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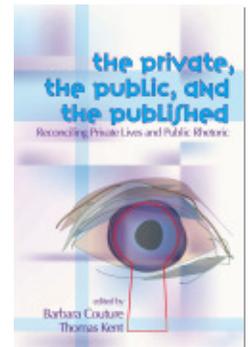
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KEEPING THE WORLD SAFE FOR CLASS STRUGGLE

Revolutionary Memory in a Post-Marxist Time

John Trimbur

In the last few months, I have gone to demonstrations against the “war on terrorism” and rallies on behalf of a living wage for Providence city workers. I attended a public hearing of the Workers Rights Board—a grassroots organization of trade unionists, clergy, and community activists—to investigate the conditions of undocumented workers in Rhode Island’s fish-packing industry. I’ve made phone calls, written letters and e-mails, signed petitions, and raised money for a workers’ housing project in South Africa. To be honest, I don’t consider myself much of an activist these days. Instead, I see my participation more as acts of solidarity with the struggles of working people worldwide, to stay connected to the tradition of revolutionary Marxism that has shaped my way of understanding the world for nearly forty years now.

I am grateful to the editors of this volume for providing the occasion to think about how personal affiliations influence public rhetorics and published work. To do this, I want to shift away from the autobiographical questions of why I—as an individual—take part in the public rhetorical performances of the demonstration, the petition, and the letter of appeal or how I’d like my published work to push my field of study, rhetoric and writing, to the left. A more interesting question, as I see it, is why would anyone remain a Marxist in an apparently post-Marxist time. The answer, I hope to show, is that Marxism, in the first instance, is a tradition to keep revolutionary memory alive.

Now, I must say at the outset that the account I present of Marxism as an endangered tradition of revolutionary memory runs counter to what you read in the newspapers. After all, if you believe the syndicated columnists, op-editorialists, and cultural commentators ever since Richard Bernstein coined the term *political correctness* and set off a moral

panic about leftist “thought police” putting free speech, white males, and the Western tradition under siege on college campuses, you might well think that American universities are dominated by Marxist ideologues. Through the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, writers at the *Weekly Standard* and *New Republic*, not to mention radio talk shows and fringe Web sites, refashioned the anticommunism of the cold war era to turn it on radical literary critics, feminists, and multiculturalists, finding an infiltration of alien and anti-American ideas in the academy at just the time the old Soviet threat seemed to be fading away.

I do not mean that this ideological struggle to discredit leftist ideas—and to deflate the pretensions of postmodern scholarship—is just a matter of the opinion makers needing an enemy, an other, a species of “un-American activities” to delineate a coherent, mainstream version of the American nation-state. There really was and continues to be something genuine at stake in the culture wars, as this country tries to understand itself as a pluricultural, polyglot, racially mixed, and complexly gendered society in the vortex of a globalized economy that is everywhere making and remaking the relations between working people and international capital. There is no question that a cultural Left did indeed form in American universities during the 1980s and 1990s, joining race, class, and gender to continental thought in its various poststructural manifestations. The resulting mix of cultural studies, feminism, critical race theory, queer theory, and postcolonial theory produced an invigorating effort to rethink teaching and learning and research and curriculum in the American academy, drawing generational and ideological lines in departments and fields of study that divided, often in painful and conflictual ways, traditional scholarship from the new thing and called into question the very meaning and nature of intellectual work. Writing and rhetoric were no exceptions, and I doubt that you will be surprised I consider all of this a good, even remarkable, development, an altogether fitting response to a national culture dominated by the free marketeering, deregulating ethos of the Reagan/Bush/Clinton administrations, the now burst bubble of the “new prosperity,” and the social irresponsibility of “personal choice” (for the consuming classes) and “personal responsibility” (for the poor). Nonetheless, I must hasten to add that what the cultural Left did *not* do, despite all the charges of Marxist hegemony on campus, was to prepare a fertile ground for the revolutionary Marxism of the Old Left.

This is not to say that the academic cultural Left did not draw on Marxism for theoretical insights to maintain a properly cultural materialist attitude and approach. Rather, the cultural Left appropriated Marxism from a *post-Marxist* perspective, a sensibility that is not anti-communist in its allegiances but is not exactly devoted to class struggle or the historical mission of the proletariat, either. To my mind, two decisive events shaped the post-Marxist sensibility of the academic cultural Left: the emergence of postmodernism as a pervasive structure of feeling in the 1980s and 1990s and the fall of the Stalinized worker states in 1989. I want to look at each in turn to explain what I see as the present position of revolutionary Marxism in contemporary intellectual life.

As everyone knows by this point, the characteristic sensibility ascribed to postmodernism—its catchword slogan—can be found in Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives.” This incredulity, it is crucial to note, does not amount so much to an outright repudiation or disproof of modernist metanarratives, such as the Marxist tale of the emancipation of the working subject, though it is sometimes, mistakenly in my view, taken this way. Instead, Lyotard’s postmodern incredulity is a distancing mechanism that props up modernism by making us “post” to it. This sensibility, for example, is not at all like *The God That Failed* days of the 1950s and McCarthyite anticommunist witch hunts, when writers and intellectuals who had been party members or fellow travelers denounced Marxism through public confessions and reintegrated into Eisenhower’s America. As a rule, postmodernism does not produce renegades such as the notorious provocateur David Horowitz, who has turned infamously from his Old Left background and the New Left activism of *Ramparts* magazine, the antiwar movement, and support for the Black Panthers into a red-baiting gadfly. On the contrary, postmodernism offers an ironic detachment that puts the keywords of Marxism in quotes, unavoidable perhaps for the analysis of contemporary culture but never quite spoken with a straight face.

The second decisive event, the fall of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European workers’ states in 1989, intertwines with the postmodern sensibility to discredit further the historical legacy of revolutionary Marxism. At face value, it seems hard to lament the fall of the Stalinized workers’ states, with their secret police, gulags, psychiatric prisons, and totalitarian regimes. Still, it should be pointed out how the results of 1989 have affected working people and the oppressed not only

in Russia and Eastern Europe but worldwide. What occurred was not simply the collapse of a parasitic bureaucracy but a victory for capital internationally. Russian and Eastern European workers are paying dearly for the sins of Stalin and his successors. Instead of ushering in a new era of democracy and freedom, the fall of the Iron Curtain has made available to the world market the socialized property that Stalin and his henchmen maintained at least in a degenerated form, thereby instituting a kind of anarcho-capitalism that is breathtaking in its corruption and venality. Moreover, the fall of Soviet Union and its sphere of influence removed a critical buffer between the third world and the capitalist metropolis, clearing the way for the imperialist expansion of NAFTA, GATT, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. The possibility of neutrality, national autonomy, and indigenous development once imagined in Nehru's India, Nasser's Arab socialism, Nyerere's Tanzania, or postapartheid South Africa has been profoundly constricted. To put it bluntly, the bosses are winning the class struggle worldwide.

Combined with the Reagan/Bush offensive against labor, the equation of the stock market's performance and national well-being during the Clinton years, the conservatism of the American trade union movement, and the absence of a workers' party in the United States, post-modernism and the fall of the Soviet Union can be seen as an actual and psychological Thermidor, a waning of revolutionary energies and the hope for social transformation. In this context, Marxism does not seem revolutionary or dangerous but corny and sentimental, left over from a prior time with little relevance to the present. Unlike the 1930s, when writers, intellectuals, and workers turned to Marxism as a guide to theory and practice—or even the early 1970s, when a fraction of antiwar New Leftists regrouped into Old Left tendencies, whether the Communist Party or Trotskyist and Maoist sects—Marxism appears not so much to have been overturned as to have withered away.

So why remain a Marxist in this post-Marxist world? As I mentioned earlier, the continuing pertinence of Marxism to our current situation can be described best in terms of revolutionary memory, the desire to keep alive the Marxist romance of history where socialism looms as not just the overthrow but the culmination of capitalist development, the design of a social future dedicated to the elimination of scarcity and the full participation of all in determining our common life. As I see it,

revolutionary memory constitutes the psychological “interior” of revolutionary Marxism, where it figures as a personal and affective investment in the long-deferred dream of an international workers’ commonwealth. For Marxists, theory amounts to the codification of past struggles, and revolutionary memory in turn embodies theory at the level of lived experience. There is a certain nostalgia, to be sure, that inflects revolutionary memory, not a wistful longing for a lost past but a personal affiliation with past struggles that seeks to realize their meanings and potentialities. To put it in rhetorical terms, revolutionary memory is a storehouse of knowledge—the lessons of the past that link memory, the fourth canon of rhetoric, to invention of a better future.

By convention, Marxism is often divided into its humanist and scientific wings, with the early Marx of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and *The German Ideology* counterposed to the late Marx of *Capital*. In certain respects, of course, this is a useful distinction to map the terrain of Marxist thought, but it misses nonetheless the actual “interior” of revolutionary Marxism I am trying to describe. It may be easy enough to see how the humanist side of Marxism, in the work, say, of E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, or Richard Ohmann, extends Marx’s vision of eliminating alienation, exploitation, and oppression and of replacing the individualist fragmentation and self-interest of bourgeois society with what Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* calls an “association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (53). But even the “scientific” designation must be seen as part of the pathos of Marxism, where the term *scientific* refers to neither the chilling power of a Stalinist bureaucrat nor the supposed disinterestedness of the bourgeois technocrat but instead to a process of immersing oneself, experimentally, in a history of struggle. The “science” of revolutionary memory begins, in my account, not with the desire to manage or observe but with the desire to make history, as Marx says, in conditions not of our own making. This kind of optimistic experimentalism is all the more valuable today when history appears, in fact, to be going in the wrong direction.

Let me put it a different way. Revolutionary memory is a Januslike, backward- and forward-looking maneuver that links lives to lives in the history of actual struggle. Revolutionary memory universalizes the particular moment when one does not cross a picket line, when one observes a boycott or goes to a demonstration by linking that moment

to past picket lines, boycotts, and demonstrations. It makes one accountable to the struggles and sacrifices of the past—the Paris Commune in 1870, the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the Spanish Civil War, the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the Chilean Unidad Popular in the early 1970s, and the antiapartheid movement in South Africa. Revolutionary memory provides access to a tradition of heroes and martyrs, gains and betrayals, in an unfolding and now endangered narrative of emancipation.

This “interior” of Marxism, I should be quick to note, has its own historical circumstances. It has long been an axiom among liberal historians and social scientists that the appeal of Marxism in the United States is in large part due to the fact that it offers deracinated intellectuals, displaced immigrant workers, and others caught up in the turmoil of social change a way to deal with the demands and uncertainties of modernity. In this view, Marxism provided a means of acculturation for immigrants to the United States in the first half of the twentieth century to adjust to the new world of the capitalist metropolis, in the ethnic class cultures of industrial cities. Similarly, the “class treason” of Marxist intellectuals during, say, the Great Depression is often pictured as an alternative path of upward mobility, when other outlets were blocked for economic reasons. At one time, when I was studying American history as an undergraduate and graduate student, I thought this liberal view of Marxism’s appeal was the worst kind of psychological reductionism, which made its revolutionary tradition of theory and practice into a compensatory gesture. But today, I must say, there is an important grain of truth here, though one that needs to be reformulated.

My sense is that, indeed, the “interior” of Marxism—the felt sense of revolutionary memory I’m trying to delineate here—*does* provide intellectuals, workers, and others with a means of dealing with the limits and pressures of modernity. But I want to highlight the positive side instead of the negative connotations. In other words, given the flux, fragmentation, and loss of traditional beliefs in the modern era (the shift from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* in the literature of the social sciences), I believe Marxism offers in the first instance not so much a compensatory gesture as a constructive reidentification. The uprootings of modernity, in which, as Marx says, “everything that is solid melts into air,” brought with it the conditions to imagine a larger human community—no longer the family, neighborhood, village, or even nation-state but the bonds of working people worldwide.

Revolutionary memory is inseparable from revolutionary internationalism, the belief that workers have no fatherland and only their chains to lose. This is the profound (and poignant) side of “scientific” Marxism, that points out how unfettered capital creates simultaneously a world market and an international proletariat whose historical mission is to transcend national divisions and to remake the world. To my mind, revolutionary memory depends on this commitment to the international solidarity of working people. The precedents are clear enough: the revolutionary internationalism of Lenin and Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, and Eugene Debs during World War I, which held to the traditional Marxist view that war among the capitalist nation-states was no more than a matter of dividing the world market and political spheres of influence. The revolutionary internationalists, unlike their former comrades in the Second International who supported the war aims of their respective nations, urged intellectuals and workers to see they had no stake in the conflict among ruling classes.

At a time when the United States has embarked on a “war against terrorism” whose aims and boundaries are difficult to determine, it is helpful to recall this principled opposition. Don’t get me wrong. It is hard to see the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center as even a deformed response of the oppressed and exploited to American hegemony. Certainly, the conditions of the attack have been prepared by such U.S. policy as the Gulf War, the blockade and bombing of Iraq, and the tacit and explicit support of Israel’s refusal to grant Palestinians self-determination. But, to me, the upshot is simply “commit a crime, do time.” I’d even be willing to accept extraordinary police measures to bring the terrorists to trial—in an international court and not Bush’s kangaroo military tribunals. But the bottom line, as I see it, is that working people have no interest in this war.

This volume of essays, of course, is not the place for my personal views of current events; it is about how personal affiliations and public rhetorics, in my case what I describe as revolutionary memory, influence published work. What remains to be seen—and what I take up in the next section—is how revolutionary memory influences the questions I think are important in my field of study, rhetoric and writing.

First of all, the revolutionary memory I describe suggests a particular orientation toward postmodernism in the realm of cultural and rhetorical theory. As anyone who reads the journals in rhetoric and writing

knows, postmodernism has turned into an honorific term, a warrant to distance intellectual work from the supposed illusions of modernism, whether Enlightenment rationality, the autonomous subject, or the historical mission of the proletariat. If anything, the label “modernist” has become a convenient and now thoroughly conventionalized rhetorical gesture to critique, discredit, and dismiss. In my view, however, postmodernism does not offer the theoretical leverage it claims. Instead, postmodernism must be seen as an intellectual, artistic, and cultural trend *within* modernity, not the articulation of a new historical epoch but a sign of the persistence of late capitalism.

From this vantage point, there is less than meets the eye to postmodernism. Its postiality, when linked to such notions as globalization, postcapitalism, postindustrialism, post-Fordism, and postnationalism, amounts to a type of presentism that mistakes conjunctural developments (such as the unprecedented incorporation of information into the means of production, the shift from manufacturing to service economies in the metropolis by outsourcing production to the third world, niche marketing, and flexible specialization) for deeper, underlying changes in the relations between capital and labor. For Marxists, postmodernism’s characterizations of the present moment are not only insufficient historical accounts but implicitly an accommodation to the current lull in the class struggle internationally. Revolutionary memory enables the view that it has not been changes in the “objective conditions” of capitalism that have blocked the path to socialism so much as it has been the defeats of the Left (in France in 1968, in Chile in 1974) and the consequences of Stalinism in 1989 that have bottled up revolutionary energies.

The now common claim that globalization has dramatically changed economic relations through the transnationalization of capital, rendering national markets and economies irrelevant and creating in their place an interconnected world economic system of immediate communication and exchange, ascribes to late capitalism a capacity it simply does not possess. As Paul Smith says, globalization embodies a kind of magical thinking: of a “fully global space replete with an ecstatic buzz of cyber communication,” an “instantaneous mobility of people, goods, and services,” and a “global market place hooked up by immaterial money that flashes around the globe many times a minute”—a world where time and space have been overcome and the “necessary navigational

and communicational means so fully developed and supremely achieved that they can eclipse even reality itself” (13).

Behind such millennial dreams of a new postcapitalist, posthuman order, the very notion of globalization remains what Samir Amin calls a “reactionary utopia,” a neoliberal fantasy that the world market can overcome the contradictions inherent in capitalist production. For all the breathlessness in theories of postality, what appears to be a novel rupture with the past is, in fact, capitalism’s familiar and relentless urge to maximize profits by revolutionizing the means of production. Despite the tendency toward universalization inherent in capitalist development, as Amin puts it:

Capitalist globalization remains truncated, generating, reproducing and deepening global polarization step by step. The historical limit of capitalism is found exactly here: the polarized world that it creates is and will become more and more inhuman and explosive. (75)

Globalization does indeed seek to dismantle national borders for the free circulation of capital—but not of human beings or the products of their labor. The Marxist contradiction between use value and exchange value remains a key site of struggle, as is evident, for example, in the pharmaceutical industry’s attempt to maintain patent rights and intellectual property claims against AIDS-stricken third world countries’ demand for affordable generic drugs to alleviate human suffering. In this regard, the revolutionary memory of international solidarity—the imaginary community of working people worldwide—can remind us that the choice is still, as Trotsky put it in the shadow of fascism and World War II, “socialism or barbarism.”

The fascination with postmodernism in rhetoric and writing studies, I must say, is both understandable and alarming. It is understandable because postmodernism, as an intellectual and artistic trend within modernism, is interesting in its own right. Postmodern notions of hybridity, border crossings, and nomadic subjectivities, for example, provide important correctives to orthodox Marxism by showing how complicated racialized and gendered identities figure in the dynamics of class formation and reformation. Along similar lines, only the sternest Stalinist commissars of culture would deny the pleasures of such postmodern artists and architects as Cindy Sherman and Frank Gehry. In this regard, I agree with Trotsky in *Literature and Revolution* that the

experimentalism of the artistic avant-garde, and not a narrow socialist realism, must be encouraged and appreciated.

Still, as you have probably detected, I want to hold such postmodernism at arm's length—and to subject it to the scan of revolutionary memory. There are two problems I find insurmountable. First, as I've already suggested, postmodernists posit a break with the past that makes revolutionary memory irrelevant. Its aggressive presentism wants to style history as rupture and discontinuity. Second, this desire to see the present as novel and unprecedented, instead of as the product of a knowable past, reveals the interests of a particular fraction of the professional managerial class—the consultants, artistic directors, information designers, editors and publishers, media specialists, human relations staff, public relations experts, and trend watchers, whose perspective is cosmopolitan, politically liberal, consumerist, gentrifying, and relentlessly hip. These are the sign and symbol managers in the culture industry and the information economy, professional semioticians whose cultural capital resides in their ability to interpret and explain. In certain respects, the predispositions of this postmodern fraction of the professional managerial class have insinuated themselves into curriculum design and textbooks for writing instruction, especially the cultural studies approach to composition, with its emphasis on the student as a knowing consumer, viewer, and spectator, and community service learning, with its emphasis on doing good work for the less fortunate.

Revolutionary memory calls for something different than informed and critical consumerism or community service learning. Both are important but inadequate alone. The critique of consumerism, for example, threatens to lead not to a reevaluation of production for profit instead of for human needs but to a hipper advertising message, what Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson call the production of sign values by addressing alienated and media-savvy spectators. Along similar lines, community service learning may well reinforce an old story of middle-class benefactors providing for the needy instead of leading to a critical and active understanding of class formation in contemporary America. I do not mean to suggest that either outcome will inevitably follow from these pedagogical and curricular practices. My point is that without the international solidarity of revolutionary memory, both cultural studies and community service learning remain at risk of accommodating critique and service to the postmodern middle classes' bid for cultural authority.

What is to be done? That is the question Lenin posed when the revolutionary forces in czarist Russia split into Bolshevik and Menshevik camps. I do not pretend I can answer this question in any kind of satisfactory way, given our present circumstances in contemporary America. But Lenin's insistence on intellectual elucidation and ideological clarification can be useful here. Within the confines of my field of study, I want to close by raising the issue of access to higher education and advanced literacy.

Rhetoric and writing studies have been shaped in many respects by the long-standing allegiance of writing instructors, theorists, and program administrators to democratic education, in particular to the aspirations of basic writers and to affirmative action and open admissions programs. Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, the work of David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell, Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, and Tom Fox's *Defending Access* all affirm the educability of ordinary people and attack the class privilege of higher education. These works have played a central role in defining the identity and social affiliations of the field. Still, as the title of Fox's book indicates, we find ourselves currently fighting a defensive battle against a conservative backlash that has restricted access in the name of "standards." In my view, this is a necessary struggle, but it can also be one that keeps us in a holding pattern, trying to preserve the limited gains of the past, and it wears people down. For this reason, I believe there is an urgent need to articulate a program to extend literacy and the access to higher learning.

There are various ways to do this. At elite colleges and universities, the demands to institute need-blind policies and end legacy admissions can be raised to point out the class bias in the supposedly meritocratic premises of "selectivity." In a broader sense, given the unaffordability of private college for poor, working-class, and many middle-class families and the tracking system in higher education that distributes resources and life chances unequally to community colleges, state colleges, liberal arts colleges, and research universities, I think we should demand the right to a college education for all who wish it by democratizing higher education "through open admissions to *all* colleges and universities, free tuition, and a livable student stipend" (Trimbur, "Literacy" 294).

At least, as you can see from this citation, that is what I wrote over ten years ago, and I hold to its relevance today. The idea of overturning the prevailing class system of higher education, of course, is not a popular

one, but to my mind, the issue is a matter of socializing education by removing it from the “free market,” in which colleges and students compete with each other, and making it a thoroughly public and democratic institution. Such a demand, moreover, provides a way to point out how existing social arrangements in capitalist America cannot realize the most basic democratic task of educating all its inhabitants—native-born, documented, and undocumented—according to their talents and needs. Teaching in community colleges and adult literacy programs for recent immigrants, I have been struck forcefully over and over again by how class society wastes human potential and popular intelligence through its divisions of mental and manual labor, experts and laypeople, official and vernacular literacies. Class society not only erects barriers to the development of all its members, it also amounts to a system of subsidizing the children of the professional and upper classes. The issue, I am trying to persuade you, is not simply that this is unfair but that it also—and crucially—means we cannot solve the problems of poverty, exploitation, oppression, and environmental degradation that face us because we cannot activate the human ingenuity required. I have no doubt that the needed ingenuity is there and that it can be tapped. But to do so, I believe, would involve thinking beyond national borders, and that is why the revolutionary memory of international solidarity—the vision of how working people worldwide can remake society—gives me some measure of hope in an otherwise dark time.