

**Focusing the Left Mind:  
Climate Catastrophe and the neo-Marxian Resurrection  
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Last week I reported on the Ecosocialism conference at Barnard. Having made the last minute decision to attend the Historical Materialism conference at NYU I'm in a position to report about that too and particularly about the mirror image perspective which the two events provided on each other. That is, whereas last week delivered a compelling argument indicating where the left needs focus its energies, along with a few disappointments, at HM the ratio was reversed: there were some very valuable presentations to be sure, but there was also a conspicuous and even self-congratulatory exploration of dead ends of the sort which the left has pursued to its detriment in the past and which it will need to avoid in the future.

Most prominent of these was the 800 pound gorilla which was simultaneously the subject of the Barnard conference and which was somehow completely ignored at HM: among the 70-80 panels, only two mentioned the environment, none addressed ecosystem collapse or environmental politics while global warming went altogether unmentioned. This is at best myopic and at worst utterly insane. There is, it should be said, a superficially rational basis for ignoring the Ecosocialist challenge to Marxian orthodoxy, namely that it capitulates to the politics of catastrophism, as was argued by Eddy Yuen in Sasha Lilley's new book. Yuen's logic and agenda was effectively demolished by Ian Angus at the Climate and Capitalism blog in a piece which should be required reading for everyone on the left. Yuen participated in an HM panel I was unable to attend, where he presumably attempted to answer Angus's criticisms, though it is hard to imagine that he was able to do so at all convincingly.

In a usefully reductive, albeit extreme form, Yuen's position was represented at the Ecosocialist conference by a member of the Spartacist Youth League who, in trademark style, excoriated the participants for signing off on anti-development imposed on the global south and hair shirt austerity imposed on the north under the cover of climate change. His invective reached a crescendo with the stentorian imprecation that "We need more coal fired power plants!" By now, only the most deluded sectors of the left are willing to drink this particularly toxic pseudo Marxist brew. In this way, the impending climate catastrophe provided teflon for remarks which in other circumstances would have the potential to disrupt and divert the proceedings into Spartacist induced ultra-sectarian bickering.

Or to put it in terms of Dr. Johnson's famous quip about executions, the looming specter of environmental collapse "focussed the mind wonderfully" at the Ecosocialist conference providing the basis for refreshingly pragmatic, reality based discussions of left tactics and strategy. In contrast, the absence of this target at HM had what was in

retrospect a predictable consequence that familiar pathologies of the Marxist left made an unwelcome reappearance.

Symptomatic of this was a panel supposedly devoted to The Geopolitical Economy and the U.S. Working Class in which the first two panelists delivered talks which were impressively academic albeit in the worst sense: polished, elaborate and formidably technical presentations of results published in peer reviewed journals. In the second of these, Alan Freeman took great pride in his having definitively demonstrated, by means of various econometric techniques that the universal law of the falling rate of profit postulated in Marx's Capital is indeed the gospel truth. In so doing, he settled scores with a passel of other Marxist academics who, insufficiently steeped in the sacred texts, Freeman judged guilty of all manner of named and unnamed heresies.

Fortunately, these exercises in academic abstraction were immediately followed by an excellent talk by Lee Sustar who returned us to the real world of the globalized economy, the entirely non-abstract injuries inflicted by hyper-exploitation of workers in his native Chicago and also certain small but inspiring and successful struggles against it. Sustar provided the groundwork for Doug Henwood, in his capacity as respondent to deliver the coup de grace: "Why should anyone care" about the FRP? What possible impact could or should it have on workers attempts to make lives of minimal decency for themselves and their families? Furthermore, looking a few blocks south of NYU doesn't seem to provide much evidence that the capitalists are doing all that badly-with billion dollar salaries being pulled down by hedge fund managers, the usual eight figure bonuses being payed out to the usual stable of finance capitalist "blood suckers". Freeman, seemingly taken aback by Henwood sharp five word critique huffed and puffed, flogged his working class credentials, but never succeeded in answering why this dispute should matter to anyone outside of the conference rooms and faculty clubs where he spends most of his time.

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If HM was useful in highlighting some of the dysfunctionalities of old style Marxism, it was also valuable in offering up a variety of Marxist rebrandings, the most conspicuous being the quickly expanding Jacobin franchise. While there has been some question in my mind and that of others of their political orientation, the appearance of editor Bhaskar Sunkara, and his subsequent article in In These Times largely removed any doubts along these lines. Before I say something about this, it should be noted that Sunkara has by now achieved something approximating left rock star status, packing to the Waverly Hall classroom to the gills mostly with young admirers-and I mean really young-from teens to early 20s. This level of celebrity is, of course, an unmixed blessing-however it was achieved: the left needs recognizable media figures who can deliver the goods in a form which communicates effectively with the younger generation.

What was less encouraging was the political direction they are being oriented towards via Jacobin. The title of the journal would lead one to think that this would be a hard core, take no prisoners leftism, one which repudiated the endless capitulations and concession

of "pragmatic" liberalism, labor and its servile relationship with the Democratic Party. In fact, this was, to put it charitably, about as far from the guillotines as one can imagine.

Most notably, Sunkara, both in the talk and in the ITT piece self-identified as a member of the Democratic Socialists of America paying homage to the tradition of Michael Harrington and, although Sunkara doesn't mention him, his successor, Dissent editor Michael Walzer with whom Sunkara appeared at recent Young Democratic Socialist recruiting event. This affiliation was justified with the unsupported assertion that in "every major progressive advance from the New Deal to the 60s, socialists played a key role" though these victories became rarer "with the decline of the left." Sunkara's conflation of Debsian socialists with the DSA with "the left" reveals not only an unfortunate terminological sloppiness but an inability to make crucial distinctions. A similar myopia also applied to Sunkara's designation of Ezra Klein at HM as a "technocratic liberal" and then, in the next sentence, as a "neo-liberal".

By this point, it is no longer useful to paper over the differences between a traditional liberalism defined by the Humphrey Hawkins full employment act, guaranteed annual income, universal single payer health care all of which were seriously discussed within the Democratic Party, and the neo-liberal onslaught defined by free trade agreements, welfare "reform", and mass incarceration. The notion of the latter being an intermediate stop on the "road to socialism" seems not much more than a cruel joke; the incredulity of the audience at Sunkara's suggestion was understandably palpable.

Obviously, this is not the place to delve into the nature of the left's fraught relationship with the Democratic Party, what, if anything can be redeemed from the anti-communist, cruise missile left tradition personified by Harrington and now Walzer, and the related question of a strategic alliance with liberals who, as Sunkara correctly, albeit understatedly notes, "never had much patience for socialists". I am optimistic that a serious, ecumenical, factually informed and good faith engagement with these questions can potentially yield answers determining how we move forward together. It's worth mentioning that the exchange at HM at which Sunkara was paired with a young, energetic, self-described Trotskyist named Jonah Birch, was precisely that, notable for its productive high-mindedness.

In contrast, Sunkara's ITT piece was marred by the kinds of juvenile snottiness towards other leftists which has been a conspicuous feature of Jacobin since the outset and typified by the following passage: "Much as Star Trek nerds make their pilgrimage to Trekkie conventions, this cadre flocks to Left Forum in New York City every year for heated arguments over this or that piece of sectarian esoterica." I attended last years Left Forum, and the panels dealt with student debt, the Vermont Progressive Party, and the anti-foreclosure movement in Miami. Not a single mention of any sect, as I recall, and if the problem of obtaining toilet facilities when municipal government shuts off water to foreclosed properties is esoteric, then I suppose most of us would plead guilty. Unsurprisingly, the Occupy movement, a particular *bête noir* of Jacobin, is subjected to the usual litany of verticalist abuse: "Their master plan for world change:

Refuse to take power. Avoid politics. Occupy squats and 'liberate space.' Celebrate liberalism's collapse and hope something better will arise out of the rubble."

While Sunkara was not there to hear it, the rebuttal was provided by CUNY professor Penny Lewis in her appearance on an HM panel on Occupy the following day. Lewis, along with her CUNY colleagues Stephanie Luce and Ruth Milkman is the author of what is, as far as I know, the only formal study of OWS attempting to address questions which ideologues of the center left to the far right blithely assume to be uncontroversial- e.g. was OWS, as frequently claimed, almost universally white, middle class, educated and privileged. Relevant to the point at hand, Lewis has continued to follow OWS activists in their subsequent trajectory into anti-foreclosure activism, the strike debt campaign and, most notably, Occupy Sandy. Suffice to say that Sunkara's lazy caricature, while having some superficial basis, misses completely the high level of political consciousness and, most importantly self-consciousness of OWS organizers who have given substantial thought to all of the substantive issues which lie behind the now familiar verticalist critiques of OWS.

Hopefully, Lewis will soon publish the results of her recent interactions and these will have the effect to elevating the left discourse on these questions which Sunkara and others seem committed to dragging down. In the mean time, there is a newly published primary source which should be read very carefully by those who routinely trivialize OWS as if those involved were some combination of addled post-modernists and back to the land sixties delusionaries. This is, of course, David Graeber's superb Democracy Project which provides both important first hand accounts of the foundation on which OWS was constructed in the summer of 2011 and also eloquent and incisive discussions of the relationship between the anarchist principles of a core segment of OWS and how these were not peripheral but absolutely central to its success.

No doubt those engaging in the pretzel logic required to assimilate Lenin and Ezra Klein into a project for socialist renewal will dismiss these with a cheap one liner. But given that OWS, as Francis Fox Piven noted in her HM talk which followed Lewis, should be viewed as one expression within a broader pattern of left mobilizations which pre-existed OWS and will continue into the future, the left has a responsibility to understand the underlying impulse which created the wave. Graeber's book, which I am now finishing, is the best source for doing so-and for insuring that much of the left does not again find itself on the wrong side of history.