

As Adorno wrote, in *Negative Dialectics* (1966):

“The liquidation of theory by dogmatization and thought taboos contributed to the bad practice. . . . The interrelation of both moments [of theory and practice] is not settled once and for all but fluctuates historically. . . . Those who chide theory [for being] anachronistic obey the *topos* of dismissing, as obsolete, what remains painful [because it was] thwarted. . . . The fact that history has rolled over certain positions will be respected as a verdict on their truth content only by those who agree with Schiller that ‘world history is the world tribunal’. What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations.” [T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (Continuum: New York, 1983), 143-144]

Platypus is concerned with exploring the improbable but not impossible tasks and project of the reemergence of a critical Left with emancipatory social intent. We look forward to making a critical but vital contribution towards a possible “return to Marx” for the potential reinvigoration of the Left in coming years. We invite and welcome those who wish to share in and contribute to this project.

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“The Left is Dead! — Long Live the Left!”

***Vicissitudes of historical consciousness
and possibilities for emancipatory social politics today***

Chris Cutrone, for Platypus

“The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

— Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852)

“The theorist who intervenes in practical controversies nowadays discovers on a regular basis and to his shame that whatever ideas he might contribute were expressed long ago — and usually better the first time around.”

— Theodor W. Adorno, “Sexual Taboos and the Law Today” (1963)

According to Lenin, the greatest contribution of the German Marxist radical Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) to the fight for socialism was the statement that her Social Democratic Party of Germany had become a “stinking corpse” as a result of voting for war credits on August 4, 1914. Lenin wrote this about Luxemburg in 1922, at the close of the period of war, revolution, counterrevolution and reaction in which Luxemburg was murdered. Lenin remarked that Luxemburg would be remembered well for her incisive critique at a crucial moment of crisis in the movement to which she had dedicated and ultimately gave her life. Instead, ironically, Luxemburg has been remembered — for her occasional criticisms of Lenin and the Bolsheviks!

Two lessons can be drawn from this story: that the Left suffers, as a result of the accumulated wreckage of intervening defeats and failures, from a very partial and distorted memory of its own history; and that at crucial moments the best work on the Left is its own critique, motivated by the attempt to escape this history and its outcomes. At certain times, the most necessary contribution one can make is to declare that the Left is dead.

Hence, Platypus makes the proclamation, for our time: “The Left is dead! — Long live the Left!” — We say this so that the future possibility of the Left might live.

Platypus began in December, 2004 as a project for an international journal of critical letters and emancipatory politics, envisioned by a core group of students of University of Chicago professor Moishe Postone, who has studied and written on Marx's mature critical theory in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* towards the imagination of postcapitalist society since the 1960s.

Platypus developed and grew in Spring 2006 into a reading group of our students interested in pursuing the continued purchase of Marxian critical theory. The *Platypus* Affiliated Society is a recently established (in December, 2006) political organization seeking to investigate possibilities for reconstituting a Marxian Left after the demise of the historical Marxist Left.

We take our namesake from the platypus, which suffered at its moment of zoological discovery from its unclassifiability according to prevailing science. We think that an authentic emancipatory Left today would suffer from a similar problem of (mis)recognition, in part because the tasks and project of social emancipation have disintegrated and so exist for us only in fragments and shards.

We have grown from at first about a dozen graduate students and teachers to over thirty undergraduate and graduate students and teachers and others from the greater Chicago community and beyond (for instance, developing corresponding members in New York and Toronto).

We have worked with various other groups on the Left in Chicago and beyond, for instance giving a workshop on the Iraqi Left for the new SDS conference on the Iraq occupation in Chicago in February. In January, we held the first of a series of Platypus public fora in Chicago, on the topic of "imperialism" and the Left, including panelists Kevin Anderson from *News and Letters* (Marxist Humanists), Nick Kreitman from the newly refounded Students for a Democratic Society, Danny Postel from *OpenDemocracy.net*, and Adam Turl from the International Socialist Organization.

We have organized our critical investigation of the history of the Left in order to help discern emancipatory social possibilities in the present, a present that has been determined by the history of defeat and failure on the Left. As seekers after a highly problematic legacy from which we are separated by a definite historical distance, we are dedicated to approaching the history of thought and action on the Left from which we must learn in a deliberately non-dogmatic manner, taking nothing as given.

Why Marx? Why now? We find Marx's thought to be the focal point and vital nerve center for the fundamental critique of the modern world in which we still live that emerged in Marx's time with the Industrial Revolution of the 19th Century. We take Marx's thought in relation both to the preceding history of critical social thought, including the philosophy of Kant and Hegel, as well as the work by those inspired later to follow Marx in the critique of social modernity, most prominently Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno. Hence, Platypus is committed to the reconsideration of the entire critical theoretical tradition spanning the 19th and 20th Centuries. As Leszek

Kolakowski put it (in his 1968 essay "The Concept of the Left") the Left must be defined ideologically and not sociologically; thought, not society, is divided into Right and Left: the Left is defined by its utopianism, the Right by its opportunism. — Or, as Robert Pippin has put it, the problem with critical theory today is that it is not critical (*Critical Inquiry*, 2003).

Platypus is dedicated to re-opening various historical questions of the Left in order to read that history "against the grain" (as Benjamin put it, in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 1940), attempting to grasp past moments of defeat and failure on the Left not as given but rather in their unfulfilled potential, regarding the present as the product not of historical necessity, but rather of what happened that need not have been. We struggle to escape the dead hand of at least two preceding generations of problematic action and thinking on the Left, the 1920s-30s and the 1960s-70s. More proximally, we suffer the effects of the depoliticization — the deliberate "postmodernist" abandonment of any "grand narratives" of social emancipation — on the Left in the 1980s-90s.

But the "tradition" of the "dead generation" that "weighs" most heavily as a "nightmare" on our minds is that of the 1960s New Left, especially in its history of anti-Bolshevism — expressed by both the complementary bad alternatives of Stalinophobic anti-Communism (of Cold War liberalism and social democracy) and Stalinophilic "militancy" (e.g., Maoism, Guevarism, etc.) — that led to the naturalization of the degeneration of the Left into resignation and abdication, originating in the inadequate response by the 1960s "New" Left to the problems of the post-1920s-30s "Old" Left. In our estimation, the 1960s New Left remained beholden to Stalinism — including the lie that Lenin led to Stalin — to the great detriment of possibilities for emancipatory politics up to today.

In attempting to read this history of the accelerated demise and self-liquidation of the Left after the 1960s "against the grain," we face a problem discussed by Nietzsche in his essay "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life" (1873):

"A person must have the power and from time to time use it to break a past and to dissolve it, in order to be able to live. . . . People or ages serving life in this way, by judging and destroying a past, are always dangerous and in danger. . . . It is an attempt to give oneself, as it were, a past after the fact, out of which we may be descended in opposition to the one from which we are descended." [Nietzsche translation by Ian Johnston at: <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/history.htm>]

However, as Karl Korsch wrote, in "Marxism and Philosophy" (1923):

"[Marx wrote that] '[Humanity] always sets itself only such problems as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely it will always be found that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or are at least understood to be in the process of emergence' [Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859)]. This dictum is not affected by the fact that a problem which supersedes present relations may have been formulated in an anterior epoch." [Karl Korsch, "Marxism and Philosophy," *Marxism and Philosophy* (NLB: New York and London, 1970), 58]