no matter the greater levels of manufacturing employment in developing countries. My thesis is that inequality is not simply a matter of the gap between rich and poor, but of the structural relationships in the economic arena between propertied and non-propertied segments of populations. This is the crux of Marx’s class theory, and I am arguing that his model in this sense was (and still is) correct and more helpful than a purely wealth-centric notion of class. The crisis conditions which afflict the U.S. economy today need to be understood not only in terms of predatory financialization dynamics, but also as a war on labour.

6.1.4. From Commodity-Dependency to De-commodification

This society is fully capable of abundance as Marcuse recognized in One Dimensional Man, yet the material foundation for the persistence of economic want and political unfreedom is commodity-dependency. Work, as the most crucial of all human activities, by which humanity has developed to its present stage of civilization, can be and should be a source of human satisfaction. Under capitalism it is reduced to a mere means for the receipt of wages. Sensuous living labourers are reduced to being mere containers for the only commodity they can bring to the system of commodity exchange, their ability to work. This represents the commodification of the most essential aspect of human life. Necessities of life are available to the public nearly exclusively as commodities through market mechanisms based upon ability to pay.

Commodified existence is not natural; it is contrived. Significant portions of commodified social life need to be rethought. What are the most intelligent/wisest uses of labour? I emphasize (Reitz 2015, 177, 183, 200n) how the transformation of commodified human labour into public work, i.e. work that aims at the public good rather than private accumulation (Boyte and Kari 1996), would undergird progressive political advance. Work in the public interest in the public sector expands areas of the economy traditionally considered the public domain, the commonwealth: social needs oriented projects like libraries, parks, utilities, the media, telephone service, postal service, transportation, social services, especially care for the young and the elderly.

The decommodification of services in these areas, along with a guaranteed minimum income, would supply a socialist alternative its viability. So too the
decommodification of health care, housing, and education. Already we see that areas within the field of information technology are pregnant with the possibility of decommodification: public-domain software and shareware on the internet, market-free access to Skype, etc. The demand for decommodification sets Marcuse’s analysis – and ours – distinctly apart from a liberal call for a ‘politics of recognition’ (Honneth 1994) that features primarily attitudinal or only redistributive remedies.

While recognition and redistribution are certainly necessary, they are not sufficient. The slogan ‘tax the rich,’ while fundamentally helpful in liberal terms, misses the radical socialist point that the cure for the harsh distributional inequalities cited above lies in a new mode of property ownership that restructures the very process of value creation, as well as the inextricably interconnected processes of exchange and consumption. No non-socialist theory of education or society has any profound quarrel with wage labour or the general system of commodity dependency. Marx admonishes workers: ‘…instead of the conservative motto “A fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work!” they should inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword, “Abolition of the wages-system!”’ (Marx 1865/1965, 78). Marx clarified capitalist society’s obsession with production for profit rather than human need: its structurally generated fetish/addiction to production for commodity exchange rather than for use-values. Production for use rather than exchange would optimize living conditions within the social formation as a whole. Capitalist productive relations are driving global labour to its knees. Only the abolition of wage labour and commodity fetishism in the economy can restore satisfaction and dignity to an uncommodified labour process.

6.2. Leopold and Marcuse on Environmental Destruction and Revolutionary Ecological Liberation

Aldo Leopold was dissatisfied with any merely lyrical romanticizing of nature, as in Goethe’s ‘Mailied’ [May Song]: ‘Wie herrlich leuchtet mir die Natur’ – ‘How stirring and splendid Nature can be!’ Instead, he pursued Alexander Humboldt’s ‘everything is interconnected’ approach, recognizing how humanity’s inner capacities adapt to the world’s ecosystems, and that our insight into these ecosystems builds our fuller, more comprehensive understanding of life as a whole, i.e., including aesthetics, ethics, and politics. Humboldt’s writing on plant ecology, geography, geology, and much more, of necessity also condemned sugar plantation slavery as a denatured and disfiguring economic form where he found it in Cuba (Foner 1983). Humboldt maintained the unity of the human race, against Agassiz, who promoted racial hierarchy. Humboldt’s work influenced Henry David Thoreau and John Muir as well as the thinking of the most profound ecological philosopher of the twentieth century, Aldo Leopold. This Sand County, Wisconsin, forester and nature writer knew the earth was
Opposing Authoritarian Populism

awesome, knew the earth was radical. Above and beyond its beauty, he saw that living on the face of our planet with dignity is possible, and holds the promise of ethical, political, and aesthetic meaning for human communities.

Leopold (1949/1966, 218–219) understood earth (i.e. land) scientifically as a biotic system to which humanity belongs. This led him to a logic of protection, love, and respect for nature – both in recreation and in social production. He explicitly developed what he called a ‘land ethic’ that enlarged the boundaries of the concept of ‘community’ to include soils, water, plants, animals, air, and people. He replaced a view of humanity as conqueror of the land-community with a vision of human inhabitants of a green commonwealth. To Leopold nature was considered to be a community to which humanity belongs. ‘Green Commonwealth’ is my term, not his, but it encapsulates his conviction that ecological science leads to ecological conscience: to conservation and cooperation. Ecological science discloses ‘the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of cooperation […] All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts’ (Leopold 1949/1966, 218–219).


Under the conditions of advanced industrial society, satisfaction is always tied to destruction. The domination of nature is tied to the violation of nature. The search for new sources of energy is tied to the poisoning of the life environment. (Marcuse 1979/2011, 209)

It is very telling that Marcuse frames his discussion of a destructive and authoritarian character structure within ‘the concerted power of big capital’ (Marcuse 1979/2011, 212):

[T]he destructive character structure so prominent in our society today, must be seen in the context of the institutionalized destructiveness characteristic of both foreign and domestic affairs. This institutionalized destructiveness is well-known, and examples thereof are easy to provide. They include the constant increase in the military budget at the expense of social welfare, the proliferation of nuclear installations, the general poisoning and polluting of our life environment, the blatant subordination of human rights to the requirements of global strategy, and the threat of war in case of a challenge to this strategy. This institutionalized destruction is both open and legitimate. It provides the context within which the individual reproduction of destructiveness takes place. (Marcuse 1979/2011, 207)
In his analysis there is no separation between individual psychology and social psychology. He theorizes ‘the potential forces of social change are there. Those forces present the potential for emergence of a character structure in which emancipatory drives gain ascendency over compensatory ones’ (Marcuse 1979/2011, 210).

Can we now speculate, against Freud, that the striving for a state of freedom from pain pertains to Eros, to the life instincts, rather than to the death instinct? If so, this wish for fulfilment would attain its goal not in the beginning of life, but in the flowering and maturity of life. It would serve, not as a wish to return, but as a wish to progress. It would serve to protect and enhance life itself. The drive for painlessness, for the pacification of existence, would then seek fulfilment in protective care for living things. It would find fulfilment in the recapture and restoration of our life environment, and in the restoration of nature, both external and within human beings. This is just the way in which I view today’s environmental movement, today’s ecology movement. The ecology movement reveals itself in the last analysis as a political and psychological movement of liberation. It is political because it confronts the concerted power of big capital, whose vital interests the movement threatens. It is psychological because (and this is a most important point) the pacification of external nature, the protection of the life-environment, will also pacify nature within men and women. A successful environmentalism will, within individuals, subordinate destructive energy to erotic energy. (Marcuse 1979/2011, 212)

Marcuse explains that a politicization of erotic energy has resulted in the appearance of new goals, new behaviour, and new language in movements for radical social change. The individual’s New Sensibility may well even energize protest and ‘counteract the neglect of the individual found in traditional radical practice’ (Marcuse 1979/2011, 210).

Marcuse’s 1972 essay ‘Ecology and Revolution’ had previously noted the revival of student protest at the time, not only against the Vietnam War, but also in the ecology movement protesting against ‘the violation of the Earth’ which it increasingly saw as a ‘vital aspect of the counterrevolution.’ Marcuse emphasized that the bombing of Vietnam was also to be seen as a ‘capitalist response to the attempt at revolutionary ecological liberation: the bombs are meant to prevent the people of North Vietnam from undertaking the economic and social rehabilitation of the land’ (Marcuse 1972/2005, 174 emphasis added). We cringe still today at the thought of Trump’s reactionary opposition to the Paris climate accords and his appointment of anti-ecology ideologists to the Departments of the Interior (Ryan Zinke), Energy (Rick Perry), and the Environmental Protection Agency (Scott Pruitt).

The revolt of youth (students, workers, women), undertaken in the name of the values of freedom and happiness, is an attack on all the values which govern
the capitalist system. And this revolt is oriented toward the pursuit of a radically different natural and technical environment; this perspective has become the basis for subversive experiments such as the attempts by American ‘communes’ to establish non-alienated relations between the sexes, between generations, between man and nature – attempts to sustain the consciousness of refusal and of renovation. (Marcuse 1972/2005, 174)

We have seen of course how often the ecological movement has been co-opted and harmonized with the perspective of a ‘green capitalism.’ Nonetheless, its system critique continually re-emerges:

Increasingly, the ecological struggle comes into conflict with the laws which govern the capitalist system: the law of increased accumulation of capital, of the creation of sufficient surplus value, of profit, of the necessity of perpetuating alienated labor and exploitation. Michel Bosquet put it very well: the ecological logic is purely and simply the negation of capitalist logic; the earth can’t be saved within the framework of capitalism; the Third World can’t be developed according to the model of capitalism. (Marcuse 1972/2005, 175).

For Marcuse ‘the issue is not the purification of the existing society but its replacement’ (Marcuse 1972/2005, 175).

6.2.1. Marxist Ecological Materialism

Also warranting our attention is the recent publication of a new compendium of essays on the global architecture of wealth and resource extraction grounded in Marx’s perspective on capitalism’s ‘ecological rift’ dividing humanity from the natural world by John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark and Richard York (2010). These authors stress the dialectical unity embodied in an historical materialist approach to the scientific study of nature and society and Marx’s philosophically realist ontological and epistemological dimensions.

The world is being subjected to a process of monopolistic capital accumulation so extreme and distorted that not only has it produced the Great Inequality and conditions of stagnation and financial instability, but also the entire planet as a place of human habitation is being put in peril in order to sustain this very system. Hence the future of humanity – if there is to be one at all – now lies with the 99%. (Foster & McChesney 2012, 26)

Concerns arising from the transformation of the natural environment by human beings are not new. Yet the increase in the rate of consumption of natural resources from the industrial revolution to the present has sounded the alarm regarding the magnitude of the consequences for the environment in the near term as well as over decades. The concern is ultimately about the environment’s
ability to continue to renew and rejuvenate itself in the long run. The intensity of the debate today across the globe is unprecedented. To address these most urgent issues we must address the influence of powerful classes in society and undertake a collective politics in the collective interest.

The notions of ecological metabolism and ecological rift are elucidated by Foster et al. via Marx’s discussion of ‘wood thieves.’ Ecological metabolism refers to the interchange of matter and energy between humanity and nature through life-sustaining social structures. Because of the enclosures of the common forest lands as private estates, the taking of dead wood by peasants, as had been common practice, was criminalized by landowners who asserted that this wood supply (never before sold or exchanged) had an economic value as a commodity which they owned and for which they must be paid. Thus the peasantry was separated from the natural and social world it had inhabited. Likewise today most of the resources of the earth and cultural assets of its people (including Labour, leadership and learning), that once sustained humanity in common, are now privatized, marketed as scarce commodities, often grotesquely distributed involving patterns of privilege and waste. The rift between nature and the capitalist global order is expressed as generalized commodity-dependency, i.e., massive economic and political unfreedom, i.e., alienation.

According to Foster, Clark and York, ‘[t]he essential problem is the unavoidable fact that an expanding economic system is placing additional burdens on a fixed earth system to the point of planetary overload’ (2010, 17). These co-authors supply an historical context by discussing some of the manifold manifestations of earth exhaustion: ocean acidification, pollution of the globe’s freshwater supply, biodiversity loss, atmospheric aerosol loading, chemical pollution, the energy crisis from coal to oil, the climate/carbon metabolism crisis, i.e., climate change. Each of these rifts is shown to be a result of the expansion of capitalist production and the squandering of natural resources via capitalism’s unstinting architecture of accumulation. Foster and Clark (2004) hold that even our understanding of imperialism has been,

… impeded by the underdevelopment of an ecological materialist analysis of capitalism in Marxist theory as a whole. Nevertheless, it has long been apparent – and was stipulated in Marx’s own work – that transfers in economic values are accompanied in complex ways by real ‘material-ecological’ flows that transform relations between city and country, and between global metropolis and periphery. (Foster and Clark 2004, 187)

Today’s intensifying levels of global earth exhaustion coupled with intensified economic exploitation and resurgent social inequalities (of class, race, and gender) necessitate intellectual and political growth on the part of every one of us. The convergence of the environmentalist and Labour movements is essential in terms of a unified emancipatory praxis if the human species is to go on living.
6.2.2. Global Solidarity: The Green Commonwealth Counter-Offensive

The history of the economic relationships between and among countries of the world has also been a history of domination, peaceful coexistence, and war. Today humanity is acutely aware of our interconnectedness to the planet and the damaging role played by rapacious imperialism. The promise of Green Commonwealth is that of socio-cultural equality and sustainable political-economic abundance.

Social movements against inequalities of race, gender, and class have been the civilizing forces of our age; authoritarian populist movements, on the contrary, intensify the damage of division. Black Lives Matter (BLM) has effectively educated the nation about the cavalier use of racist deadly force (on and off the campus) and the real nature of undemocratic governance. The organized social struggles against racism, sexism, poverty, war, and imperialism, have educated wide swaths of this country’s population outside traditional classrooms about alienation and oppression, power and empowerment. The ‘New Social Movements’ at the start of the twenty-first century learned to ally crucially with labour. In this regard I differ from Habermas (1981), who stresses the ostensible independence of these contemporary movements from labour. I am making the case that the latent emancipatory power of labour is axial to both revolutionary theory and praxis. The militant anti-globalization action in Seattle 1999 against corporate capitalism, the World Trade Organization, and other international financial institutions, united ‘teamsters and turtles,’ activist elements of organized labour in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world with environmentalist organizations, in a massive confrontation with the paramilitary police power that protected the representatives of global capital as they consolidated their payroll-slashing and earth-bashing investment strategies, through outsourcing and ‘race to the bottom.’ In 2001, a similar confrontation occurred in Genoa, Italy. This was one of the most enormous demonstrations against global finance capital Europe had seen in years. The 2011 and 2012 anti-austerity uprisings in Athens, Rome, Madrid, and elsewhere were equally spectacular and militant. So too the massive student protests against tuition increases in Montreal, Quebec during March, May, and August 2012. These struggles echo the worker-student protests in Paris 1968, and the new forms of political-economic thinking emergent from the now regular meetings of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil and elsewhere. Then there are also the left populist movements of SYRIZA in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and even the Bernie Sanders campaign in the United States.

Radical authors today are coming to realize also that: ‘the only way forward is a new arrangement, based on ones that have better served societies since the dawn of civilization’ (Pettifor 2012, 24). Just one indication of this advancing perspective is that of British ecological economist, Brian Davey, who suggests as a new socialist starting point ‘the philosophy, culture, and political economic ideas of a diversity of indigenous communities and tribes in the Andean region’
These peoples were modelling a ‘solidarity economy’ blending ecology and socialism after a long history of colonial oppression, racism, and sexism. The contemporary combination of socialism and ecological policy is likewise seen by others (Kozloff 2008; Bateman 2012; Sitrin 2012) as offering further examples in Spain, Argentina, Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, and elsewhere. These ‘new’ arrangements are derived from the commonwealth practices that prevailed for the longest period in human history in ancient African (and subsequently other, e.g. Minoan) partnership societies, and which persist in the contemporary labour theory of ethics and commonwealth. A Green Commonwealth counter-offensive is the political challenge today.

In a recent essay Jodi Dean emphasized that ‘at a minimal level, if we are to have a chance of taking power, of reformatting the basic conditions under which we live and work, we have to share a name in common. …’ (Dean 2015). Where she is proposing the formation of a revolutionary party, I am suggesting we need to form a prefigurative alliance of working groups around the Promise of Green Commonwealth and to constitute a Green Commonwealth Counter-Offensive. She recommends as one of the prefigurative forms of party organization:

- Trusting others’ skills and knowledge is essential if we are to form ourselves into a political force capable of addressing global capital. This suggests the utility of working groups in multiple locales and issue areas – groups with enough autonomy to be responsive and enough direction to carry out a common purpose, which itself would have to be hashed out and to which all would have to be committed. (Dean 2015)

Commonwealth has the power to reclaim our common humanity. Its ‘radical’ goal is decommodification: public work for the public good. Humanity’s rights to a commonwealth economy, politics, and culture reside in our commonworks. This involves sensuous living labour authentically actualizing itself through humanist activism and creativity – humanity remaking itself through a social labour process in accordance with the commonwealth promise at the core of our material reality. This requires a new system of shared ownership, democratized ownership, and common ownership. Commonwealth is humanity’s (that is, sensuous living labour’s) aesthetic form: workmanship and artistry, emancipated from repression, taking place not only ‘in accordance with the laws of beauty,’11 but also according to the labour theory of ethics and ecological responsibility – Green Commonwealth.

Commonwealth is living labour’s promise. This is the radically socialist logic of commonwealth production, ownership, stewardship: bring to fruition, within the realm of necessity, an intercultural architecture of equality, disalienation, ecological balance, freedom, and abundance.

The current period is one of economic crisis, change, and danger, including that of authoritarian populism. Today’s global capitalist crisis is a crucial
opportunity for a new radically emancipatory beginning in pursuit of racial equality, gender equality, the liberation of labour, the restoration of nature, leisure, abundance, and peace. a new political beginning.

The goal of building a universal human community on the foundation of universal human rights must acknowledge the fundamental role of the labour process in the sustenance of the human community. Human labour has the irreplaceable power to build the commonwealth, past and future. Our current conditions of insecurity and risk make it imperative that we undertake a deeper understanding of the necessity of a humanist commonwealth alternative: an egalitarian, affluent, green political-economy through which humanity may govern itself beautifully in terms of our fullest potential, mindful of the fragile magnificence of the earth.

Notes

counterrevolutionary Americanism, patriotism, and white supremacy, reinforced the ‘sacredness of the prevailing order of society.’


8 Marx, Paris Manuscripts XXIV: ‘Man is a species being […] he adopts the species as his object […] because treats himself as the actual living species; because he treats himself as a universal and therefore a free being.’ Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 edited by Dirk J. Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1964) p. 112.

9 John Locke, An Essay Concerning the True Original Extent and End of Civil Government, Chapter 5, Paragraph #27.

10 Adam Smith, Wealth of Nations, Book One, Chapter 8, Para. 1, 2, and 8.

11 Marx, Paris Manuscripts XXIV: ‘An animal forms things in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty.’ Marx drew this phrase on the laws of beauty from Schiller’s Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man; see also Marcuse 1969, page 26, on art as a productive social force. Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 edited by Dirk J. Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1964) p. 113–114.

References


Davey, Brian. 2012. ‘Perhaps We Can Create a Society in which a Good Life is Possible’. In Meme Wars, ed. Kalle Lasn.New York: Seven Stories Press.


Marcuse, Herbert. 1933/1973a. ‘On the Philosophical Foundation of the Concept of Labor in Economics,’ Telos, Number 16, Summer.


