

Platypus Affiliated Society public forum: "Imperialism" (Chicago, January 30, 2007)

Opening remarks by Chris Cutrone (*Platypus*):

Hello, my name is Chris Cutrone, and I am representing the new group Platypus at this forum we have organized. Here at the School of the Art Institute, I teach Marxist critical social and cultural theory, especially through the works of Adorno and Benjamin. A theme that constantly recurs in my teaching is the purchase of critical theory for society and politics today.

Platypus, which takes its namesake from the unrecognizability and resistance to classification of the animal, began as a project for a new journal, a publishing vehicle dedicated to investigating problems and tasks inherited from the Old/1930s and New/1960s Left, and the post-political Left of the 1980s and 90s. As with our namesake, we feel that an authentic Left for today would almost go unrecognized according to the received categories of the Left, or, if recognized, only as a living fossil.

Towards the ends of reconstituting an authentic Left, beginning here in Chicago but now with groups spawning elsewhere in places like New York, since last year we have organized reading groups, and, now, public fora in order to discuss the potential for reformulating the Left towards social-emancipatory politics today.

Starting from these activities we will pursue research and journalism dedicated to the reconstitution of the Left. Platypus has a distinctly Marxian background, and we focus on the history and thought in the Marxist tradition, but in a critical and non-dogmatic manner, taking nothing for granted, departing from received wisdom of all kinds, and treating the history of the Left as a subject for our reappropriation freely in the present.

We recognize our present as what has come to be after the Left was destroyed and liquidated itself.

It is our contention -- our signal point of departure-- that the Left, as it has been historically understood in its best traditions, is dead, and needs to be reformulated, both theoretically and practically, at the most fundamental levels.

We in *Platypus* decided to organize this forum on the issue of imperialism and the Left, because we find that, given current events, it provides a good frame for investigating and interrogating the present crisis on the Left, both here and internationally.

The politics of anti-imperialism has been problematic for the Left for quite some time, but has taken on particularly grotesque forms in more recent history and especially in the present. The politics of anti-imperialism has lost whatever coherence it may have had for the Left in the past, and today betrays the Left's severe dearth of emancipatory social imagination.

For example, the present anti-war movement on the Left has been stuck, on the one hand, between the problems of fighting the last war, meaning applying inappropriately the template of the Vietnam War and the counterinsurgencies waged by the U.S. in Latin America, where the U.S. fought against movements for progressive social change, and, on the other hand, tailing after the crassest opportunism of the Democratic Party and the present defeatist moods about Iraq among the ruling elites, for whom the more Iraqi and American dead the better for pressuring and marginalizing the Bush administration -- however little the Democratic Party policy might or could be any different.

In this way, the Left has abdicated the possibility for a responsible politics for progressive social transformation and emancipation. Instead, a contrarian mood prevails in which U.S. policy and its relationship to the social and political realities with which it grapples, are opportunistically vilified.

It seems enough to say that the U.S. is an imperialist power, and to derive politics from this hypostatized characterization. In doing so, the Left seeks to avoid its own inconvenient history.

The most crass expression of this is the paranoiac hatred of Bush and the neocons, including entertaining the idea that the 9/11 attacks were orchestrated by the U.S. government!

We in *Platypus* recognize that Leftist politics today is characterized by such deep despair. No one on the Left seems to actually believe in the possibility for a transformed and emancipated

world. -- Whatever vision does exist is of a nature much too derived from wounded narcissism, and animated by the kind of loathing expressed by Susan Sontag in 1967 to the effect that the white race is the cancer of human history. As such the desire for change has become utterly reactionary. In its reactionary character, the Left has devolved into apologetics for the world as it is -- for existing social and political movements that have nothing in common with social emancipation; the Left has largely already become a new Right.

For example, an assumption about the Iraq invasion and occupation more or less explicitly articulated is that democracy cannot be imposed on Iraq -- that Iraq is clearly not ready for democracy. When this is not the explanation offered, then the Islamist insurgency is dressed up as expressing the self-determination of the peoples of Iraq. From Ward Churchill calling the office workers in the World Trade Center little Eichmanns of U.S. imperialism, to the civil rights attorney Lynne Stewart saying that Sheikh Abdel Rahman might be a legitimate freedom fighter, the Left seems to have become completely unmoored in its most basic orientation towards greater social freedom.

This disorientation evinced on the Left in recent years has long historical roots, going as far back as the 1930s, if not earlier, which I might get into later, but suffice it to say for now that the historical insights and examples from the Left have become an occulted legacy for the present, and the Left today has decomposed largely into competing apologias and rationalizations for a wretched social and political reality.

This reality is one that the Left has, in its long degeneration over the course of the last 30 or 40 years, not only failed to prevent, but has actually helped to bring about. The sooner this decomposition can be begun to be turned around, the better. We contend that the very future of humanity depends on this.

But such a turnaround requires, first of all, recognition of the problem, and recognition of its depth. That is what we in *Platypus* are dedicated to investigating, the history of the demise of the Left, so that a social emancipatory vision for the world can be regained, anew. As we say, the Left can only survive by overcoming itself.

Seriously interrogating the received categories of social politics such as imperialism is essential to reestablishing a coherent politics that has any hope of being able to change the world in emancipatory ways. The enemies of social progress have their visions and are pursuing them. Some are more reactionary than others. The only question is: what are we going to do, on the Left?