

The Performance of Revolution

(More Thoughts on the Postmodernization of Marxism)

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The economists express it like this: each person has her or his private interests in mind, and nothing else: as a consequence she or he serves everyone's private interests, i.e., the general interest, without wishing to or knowing that she or he is. The irony of this is not that the totality of private interest – which is the same thing as the general interest – can be attained by the individuals following her or his own interest. Rather it could be inferred from this abstract phrase that everyone hinders the satisfaction of everyone else's interest, that instead of a general affirmation, the result of this war of all against all is rather a general negation. The point is rather that private interest is itself already a socially determined interest, which can only be achieved within the conditions established by society and through the means that society affords, and that it is thus linked to the reproduction of these conditions and means. It is certainly the interest of private individuals that is at stake; but its content as well as the form and the means of its realization, is only given by social conditions independent of all these individuals.

Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*

The *psychological* notion of self-interest has been from the start (of bourgeois ideological dominance) the companion piece to the *economic* idea of private property. And the *political* concepts of democracy and individual liberty have been the hybrid children of the two. But the child, as is well known, is often

not the *synthesis* of the parents. It is, rather, a dialectical unity, filled with conflict and characteristically restrained (self-restrained) in all its efforts to move beyond itself. Such is the paradox of individual liberty. For the *individual* can never be free of the form and content of individuated ideology in an individuated commodified society. We are like laboratory rats trying to escape from a maze that is in fact part of a larger maze (and so on and so on) that conditions us on how to escape. *And yet we do change*. In part, this is explainable by the obvious fact that things happen to us over which we have no control. What seems more important is that some of our changing seems subjectively driven. But how is that possible, given the philosophical conundrum articulated above? Are we deluded about thinking that we change? Some philosophers from Parmenides and Zeno down to postmodern times have thought so. They have insisted that change and/or our efforts to explain change are mere illusions. And most certainly, these varied thinkers have insisted, subjectively based change is out of the question. Others (any freshman student of philosophy will tell you) starting with Heraclitus have insisted that change (or changing) is all there is. But most ordinary people seem to happily accept that things do change even if it seems philosophically impossible for them to do so. “So much the worse for philosophy” appears to be the common-sensical attitude of the ordinary man or woman.

In western culture many would argue that *individuated liberty* and *democracy*, as idea and practice, have solved the ancient riddle of Determinism. For the free individual (so the story goes) can participate in political society and cast her or his vote in accordance with her or his self-interest in such a way as to effect change. But as Marx and others have pointed out, the individual’s self interest (wants, desires, etc.) are themselves thoroughly determined by prevailing conditions and, therefore, acting individualistically in accordance with them will largely leave matters ... unchanged.

While few these days consider these issues philosophically, many people attend to them in endlessly varied practical forms, political types and psychology types amongst them! Political types and psychology types in contemporary society often appear to treat each other with disdain. But, in my opinion, these two critical human disciplines could learn much from each other if both would properly reject their pompous self-serving claims of being a science and study the activities of each *culturally*. For it is the culture of politics and the culture of psychology which best reveal their “essences” by exposing their respective “essential limitations.”

The Culture of American Politics¹

America’s earliest social/political engineers (a.k.a. our Founding Fathers) – their views strongly influenced by the Enlightenment and the age of democratic revolution – created a system that was something of a reconciliation between the democratic participation of the mass (though the “mass” was somewhat narrowly defined) and the best person to govern, the expert, the representative – the politician. Over time electoral democracy became culturally more and more focussed on the outcome rather than on the process. It was increasingly less and less about the collective process of decision-making and the self-transformative culture that a civically active and involved society engenders. It was more and more about the decision, pure and simple. The product, not the process; the outcome, less and less revolutionary.

So even as the franchise became fully inclusive and structural barriers to participation were eliminated, the *culture* of American politics evolved – some might say devolved – into one which is notably non-participatory. Among the so-called western-style democracies of the contemporary world, the US is ranked 52 out of 58 in terms of voter participation. Over 50% of eligible Americans don’t

vote in national elections. Among the newest voter generation – 18 to 24 year olds – participation in national elections is shockingly below 30%.

There are many political “scientific” accountings of this phenomenon, from claims about the cynicism or apathy of the American voter to recognition of the institutionalized discouragement by the complex system of regulations which protect incumbents and by American two-partyism as it has evolved in the last seventy years. But it seems to me that the problem – for those who take the decline of American democracy to be so – is much deeper and more specific to the current postmodern era. After all, at first glance, democracy’s stagnation could, to a large degree, be “fixed” by the introduction of new political reforms which make participation more possible and desirable. But even structural reforms that lead to an expansion and revitalization of electoral democracy, while desperately needed, do not address in and of themselves what is a more fundamental and far-reaching problem for the American community – indeed, for the international community. That problem is the breakdown of *development*. And ironically, as the developmental capacities of contemporary society have diminished, economic, social, moral, personal and political democracy has been more and more substituted for development in most so-called advanced societies.

But the mere substitution of democracy for human development, far from resolving the paradoxicality of change, exacerbates it. Hence, in American society it should come as no surprise that structural changes of all sorts -- which have increased the ability of citizens to participate democratically -- have been accompanied by a *de facto* decline in such participation. Apathy is not, in my opinion, the answer because, in point of fact, greater democratic participation without overall development does not effectively produce change. Therefore, it is quite reasonable that many people would not be voting. To put the matter simply, more and more people having greater and greater opportunity to vote for fewer

and fewer real choices not only does not yield development, it makes people more and more cynical that there can be such a thing as development.

Consequently, any efforts to further rejuvenate democracy that do not simultaneously and continuously reinitiate development are doomed to reinforce and further institutionalize the non-developmental framework, i.e., the political culture, of contemporary society. Right now, our choices – the decisions we make -- are conditioned by the dominant culture, by what people “want” and “desire” as determined by that culture. Unless the mass can somehow be organized to engage in the process of transforming the culture, our wants and desires will continue to be circumscribed by the culture we are unwilling or unable to change.

Though many (actually most) Americans don't vote, due in no small part to the belief that it doesn't make a difference, there nonetheless remains a curiously steadfast belief in the proposition that the primary way we can change things is through voting. The belief that how people effect change is as liberated individuals, i.e., going to the voting booth and individually pulling such and such a lever, prevails. But while individuals – even a substantial collection of them – can change who the governor of Wyoming or Illinois is, individuals – even a large collection of them -- do not transform the culture of a society. They cannot because, organized as individuals, they can do nothing but express the dominant culture. Cultural transformation is a group or *mass* activity – an activity of a group or mass, whether of two people or two billion people.

The American non-voters – their conscious cognitive belief systems aside – have stumbled upon a critical insight. They might be able to change *something* by voting. But they can't change *everything*. And unless you can change everything, i.e., the culture, you can't change anything. Why vote, since it only *appears* to effect change, but really doesn't.

This dysfunction of American democracy – which is really a dysfunction of American development – seemingly catalyzed the beginnings of a populist

political revolt in the early 1990s. The 1992 independent presidential candidacy of Ross Perot inspired 20 million Americans -- considered among the most attitudinally conservative elements of the population -- to break with the cultural sine qua non of US politics, the two-party system. They declared that they wanted the era of special interest governance to be over. This phenomenon knocked the socks off just about every political player, pundit and oddsmaker in the English-speaking world. Naturally, it also caused quite a stir among leftist intellectuals and activists who were quick to diagnose the rebellion as having "neo-fascistic tendencies." The American left -- perhaps the paradigmatic conservative believers in expertise over popular democracy (with themselves cast as the experts) -- had absolutely no idea what was going on. All they knew was that 20 million ordinary Americans were in rebellion and it wasn't coming out of or going into the Democratic Party. That was enough for them to either demonize and/or write off the significance of the movement.

But tactical polemics aside, the Perot phenomenon offered a profound insight into the core American psychic (schizophrenic) conflict between expertise and popular democracy. Perot's message was, on the one hand, a militant populist message. *The special interests have hijacked our government. This country belongs to the American people. We have to take our country back. We have to eliminate corruption, restore accountability and reshape our political process.*

Millions responded to that populist cultural appeal to redistribute political power from the professionals to the people.

At the same time, though, there was another, opposite dimension to Perot's message. *What this country needs is good management. We need to pay attention to the bottom line. Our politicians are managerial nincompoops, they'd never succeed in the private sector. I have. I've built a billion-dollar company. I have the expertise to run this country.* Millions responded to this appeal as well.

Arguably, it was the ambiguous mixing of the two that was at the heart of Perot's

appeal. For Americans remain deeply conflicted about what we want and about how we see ourselves being governed.

The Jesse Ventura victory in Minnesota in 1998 provoked some related controversies. Some have observed that Ventura, professional wrestler-turned-populist politician, inspired new and non-voters specifically because they wanted to vote for someone who had no business being governor. That was part (a large part) of the populism. The Ventura vote was an in-your-face defiance of the conventional wisdom that whoever gets elected must be “qualified” according to the prevailing standards of expertise. Perhaps what Minnesotans really “want and need” is not an expert but a leader who can organize the state to fuller levels of participation (Minnesota’s turnout in the 1998 election was 24 percentage points higher than the national average).

But even that radical view of the significance of the Ventura victory is limited. What if the significance of the Ventura run is simply what took place on Election Day, namely that more than 765,000 people went out to the polls and kicked sand in the face of the establishment? Shouldn’t we consider the possibility that its significance was not in the fact that Ventura ended up governor, but in the fact that the people of Minnesota engaged in a mass performance which is not best understood or identified as individuals selecting a governor, but as a mass ensemble creating a new political cultural product? What took place in Minnesota was hardly an election. It was a defection. Put positively, it was more a wrestling match than a vote. It did not “seemingly reconcile” a social contradiction by the means of existing institutionalized structures, i.e., it was not the workings of the bourgeois democratic state. For while it was not extra-legal, in the sense of many of the militant worldwide revolutions of the century, it was more extra-institutional than even many of those events.

The problem (if there is one) with Jesse Ventura is not that he has no business being governor. Indeed, that is the very essence and the creatively

remarkable character of the Minnesota phenomenon. Minnesota has no governor. They have Jesse Ventura (he is the embodiment!) as the ongoing product of a profound mass cultural transformation. The wrestling match is one of 20th century America's paradigmatic ensemble, participatory cultural performances. Through mass media, millions of ordinary Americans are variously involved in a show which does not for a moment hide the fact that it is a *pretense*. It is indeed its pretense which captivates all involved. What is captivating is the opportunity to participate with a mass of human beings to culturally create, i.e., to create culture, as only a mass or group activity can. It makes no difference who wins. What makes a difference is the involvement in a creative cultural activity. Jesse Ventura *won* only because Minnesota law required a winner. But the essence of the phenomenon was the mass cultural activity of violating the politically overdetermined pseudo-democracy of American two-party politics, i.e., the performance of revolution.

The Performance of Revolution

Social therapy (the name we use to describe our Marxian-based, dialectical group therapy) has, I believe, helped many with their emotional pain. As well, it has been both the breeding ground and the testing ground for numerous transformations of Marxian and post-Marxian conceptions. This "therapeutization" of Marxism is not simply an application of Marx's view (anymore than Einstein's work is merely an application of Newton's); it is, rather, a clinical developmentalist recasting of the classical class analytic, cognitive view known as dialectical materialism.

Some of the more important Marxian conceptions reshaped by social therapeutics include the conception/practice of power, self, group, meaning and dialectics itself. My earliest therapeutic/analytic work brought to light the critical

distinction between power and authority² where power is the creative capacity of the group by the exercise of its emotional labor to generate new environments, and authority is the societally overdetermined predisposition of the individuated members of the group to passively accept class-dominated, patriarchal emotive environments. In the vortex of the conflict between power and authority, the social therapist is, at once, the organizer (facilitator) of the group's emotive labor power and the potential (or even actual) repository of the group members' authoritarian "instincts." Thus, in working out the precise nature of this emerging relationship, the group changes its relationship to power and to authority, i.e., it hopefully becomes more powerful and less alienated.

Obviously connected to this work is the group's practical-critical consideration of self. For self and the profoundly over-glorified orthodox Western therapeutic principle of "knowing thy self" are, in my opinion, little more than a cover-up for individuated alienation. The Marxian notions of species identity and world historic identity are re-tooled to do battle against the Freudian (bourgeois) fear of group behavior. As well, Wittgenstein's (1953) critical commentary on private languages (and, of equal importance, his philosophically therapeutic mode of teaching it) serves as a kind of humanistic "shock" therapy to help individuals recognize that they do not (and need not and cannot) know themselves since they are themselves. The social therapist (qua organizer or facilitator) works then with the group – not the individuated selves that, reductionistically speaking, comprise the group. To be sure, particular members of the group freely raise and react to whatever they choose and however they choose. Yet, any and all remarks which effectively turn the group into a passive body of listeners as opposed to active participants is quickly (though variously) and powerfully responded to. In a word (a Vygotskian word), the group is consistently organized as an emotive zone of proximal development, or zpd (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). The various members, each at a different level of emotional development, are encouraged to create a new

unit (the emotional group) with a new level of emotional development, i.e., the group's level of emotional development. This ongoing and ever-changing activity is (as Vygotsky shows for more cognitively structured learning groups) profoundly developmental for all – even the most developed individually.

Indeed, this process requires nothing less than totally (qualitatively) changing the focus of the therapy group from the individuated self discovering deeper insights into his or her consciousness to the collective activity of continuously creating a new social unit (the emotional zpd). “How well is the group performing its activity?” not “How is each individual doing?” becomes the overriding question. This ultra-focus on activity, i.e., the conversation, does nothing less than transform meaning itself. Reconsidering Wittgenstein from a purer Marxian (and Vygotskian) activity-theoretic vantage point, we reject the simplistic equation of meaning and use (so common amongst many followers and students of Wittgenstein including many postmodernist psychologists) in favor of the dialectical relationship between meaning and activity. The meaning of conversation, we argue, is not to be found in how it is used but in that it is used (Newman, 1999, pp. 84-85).³

The ongoing social-therapeutic group is, like the election of Governor Ventura, a “performance of revolution.” Since it meets each week, it is, to jokingly borrow a phrase from Trotsky, a kind of “permanent revolution.” Each group is a grouping of human beings doing what our unique (and often disturbed) species does periodically and in varying ways, viz. create culture, i.e., self-consciously develop. We are able to do so by virtue of our capacity to perform. Presumably our performatory capacity is inextricably entwined with our vulnerability to being alienated (and, no doubt, individuated). We are able (as childhood proves) to become what we are not. If we were not, we would not develop at all. We are pretenders. We are performers. But we cannot *perform* as individuals. As individuals we can, at best, *act*. The form of individuation (the

commodified character of alienation in modern society) is the ultimate inhibitor of performance. We perform only as a group. To change political matters, then, we must perform as a group even as we vote as (legalistic) individuals. To change psychological matters, we must *perform* as (in) a group even as we consume as individuals.

The performance of revolution is not to be confused with the modernist notion of *making* a revolution. Indeed, so far as I know, the origin of this notion of *performing revolution* (revolutionary practice) derives from Marx. Yet (and this has been, in my view, dramatically misunderstood) Marx effectively introduces the concept revolutionary practice to *distinguish* it from the “making of revolution.” The Marxian precursor to the notion of performing revolution appears first (as far as I know) in his famous *Theses on Feuerbach*. Thesis #1 states:

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism—which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. Hence, in *Das Wesen des Christenthums*, he regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-judaical manifestation. Hence he does not grasp the significance of “revolutionary”, of “practical-critical, activity. (Marx, 1974, p. 121)

Revolutionary activity or practical-critical activity is not, for Marx, a kind of activity. Rather, Marx the methodologist, is urging us to consider the need for an *activity_revolution*. In the theses, Marx offers schemata for a new kind of understanding – one based on activity (and not the object) as fundamental. Nissen, Axel and Jensen put the matter well in their comprehensive review of my and Holzman’s “trilogy” on the postmodernization of Marx. They say:

Newman and Holzman are among the few who have seen the far-reaching implications of Marx’s theses on Feuerbach, not just the famous sixth, which states that we should not seek an abstract essence of humanity in the individual, but also the first, the second, and the eleventh, in which practice, as a sensuous subjective revolutionary activity, is proposed as the foundation of a new kind of theoretical thinking. So far, the arguments for Newman and Holzman seem consistent, even if they build up considerable expectations to be fulfilled. The problem, it seems, lies in the argument that one needs to engage in revolutionary practice to understand. We would tend to agree, if revolution means change of relevant conditions; but we would also point out that the argument begs some answer to the question of how we know (or, if one prefers, how we understand) which practice is revolutionary and when. (Nissen, Axel and Jensen, 1999, p. 423)

Yet (as is apparent from their final sentences) even these astute reviewers shift back to an objectified meaning of revolution (revolutionary activity) in asking “which practice is revolutionary and when.” It is not certain practices which are revolutionary. It is the shift from an epistemic conception of objectification to a

new mode of understanding (practical-critical, revolutionary, performatory) of activity that is revolutionary.

In “One Dogma of Dialectical Materialism” I make an almost identical point in terms of Marx’s understanding (and many Marxists’ misunderstanding) of dialectics.

The well-suitedness of dialectics as a method of study is fully dependent on a new understanding of the proper object of study. It is not the object or the thing (large or small) which can be studied; it is activity, practice, subjectivity. Dialectical materialism does not, for Marx, mean the dialectical study of the material organized as things. This is the error of all prior forms of materialism. For not only is the physical object a cultural posit (in Quine’s sense) so is object itself. Indeed, it is not the physicality of the object that is most insidiously mythical and, thereby, potentially metaphysical; it is its formal organization (its shape) as a discrete object of study or discernment. (Newman, 1999, p. 93)

The social therapeutic environment attempts to be at once *democratic* and *developmental*. The ongoing group in its ongoing ensemble performance creates its own culture. In this developmental work *everyone* is not equal because there is no every ONE. The group creates the revolutionary performance, meaning the group appeals to nothing other than the group activity itself in determining what is happening and/or the understanding of what is happening. To be sure, things of all kinds are brought into the group and, to varying degrees, influence (determine) what the group does. How could it be otherwise? Endless factors having nothing to do with the production process *per se* influence what the finished Lincoln Center production of “Hamlet” will look like. But the performance has an

integrity of comprehension because it is not merely a determined product of the process; it is the self-conscious activity of the ensemble creating the play which (even more than the script) gives us a “new kind of theoretical thinking.” Yet the new kind of theoretical thinking is not theoretical at all, i.e., it is, in traditional terms, aesthetic, in Marx’s terms, practical-critical, i.e., revolutionary. It is the practical-critical participation in the non-objectified (what I often call “pointless”) activity that *is* (or better still, *is becoming*) revolutionary. A performance of revolution changes *nothing*. It changes *everything*. Within this environment each individuated group member is “free” to contribute as often and as openly as she or he chooses. But the hegemonic component of the dialectical process is development. For in its absence, democracy (in therapy or elsewhere) means little. If we cannot creatively transform the culture and thereby the choices themselves, then our capacity to select one *other* determined choice over another is, at best, a Zeno-like illusion.

The dialectical relationship between *democracy* and *development* is precisely what history (Fukuyama notwithstanding) will reveal to us in the new century. Revolution (along with everything else) will come to have a new meaning. And *performance*, in my opinion, will more and more become the practical-critical shape of *activity* even as *dialectics* replaces *objectification* as our mode of understanding. The postmodernist Marxian revolution has yet to come. Of this I feel almost as certain as I do that the modernist Marxian revolution has completely failed.

Notes

1. Special thanks to Jacqueline Salit for her valuable assistance in the discussion of American politics. While I am aware that all of the Western Hemisphere is America, throughout this essay I use “America” and “American” as a shorthand term to refer to citizens, residents and characteristics of people living in the United States.
2. See Newman, *Power and Authority: The Inside View of Class Struggle*, written in 1974, for early articulations of this distinction.
3. This characterization of social therapy in this and the preceding three paragraphs first appeared in “One Dogma of Dialectical Materialism,” an essay on the postmodernization of Marxism that appeared in *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, 1999. It is reprinted here with permission from Ian Parker, the journal editor.

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