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Front Cover: Yuichi Ikehata, "Fragmented beauty". Ikehata's works incorporate pieces of daily life to challenge "distinction between truth and reality" through deconstructed sculptures.

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The Rebel's Time Remembering Vidrohi's Poetry of Revolution

Bhargav Rani

"The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future."

This oft-quoted sentence from Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, was the subject of much debate in a recent seminar on "Revolution" at Columbia University, whose problematics formed the basis of the first editorial of the *Advocate* this semester. The central point of contention between two of the guest speakers, Gayatri Spivak and Étienne Balibar, was over the specific meaning of "poetry" in Marx's text. While Balibar interprets Marx's choice of word as a metaphor for political imagination, for Spivak, "poetry" here signifies just that – *poiesis*, "to make," a creative production in the form of theatre, songs, dance, literature, art. Spivak argues that Marx is here shifting from a discussion on the "form" of revolutions to the actual "content" of revolutions, and to her, "poetry" was what Marx acutely recognized as the privileged mode of infusing the concept of revolution with radical content.

The present issue of the *Advocate* stems from this tension between poetry and political imagination in the concept of revolution and its content, and explores its resonances in artistic, cultural and literary productions. This month's features include an interview with members of the Freedom Theatre, a Palestinian theatre company that recently debuted their

production, *The Seige*, in New York; the first of a two-part investigation of the oeuvre of the radical leftist documentary filmmaker Peter Watkins; and an essay on the revolutionary underpinnings in George Orwell's writings. In the way of a prologue, this editorial explores the messianic quality that infused the words of the revolutionary poet, Vidrohi. What this issue offers is a particular "constellation" of creative productions in history drawn from the fields of theatre, film, literature and poetry, that we hope our readers will "make" meaning of by mediating it with the material conditions of their own lives, conditions that inform our understanding of art and revolution.

To understand the *poiesis* of Vidrohi's words, we must first understand the space that produced him – Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. To be a student at JNU is, in the first instance, to be a student of history: to apprehend history not in its bowdlerized continuity and as it manifests in the annals of the dominant, but in the disarticulating discontinuities experienced by the dominated. Within the thresholds of the university's sprawling campus, history breaks its imposed silences and the ghosts of the dead speak through the living. In the face of erasure, they are made visible on the walls plastered with political graffiti and they are given a voice in the slogans of "*Inquilab Zindabad!*" ("Long Live the Revolution!") that reverberate like a refrain. A morn-

ing walk to class is itself a lesson in history imparted not just by Marx and Lenin, Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh, Irom Sharmila and Che Guevara, but also by the indentured farmer and the dispossessed peasant gazing down from the walls of the university buildings. And an evening cup of *chai* at the cafeteria is accompanied by cultural protests, solidarity marches and demonstrations, and political-cultural groups commemorating revolutionary poets and writers, performing street plays, or singing songs of resistance. Subjugated histories are resurrected, forgotten heroes remembered, and the promise of revolution is kept alive in these songs.

If we are to go by Agamben's thesis that "[e]very conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it," it is unsurprising that this emancipation of history, albeit in the utopian enclave that is JNU, fosters and conditions a radically different experience of time. The temporality of its student life chimes in tantalizing proximity to the hour of revolution. Its romance is a romance of rebellion and resistance. The rhythms of its everyday are syncopated by dreams and political aspirations that transcend the everyday. At the core of this time capsule—its heart, where its beats are most palpable—is Ganga *dhaba*, one of the univer-

sity canteens. In the liminal shade of the evening light, students sit perched on crude stone blocks and dissect history over *chai* and *samosas*. The usual banter and gossip of student life easily segue into serious interrogations of history, until the pleasant evening air is pregnant with the weight of competing philosophies. Althusser is invoked in the same breath as Ambedkar, just as debates on local and national politics seamlessly lead into Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry. In a space conditioned by free debate and intellectual exchange, a new temporality is produced. But these philosophical excursions are but cadences of the rhythm kept by the timekeeper, Vidrohi. From a dark corner of Ganga *dhabha*, seated under the shade of a massive tree, this frail, disheveled man in ragged clothes, a vagabond poet, spewed a dangerous barrage of words at the world. At those moments that they were not a relentless string of vile expletives, Vidrohi's verse put history on trial.

Ramashankar Yadav, popularly known as "Vidrohi," literally "the rebel," was once a student of JNU. Born in 1957 in the small town of Sultanpur in Uttar Pradesh, the Hindi-heartland of the country, he enrolled in the university in the early eighties to pursue a Ph.D. in Hindi. He was soon expelled for his participation in a mass student movement against the administration and his involvement

in left politics. When the administration asked him never to set foot on campus again, Vidrohi's rebellion was absolute: he simply never left JNU. He made the campus his home for over thirty years, breathing poetry into the students' movement till his death. Present at every protest, march and demonstration, he kindled the historical consciousness of the students through the revolutionary force of his poetry. He spoke of class struggles and emancipation of women, attacked capitalism and religion, and in his poems, conflated histories of oppressions and uprisings that spanned an astounding temporal breadth. Vidrohi was a *lokshahir*, a "people's poet," in the true sense.

For Agamben, to be "contemporary" is not a social given of the present, but is a distinctive modality of apperception and existence. It is a "singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it." To be a contemporary is, thus, to apprehend time "through a disjunction and an anachronism." Vidrohi was, in that sense, Agamben's "contemporary." His contemporariness lived in his dogged resistance against the temporal regimes of the neoliberal everyday, regimes governed by the logic of productivity and deployed in the service of capital. It was a corporeal distillation of the temporality of resistance that the university produces



Credit: Tanushree Bhasin

in its most radical and austere manifestation. Vidrohi, in Agamben's words, firmly held "his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light but rather its darkness." The astronomical metaphor of darkness in Agamben finds its material, political realization in Vidrohi, whose poems grasp at that "light that strives to reach us but cannot." The darkness is, in essence, a darkness of history,

its violent erasures and oppressive silences, and Vidrohi strives to ignite an insurrection through a radical archeology of the past.

One of Vidrohi's most famous poems, "The Burnt Corpse of a Woman," is an intense abbreviation of the entire history of violence and exploitation into a monadic condensation of revolutionary potential. The question that haunts the poet is this:

I think about it,
Again and again I think about it,
That why is it that on the stepping stone of every ancient civilization,
One finds the burnt corpse of a woman,
And the scattered bones of human beings.

In a gallant effort at reclaiming the archaic, the origin, in order

to rediscover the present, Vidrohi begins his poem by situating this image of the "burnt corpse of a woman" and the "scattered bones of human beings" in one of the oldest urban civilizations of the world, Mohenjo-Daro of the Indus valley. Charting a trans-historical trajectory of this image across geographies and temporalities, he constructs history as a spatio-temporal "constellation,"

to invoke Benjamin, where this historical juncture is posited in relationship with every other instant of institutionalized violence in history even as it is mediated by the present. The burnt corpse of the woman on the last step by the canal in Mohenjo-Daro is the same one you will find in "Babylonia" and the scattered bones of humans is what you will discover in "Mesopotamia" as well, Vidrohi

says. And it is the same story over again in the "jungles of Savannah," in the "mountains of Scythia," and the "plains of Bengal." Those scattered bones could just as easily have been of "Roman slaves" as of "weavers from Bengal," they could be of "Vietnamese," "Palestinians," or of "Iraqi children." Vidrohi avows that the "fire of hatred" that has engulfed lands from "Asia" to "Africa" can-



Credit: Tanushree Bhasin

not be doused because this fire is the fire from all the burnt corpses of women in history, it is the fire from all the scattered bones of human beings in history.

For Agamben, messianic time, “the time that time takes to come to an end,” is “contemporariness par excellence.” He notes that, “insofar as messianic time aims toward the fulfillment of time... it effectuates a recapitulation, a kind of summation of all things, in heaven and on earth—of all that has transpired from creation to the messianic “now,” meaning of the past as a whole.” This echoes Benjamin’s assertion that “only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments.” The temporal condition of “redemption” for Benjamin is a “now-time, which, as a model of messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation.” Thus, for both philosophers, any radical political project of the emancipation of the present from the oppressive temporal regimes of capitalism, of human “progress” premised on a “homogenous, empty time,” must entail not paralyzed anticipation of a promised future but rather active excavation of the past; to apprehend the past in a “messianic arrest of happening,” and to posit history not as a sequential chain of causality but as a “constellation saturated with tensions.”

Vidrohi engages in precisely such an archeology of the past when he constructs a constella-

tion that concatenates histories of oppression spanning five thousand years of human civilization in a monadic abbreviation distilled into the image of the burnt corpse of a woman. Within the temporal parenthesis of his poem, its *chronos*, he brings into being a temporality of messianic force, a *kairos*, as a severe indictment of history:

An empire is an empire,
Be it the Roman empire, the
British empire,
Or the modern American empire.
Whose only task is to ensure
that,
On mountains, on plateaus, on
river banks,
By the oceans, in the fields,
It scatters the bones of human
beings.
Which promises to write his-
tory in three sentences –
That we have filled the land
with mischief
That we have engulfed the land
in flames
That we have scattered the
land with the bones of human
beings.

It is against this grain of history, this cursory summation of violence in “three sentences,” that Vidrohi deploys his dynamic constellation. While Benjamin and Agamben would have no doubt recognized the messianic force of Vidrohi’s poetry, Vidrohi himself would have probably scoffed at such a characterization. As a staunch atheist, the theological

underpinnings of Benjamin’s and Agamben’s philosophies wouldn’t have settled well with him. While this theological scaffolding does not seem to deter their crystallization into secular political philosophies of radical potential, for Vidrohi, a steadfast materialist, religion itself is an institution whose complicity in the perpetuation of the empire must be critiqued. In a Nietzschean assertion, he proclaims god to be dead, and that “No one knows where God has been buried.” In another poetic interlude featured in Nitin Pamnani’s documentary film on him, Vidrohi recites, “He is no god/ Nor is He the Son of God/ It is a question of Mankind [sic], only Man will stand up/ I don’t believe in the coming of the Messiah anyway/ I just don’t believe that there can be anyone greater than me.” However, it would be inadequate to understand this interlude as simply a rejection of any possibility of emancipation through religion. Rather, in the demand for historical agency implicit in his call for “Man” to “stand up” in a rejection of the “coming of the Messiah,” Vidrohi is also critiquing eschatological conceptions of futurity and time. His rejection of God and his fiercely politicized atheism stem from a persistent disaffection with the political apathy that eschatological doctrines nourish in the present. In this respect, Vidrohi lands in the same political and philosophical plane as Benjamin and Agamben.

Moreover, insofar as religion functions as ideology in its efforts to pass off mythology as history, it allows Vidrohi to implicate mythology as well in his indictment of the histories of the dominant. The monadic constellation that he arrests in his poem, “The Burnt Corpse of a Woman,” not only interlinks histories of oppression from Mohenjo-Daro to Babylonia, from ancient Rome to modern America, but also establishes a network of linkages with my-

thologies that sanction violence against the marginalized. With this in mind, Vidrohi says that the first instance of femicide was perpetrated by a son at the behest of his father. He locates the archaic “origin” of the burnt corpse of the woman, although manifesting as far back in time as the Indus valley civilization, not in history but in the mythological tale of Parshuram’s matricide at the urging of his father, Jamadagni.

The tale goes that Renuka is

the devoted wife of the sage, Jamadagni. She fetches water from the river every day in an unbaked clay pot that holds itself together only by the strength of her chaste devotion to Jamadagni. One day, Renuka is consumed by a fleeting moment of desire for a group of heavenly beings flying above her. The spell of her chaste devotion breaks and the clay pot dissolves away in the river. When she returns home, Jamadagni deduces all that has happened through his



Credit: Tanushree Bhasin

spiritual powers, and in a rage, commands his sons to kill their mother. Four of his sons, on refusing to undertake the heinous task, are turned to stone by Jamadagni. His youngest son, Parashurama, the “ever-obedient and righteous,” immediately severs his mother’s head with an axe. Jamadagni is pleased with his son and grants him two boons. Parashurama then demands that his mother be brought back to life and his brothers be turned back to flesh from stone. While the dominant interpretation of this tale is the moral lesson of a son’s duty, *dharma*, towards his father, Vidrohi, in a subversive vein, reads into it the very origins of patriarchy and declares, “This is how the son became the father’s and patriarchy came into being.” This insinuation of mythology at the origin of patriarchy in his monadic constellation is revolutionary to the extent that it not only abbreviates disparate histories and temporalities but also condenses conflicting universes and epistemologies.

Messianic time is not a time that exists outside of chronological time but is rather an integral part of it, a particular disambiguation of it. That is, as Agamben notes, “*Kairos*...does not have another time at its disposal; in other words, what we take hold of when we seize *kairos* is not another time, but a contracted and abridged *chronos*.” Agamben clarifies the tension between *kairos* and the eschatology of *chronos* implicit in poetry when he asserts that a poem is “an organism or temporal machine that, from the very start, strains toward its end. A kind of eschatology occurs within the poem itself. But for the more or less brief time that the poem lasts, it has a specific and unmistakable temporality, it has its own *time*.”

While Vidrohi invokes the messianic in his poetry, its rootedness in *chronos* is brought into sharp focus through his mode of delivery. Vidrohi never wrote his poems down. He always recited them from memory, as a relentless fusillade of rapidly succeeding words that strained towards their end with urgency. Apart from one collection of poems, *Nayi Kheti* (New Fields), published late in his life, his poems disappeared

without a trace in the moment of their completion, to be apprehended by only those present in the moment of their articulation. In this sense, Vidrohi, in the tradition of the *lokshahir*, takes poetry back to its performative roots, and the temporality that he produces through it must be understood in relation to the temporality that performance brings into being. The image of the past that he grasps through his poetry literally stands suspended in a “moment of danger.” This danger of their performative disappearance in the apprehension of their messianic force is the danger of erasure, where the histories of oppression abbreviated as a revolutionary monad threaten to disappear in the very ephemerality of the words that realize them in the now.

Finally, the messianic quality of Vidrohi’s poetry that marks him as a contemporary runs the risk of fetishization if appraised in isolation from its material conditions of production. Agamben touches only cursorily on the “courage” that contemporariness demands of the individual, and does not quite flesh out the stakes involved in being contemporary. Vidrohi’s rebellion against the administration’s move is not an easy one to explain. He lived on for thirty years in JNU where he had no room of his own. He slept under the open skies on most nights and retreated to the students’ union office on particularly cold ones. He mostly relied on the kindness of the student community for his minimal needs. Students who knew him, respected him, and cared for him bought him clothes

and food that the proud Vidrohi nonchalantly accepted. In 2001, alumni of the university appealed to the various university canteens to provide free food for their beloved poet. Vidrohi had, with great discipline, chalked out a life for himself outside capital. Agamben notes with astute precision that those contemporaries who locate themselves in time through disjunction and anachronism are, in a sense, rendered “irrelevant” to their time. Vidrohi acutely felt this burden of irrelevance. As he remarks in the film, “This is a bastard society. It neither rewards nor punishes the poet...I have made them eat the dust beneath their feet through my poetry. But these bastards are such that they simply ignore, they neither reward nor punish.” This is perhaps the real danger of contemporariness. It relegates all that exists outside the limits of capital into oblivion.

Vidrohi died on 8 December 2015, doing precisely what he did his entire life – protesting with his fellow comrades against the state’s repressive attacks on its people. Looking back at the many struggles, and the many defeats, that the students of JNU have endured to defend against the relentless evisceration of the idea of the university by the neoliberal, militant nationalist regime over the past two years, one can’t help but feel that Vidrohi’s death was a premonition of the world to come. Vidrohi was not just a product of the university. He *produced* the university. Vidrohi’s poetry was *poiesis*, in its original sense. His words were a radical act of creation that produced the temporality of resistance and liberation that defined JNU for so many years. His death thus was the death of an idea of the university. To summon the ghost of Vidrohi in the darkness of our times is to stoke the “light that strives to reach us but cannot.” To invite our readers to think on him from the context of our lives here in New York is to incite our own collective desire for the *poiesis* of a radically new university; it is a call for our own poetry of the future.



Credit: Tanushree Bhasin

The Revolution Should not be Televised:

The Oeuvre of Peter Watkins

Curtis Russell

Part I: “Don’t Forget to Look in the Camera”

Peter Watkins has always had a testy relationship with his chosen medium. His entire body of film and television work, from 1964’s *Culloden* to 2000’s *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, contains a sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit critique of the filmic image. Where Eisenstein and Vertov saw the juxtaposing of two images through editing as the key to cinema’s revolutionary mystique, Watkins views montage as a Janus-faced betrayal of the camera’s unique capability to root out the truth. If movies are, in Roger Ebert’s famous axiom, “a machine that generates empathy,” then for Watkins every edit debilitates the machine, foreclosing thought and prescribing emotion in a dogged drive toward predetermined meaning.

Born in 1935, Watkins came of age with the television, and acknowledges that his early films as a young producer at the BBC indulged in this stylistic system, which he dubs “the Monoform.” Yet his films have resisted this structure since before he had the words to label it, often calling attention to their constructedness with myriad Brechtian devices. Watkins’ cinema is a distinctly postmodern riposte to John Gardner’s “fictive dream,” which Watkins views as narcotizing and deadening. He insists that the viewer never forget that she is watching the product of the biases, ideologies, and personalities of its creators and the social and economic systems in which they work.

Peter Watkins, “Le Commune (de Paris) 1871” - source: <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/peter-watkins-films-1964-99/peter-watkins-la-commune-de-paris-1871>



The six-hour *La Commune*, which restages the rise and fall of the Paris Commune in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war, encapsulates all the generative contradictions that animate Watkins’ unique body of work. Filmed entirely in a warehouse on the outskirts of Paris with a mostly amateur 200-member cast writing and improvising their own dialogue, the movie is presented as a series of news reports by “Commune TV.” The anachronistic film is neither narrative nor documentary nor reportage, but bears clear hallmarks of all three.

In *The Universal Clock*, a documentary on the filming of *La Commune*, an actor slated to appear as a commentator on “News TV Versailles,” the official state outlet, asks Watkins if he wants him to side with the state or the communards. “Be yourself” is Watkins’ reply. “I don’t want you to wear a mask.” Such advice is the mark of a self-possessed artist who, despite an early reluctance to shake off the veneer of objectivity, has spent his long career methodically removing his own masks.

Watkins’ work is a descendant of what documentary historian Betsy A. McClane calls the “second line of British documentary” from the 1930s, a socially conscious strain led by critic and filmmaker John Grierson. Commonly credited with inventing the term “documentary,” Grierson was the first public relations officer for the UK’s General Post Office, where he led a film unit that made more than a hundred films emphasizing the Post Office’s modernity. The “second line,” however, made outside the GPO, attempted to draw attention to social problems throughout the UK. With titles such as *Housing Problems*, *Enough to Eat?*, and *The Smoke Menace*, these brief journalistic films pioneered the use of direct address as a shortcut to authenticity.

According to McClane, the welfare state called for by the second line films became a reality following the devastation of World War II, which led to a strong sense of nationalism and a push toward a more poetic cinema, heralding the common man instead of the technological advances highlighted by Grierson’s

school. The Free Cinema documentary group, led by Lindsay Anderson, looked to contemporary European fiction film for inspiration. It’s not hard to imagine their manifesto, as outlined in the program of their first exhibition at the British Film Institute in 1956, inspiring a young Watkins. It read, in part:

As film-makers we believe that
No film can be too personal.
The image speaks. Sound amplified and comments.
Size is irrelevant. Perfection is not an aim.
An attitude means a style. A style means an attitude.

Though consisting of only 12, initially little-seen films, Free Cinema would have an outsized influence not only on the well-known fictional output of its adherents (*If...*, *Look Back in Anger*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*), but on Ealing comedies and other idiosyncratic postwar British genres as well. It would also have an impact on Watkins’ oeuvre, specifically in its grainy, hand-held black-and-white images, its antipathy toward box office success and corporate sponsorship, and its inherent revolutionary bent.

Though Watkins’ work is primarily didactic, his early short films bear strong resemblance to the Free Cinema, which McClane classifies as non-didactic and aesthetic, crafted to appeal more to emotion than intellect. Watkins’ 1959 *Diary of an Unknown Soldier* is a first-person account, narrated by the director (like most of his films), of the last day in the life of a British private in World War I. The soldier’s tinny interior monologue is almost unbearably grating and on-the-nose, yet the 24-year-old Watkins displays a remarkable proficiency with battle scenes. The kinetic camera work, which darts between great depth of field and extreme close-up, bristles with the energy of a young artist discovering his power.

Watkins’ battle cinematography, which would become even more refined and dynamic over the next decade, would be one of the first “masks” Watkins

guiltily shed as he embraced video in the 1970s. *Culloden*, however, finds him stretching his legs creatively and employing his energetic camera in far more entertaining and bruising anti-war story. Except for the specifically British context, the film's title description could serve as an epigraph for Watkins' entire career: "An account of one of the most mishandled and brutal battles ever fought in Britain. An account of its tragic aftermath. An account of the men responsible for it. An account of the men, women and children who suffered because of it." The setting is the real-life 1746 Battle of Culloden, 4 ½ miles southwest of Inverness in the Scottish Highlands, which only lasted 68 minutes but claimed the lives of almost 2,000 Jacobite rebels, "the last battle to be fought in Britain, and the last armed attempt to overthrow its king."

Watkins employs, for the first time, the pseudo-documentary form that he would continue to use off and on throughout his entire career up to *La Commune*, as of this writing his last film. The form had recently gained notoriety with the "mondo" exploitation films in Italy, but for Watkins, it represented his first explicit engagement with televisual manipulation. An unseen Watkins interviews commanders and soldiers on both sides of the battle, positioning the film as a less jingoistic *Henry V*.

Culloden begins by introducing each commander of the "tired, ill-administered (Jacobite) force of less than 5,000 men" with a quick, heroic zoom from medium to close, in ironic counterpoint to Watkins' sardonic narration:

Sir Thomas Sheridan, Jacobite military secretary. Suffering advanced debility and loss of memory. Former military engagement: 56 years ago. Sir John MacDonald, Jacobite captain of cavalry. Aged, frequently intoxicated, described as "a man of the most limited capacities." John William O'Sullivan, Jacobite quartermaster general. Described as "an Irishman whose vanity is superseded only by his lack of wisdom." Prince Charles Edward Stuart, Jacobite commander in chief. Former military experience: 10 days at a siege at the age of 13.

This is less a critique of the Jacobite forces, though, than a denunciation of all ineffectual military leadership, putting the lives of soldiers on the line with no clear mandate or ability. Though Watkins criticizes both sides of the battle, he clearly sides with the rebels.

This doesn't prevent him, however, from engaging in a brutal takedown of the Scottish clan system, which engaged in what

he terms "human rent:" tenants were allowed to farm the chiefs' land in return for fighting whenever he decreed. The men are threatened with having their homes and barns burned down if they refuse to fight. "All are dependent on this one man," Watkins says as his probing camera swings around a landowner's shoulder to look him directly in the face. The chief can only glance guiltily out of the side of his eye. This is the introduction of a trademark Watkins trope. In Watkins' work, the proletariat are dignified through their refusal to cower before the camera's piercing glare. They peer directly into it, often in full face, confident in the rightness of their cause. For Watkins, the camera, with its dispassionate, relentless gaze, reveals the truth before which the dishonest shrink. The venal, corrupt, and inhuman bourgeoisie are only ever able to look at it sideways, afraid of what it might discover. Though ingenuous and not particularly nuanced, it's a subtle trope that Watkins has returned to again and again, and is key to understanding his cinematic methodology.

Watkins certainly spares no love for the British army, though, with its similarly unfair pay structures and ruthless treatment of their enemies. He calls it "a fraternity where the least pretension to learning, to piety, or to common morals would endanger the owner to be cashiered." After

the battle, the British companies scour the countryside, raping, pillaging, and "peacemaking." They dehumanize the rebels with propaganda, deprive captured soldiers of food and care, or kill them outright.

Culloden is Watkins' most playful film. Not only do the modern trappings of the pseudo-documentary connect the events of the film to contemporary wars like Vietnam, the form allows Watkins to re-inscribe the passion, emotion, and personality that are often lost in historical reconstructions. The humanization makes the ending all the more affecting, as the Jacobite leaders escape and are given honors while the foot soldiers are left to starve and die. King George II outlaws the tokens of Highlander Scots—tartans, music, worship, weaponry—and disbands the clan system. The camera tracks along a row of bedraggled soldiers' faces as Watkins lists off the various ways in which the rebels were made to suffer. Blameless, in his eyes at least, they gaze unblinkingly into the camera. The actors become icons for the forgotten faces of history. "They have created a desert," Watkins intones gravely, "and have called it peace."

Watkins' next film, 1965's *The War Game*, which imagines a near-future nuclear attack near London, was banned by the BBC and not broadcast until 1985. Though the film went on to win

the 1966 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, Watkins was quickly souring on the British film and television industries. His next three films are also set in a dystopian near-future: 1967's prophetic *Privilege*, about a manufactured pop singer named Steven Shorter who is used to selling everything from dog food to shopping centers to the Church of

England, which was the last film Watkins made in the UK before a self-imposed exile that continues to this day; 1969's *The Gladiators*, a sort of proto-*Hunger Games* from 1969; and 1971's *Punishment Park*, which played at the Cannes Film Festival and imagines a totalitarian United States where subversives are hunted and killed by security forces as a



Exhibition of Peter Watkins' series "The Unforgetting" at Webber Gallery. It's a highly autobiographical piece of work, showcasing photographs and sculptures produced after a long inner exploration of a traumatic loss.

training exercise.

All three films are systemic critiques. In his self-interview accompanying the DVD of *The Gladiators*, Watkins gives his definition of the “system” he is critiquing:

(A)ny hierarchical structure which is used by one group of human beings to govern and to hold other human beings in subservience. The structure brings with it a series of rules, conventions and understandings whereby those who are governed accept the system and allow it to rule. Sometimes the system is maintained by a regime of terror, sometimes by a regime of consumerism and compromise. The mass media play an essential role in propagating acceptance of either regime.

Watkins’ mass media critique was still largely subtextual in these three films, where Watkins seems more interested in oppressive organisms than in the communication structures that sustained them. The resulting critiques themselves often come off as diffuse and as formless as Watkins’ definition of the system, though the analysis remains pungent.

Though the pseudo-documentary *La Commune* bears many hallmarks of *Culloden*, at the opposite end of Watkins’ career—historical setting, anachronistic newsreel technique, black-and-white verité cinematography—its systemic and media critiques are indistinguishable from one another. The two actors portraying journalists for Commune TV say as much in their opening dialogue: the film deals “not only with the Paris Commune, but also the role of mass media in past and present society.” Before the story begins, the camera follows them around the set, their “workplace for the past 13 weeks.” The set has been left exactly how it was after the end of the last scene; the text of the narration “will be added a few months later.” Watkins is taking steps from the outset to ensure that the viewer never gets too emotionally invested. He also employs regular intertitles

enumerating facts, figures, and context, a carryover from his 1987 anti-nuclear weapon documentary *The Journey*. Twenty-six minutes into the film, one of these intertitles reminds the viewer yet again that the scenes were filmed over 13 days, chronologically, mostly in 10-minute-long shots.

Watkins, perhaps as much for his cantankerousness as for his political intractability, has never gained a large following. He left England because his films kept getting banned, soft censorship plagued him throughout his career. *La Commune* was only broadcast once on French television, late on a Friday night while most people slept.

Yet *The Universal Clock* makes clear that *La Commune* is a revolutionary communal act in itself. The whole cast, including the children, engaged in exhaustive research and preparations for the filming. Many became radicalized as a result. The documentary shows an undocumented Algerian man struggling to express all his rage and sorrow in the few lines he gets in the film. It’s moving and sad and, paired with *La Commune* itself, once again reminds us of the human stakes of the telling of history. A different actor poses the questions that the filming inspired her to ask, and which are key to the political efficacy of Watkins’ work: “What is the role of the individual inside a collective?” “What freedom of speech do each of us have, yet also within a group?” “What is it to agree on an ideology but to allow for internal nuances and contradictions?” Many cast members express doubt that any sort of systemic change is possible, but their very presence is a gesture of hope and community.

Part II, in the next issue of the *Advocate*, will explore how Peter Watkins developed the most trenchant expression of his revolutionary ethos in his anti-nuclear weapons films, culminating in his nearly 15-hour masterpiece, 1987’s *The Journey*.

The Siege Comes to New York

Ashley Marinaccio

Over the past few decades the Palestinian voice has been largely excluded from American cultural circles. While there have been several successful performances of Palestinian narratives on American stages, many Palestinian-made theatre productions that directly address politics and the Israeli occupation have been censored. It was only recently, and after much controversy caused by Public Theatre’s cancellation of its original May 2016 production, that the Jenin-based Freedom Theatre debuted its evocative and emotional production, *The Siege*, at NYU’s Skirball Center.

The Freedom Theatre is a cultural center located in the West Bank. Its mission is to “develop a vibrant and creative artistic community that empowers children and young adults to express themselves freely and equally through art while emphasizing professionalism and innovation.” The Freedom Theatre offers workshops and classes in theatre, writing, photography, filmmaking, painting and other creative mediums in addition to theatre performances and a theatre school. Oskar Eustis, Artistic Director of the Public Theater says, “The Freedom Theater of Jenin was founded by Juliano Mer-Khamis as a way of using art rather than violence to create political change. He understood that only by seeing each other as people, looking at seemingly intractable dilemmas from all sides, could change really come to his society.” With a powerful, funny script and well



Credit: The Freedom Theatre

directed performances, *The Siege* shows audiences just how important it is to see Palestinian bodies unapologetically on stage, telling Palestinian stories. *The Siege*, created and directed by Nabil Al-Raei and Zoe Lafferty, is based on the 39-day Israeli siege on the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in 2002. The creative team collected stories of the now exiled fighters from across Gaza and Europe. It is narrated by a tour guide, who transcends time by introducing audiences to the present-day church and its importance to Christians and Muslims across the world, while the main story focuses on the relationships built between six fighters held up in the church by Israeli forces outside. Documentary footage from the events are projected on the walls at various moments throughout the performance to show the events happening “outside” of the church, and provide audiences with context for what the experience looked like in real time. The simple yet elegant set designed by Anna Gisle serves the piece beautifully, evoking the inside of the church, and bringing audiences to the heart of the conflict.

Performed with great integrity, honesty and skill by a company of six actors from across Palestine, *The Siege* helps us understand the split-second choices and decisions made in the middle of active conflict zones, when your life

Credit: The Freedom Theatre



and the lives of the people you love are consistently in jeopardy. Like all great theatre, this show humanizes a group of people who have been silenced. The directors' note states, “With *The Siege* we aim to tell the story behind the western propaganda, upending the dominant narrative of the

time: ‘the terrorists have entered a holy place and have taken the priest and nuns hostage.’ It is not the story of victimization but one of resistance in a situation of complete power imbalance.” It is my hope that *The Siege* is the first of many international tours for this important theatre com-

pany, and that this will allow for more Palestinian voices to be heard in the New York theatre.

I sat down with *The Siege*'s co-creators Nabil Al-Raei and Zoe Lafferty to speak more about the performance and their experience touring the show to America.

AM: How long have you been planning to bring *The Siege* to

America? What was that process like?

NABIL: We were struggling to come for more than two years. There were difficulties we had to face. Actors couldn't get visas. We had to replace one of our actors. The stage manager couldn't get in and they sent him back, so we had to replace him. Present-

ing *The Siege* for American, New York audiences is a big deal. It's great in so many ways.

AM: What has the American audience reception been? How is it different from the Palestinian reception of the piece back home?

NABIL: It's important to present it in Palestine, first as a reminder for people to know the story and to know what happened, and especially as we present this story purely as a Palestinian narrative and second because nobody knows about the deal that was made. There was a deal to send these freedom fighters into exile – 26 to Gaza and 13 to Europe. The new generation, especially the generation that was born during and after the second Intifada, didn't know this story or what happened there. They maybe hear from their families about an invasion or the siege of Bethlehem, but not in detail. But every Palestinian knows what it means to experience a siege. It's a concept on many levels, in prison, at checkpoints, and on the ground. It's good, painful and hopeful. It's painful because it's a reminder to people of their pain but it's hopeful because we can take the story and travel with it on the ground.

ZOE: In terms of the UK and America we have the positive responses that are fantastic and enthusiastic and then we have this, let's see, funny response from



Credit: The Freedom Theatre

people who have not seen the play but somehow know all about it and are really upset about what we're saying on stage. We have this in Britain as well. We always say, "if you don't like it, if you are unsure about it, and don't want to pay money to see it, that's fine. But come along, we'll give you a free ticket and you can come for free and see it and we'll go from there." But there's a very aggressive response which has much more to do with censoring it and stopping people from having conversations around this story than it does with actual outrage over what this play is about because obviously people just don't know.

AM: How was your work received at home?

ZOE: When we first made this play in Palestine my concern is that we were being very critical of the resistance and showing sides of it that were not always positive because, at the end of the day, our job is to put complex human beings on stage and when you do that it's complicated. Then suddenly we come here and it's the opposite concern that we're white-washing these awful people and only showing them as heroes which is absolutely far from the truth. It's funny, these polar opposite concerns in each country.

AM: What was the devising process like for *The Siege*?

ZOE: The idea personally came when we were doing another play and a guy in the audience stood up and talked about the siege of the church of the Nativity. I went to Ireland initially and met two guys who were part of the siege and they passed on more contact details for others and we spent about a day with each person, interviewing them. Nabil Skyped people in Gaza because nobody can travel there. We also met people in Palestine. There was a blending point where it was every actor and Nabil's personal story because there is a blending between the reality of your experience, your whole life, and the people you put on stage. We then storyboarded and chose characters and that's when Nabil turned it into a script.

AM: Are all of your actors from the Freedom Theatre?

NABIL: Some actors came from the Freedom Theatre and others came from different regions in Palestine. Some come from Palestine 48, some from Jerusalem, Nablus, the Jenin refugee camp and the village near Jenin. It's the same responsibility that theatre has in America or Britain, that you want to bring people from all over together to create something.

AM: Can you tell us a bit more about the Freedom Theatre?

NABIL: The Freedom Theatre proves a safe space for people of

different ages to express themselves and share things that they've never shared. The training of theatre is a process of buildup, a process of self-discovery, a process of gaining back the trust you've lost in so many different ways; it's a process of stirring up the imagination that in one way or another is frozen under a brutal reality. That training gives hope because if you start to know who you are and what you want then you start to have a responsibility and the freedom about your choices and decisions. This is when you start to relate to the reality around you – the special political and social reality and you can create change.

AM: Do you have any final thoughts you can leave us with?

I think art is hope. Culture is the key for change. I really believe in that. I think it's important to acknowledge that sharing emotion and anger doesn't push me to repeat or go through the circle of revenge because that is not the solution – the solution must come in a more creative way.

For more information on The Freedom Theatre:

Website:

www.thefreedomtheatre.org

Facebook:

www.facebook.com/thefreedomtheatre

Twitter: @Freedom_Theatre

Instagram: thefreedomtheatre

Orwell's Revolution

Harry Blain

George Orwell's list of enemies is amongst the longest and most varied in history. A partial list would include pacifists, communists, fascists, capitalists, conservatives, imperialists, vegetarians, teetotalers, Quakers, Catholics, atheists, architects, poets, academics, pamphleteers and people who take their tea with sugar. He died a revolutionary and a socialist that most revolutionaries and socialists had found some reason to hate.

How could someone who was such a nuisance in life become such a saint in death? These days a quote from Orwell usually carries more authority than the Bible, even for people who might have punched the man if they ever spoke to him in one of his much-loved 'four-ale bars.' I plead guilty to using the cranky old Englishman in this way, but I do so as someone claiming to have found something in his worldview, which has little to do with the crude and depressing 'Orwellian' future presented in 1984. Instead, it is proudly revolutionary, and emerges from the revolutions in culture, politics and language that Orwell himself brought about.

Abandoning "literary ornaments"

Sharp one liners like "all art is propaganda" and "all issues are political issues" are enough on their own to show that Orwell would have thrived in the age of Twitter. He had many flaws, but reticence

wasn't one of them. Verbosity, however, was his biggest gripe, a crime against the English language perpetrated in equal measure by "shock-headed Marxists" and "jingo-imperialists," who were always "chewing polysyllables" to cloak their real opinions and motives. Orwell set out to dismantle their rhetorical trickery, and do away with what Thomas Paine once called "literary ornaments." In doing so, he promoted a much wider revolution in how we use language.

Some have called Orwell's literary style "plain-spoken", "matter-of-fact" or "conversational." Although they're not wrong, they are also missing something. Consider this scene from the (not very successful) novel, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), in which he describes the thoughts of the broke protagonist, who has just spent his entire pay-check in one drunken night:

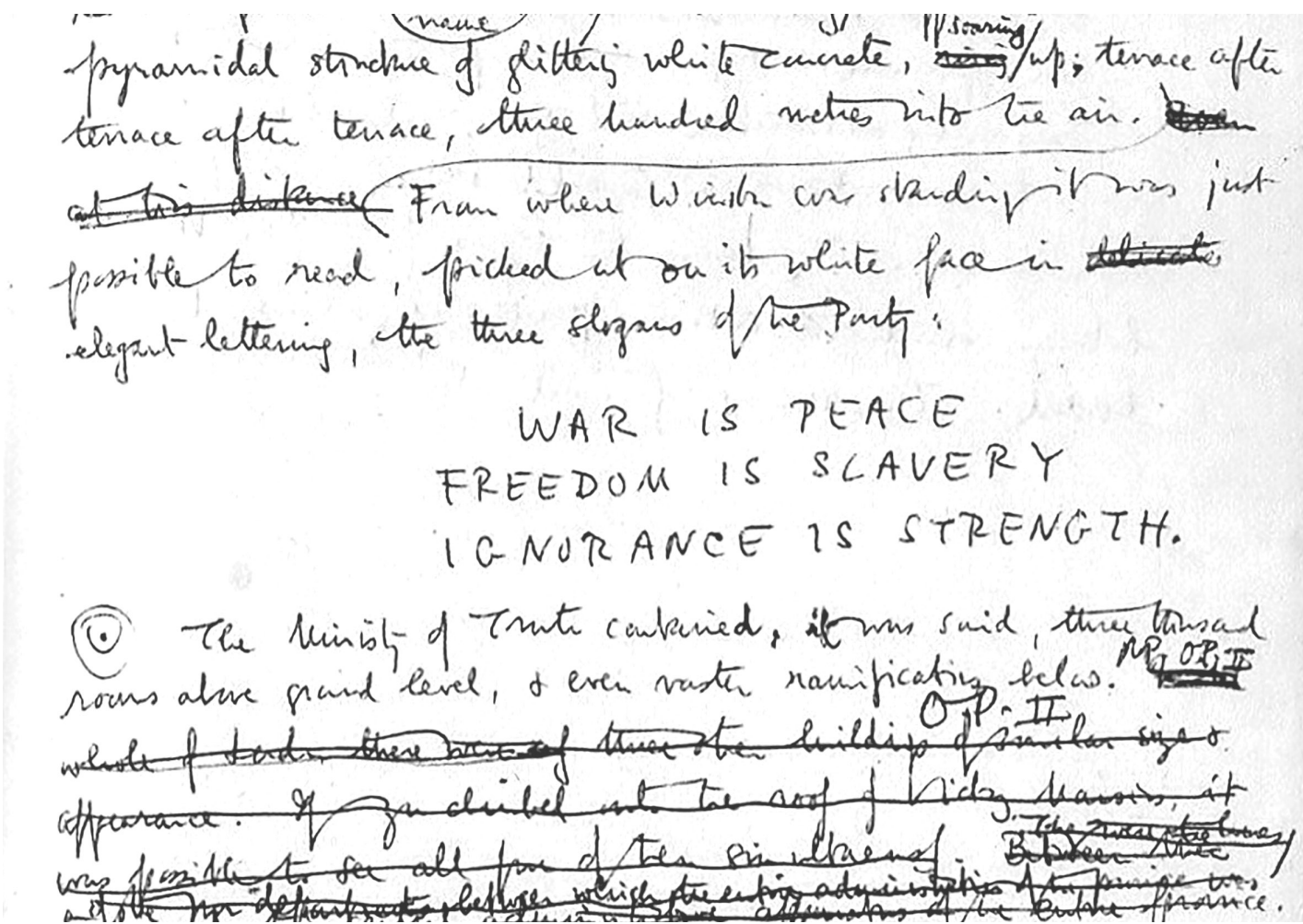
The evil, mutinous mood that comes after drunkenness seemed to have set into a habit. That drunken night had marked a period in his life. It had dragged him downward with strange suddenness. Before, he had fought against the money-code, and yet he had clung to his wretched remnant of decency. But now it was precisely from decency that he wanted to escape. He wanted to go down, deep down, into some world

where decency no longer mattered; to cut the strings of his self-respect, to submerge himself—to sink...That was where he wished to be, down in the ghost-kingdom, below ambition. It comforted him somehow to think of the smoke-dim slums of South London sprawling on and on, a huge graceless wilderness where you could lose yourself for ever.

While this is certainly blunt, it can't be called "matter-of-fact." It is full of feeling. How does it feel to be just above desperate poverty? What is worse,

the material problem of lack of money or the mental torture of maintaining social "decency"? When you fall down one rung of the social ladder, who cares if you fall down another? *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) is a personal chronicle of all these questions; its harshness and brilliance is encapsulated by one of its most intriguing characters. "It is fatal to look hungry", 'Boris' tells Orwell. "It makes people want to kick you."

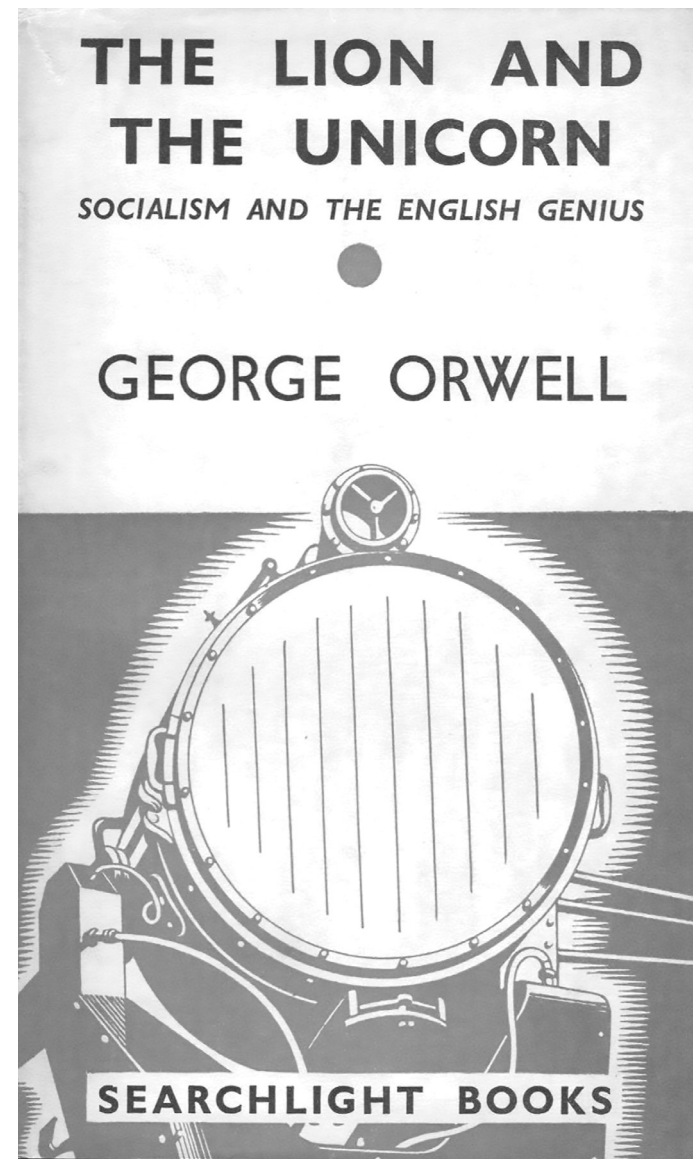
Orwell also told us something about how imperialism felt. There was no shortage of anti-imperialist literature on bookshelves in the 1930s (think, for instance, of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*), but Orwell



The original manuscript for Orwell's 1984. Image courtesy of netcharles.com

had the privilege of seeing, as he put it in *Shooting an Elephant* (1936), “the dirty work of Empire at close quarters.” The fruits of this “dirty work,” as a colonial officer in Burma are intimately described: “The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos.”

Orwell also reflected honestly on his own experi-



George Orwell, “*The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*,” 1941 “Secker and Warburg”: GB, London. (Searchlight Books, No.1). Print-run: 5,000 copies. Contents: Part I: England Your England; Part II: Shopkeepers at War; Part III: The English Revolution.

ence. Although “with one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in *saecula saeculorum*, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest’s guts.” “All I knew,” he concluded, “was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible.” Anger and shame, abstract condemnation and raw, personal hatred—this may have been the default mindset of every cop, administrator and pencil-pusher in the British Empire, and, we might add, every United States soldier in Iraq and Afghanistan. Orwell was one of the first to voice it.

“Popular tastes”

Here are some titles of Orwell’s essays and articles: *Anti-Semitism in Britain*, *Shooting an Elephant*, *The Prevention of Literature*, *Reflections on Ghandi*, *Authentic Socialism*, *How the Poor Die*, *A Nice Cup of Tea*, *A Good Word for the Vicar of Bray*, *Nonsense Poetry*, *Songs We Used to Sing*, *Books v Cigarettes*, *Bad Climates Are Best*, *British Cookery*, *Good Bad Books*, and – my personal favorite – *Some Thoughts on the Common Toad*.

Why did this great enemy of totalitarianism, combatant in the Spanish Civil War, and chronicler of 20th Century thought also insist on writing about trivial things? This tendency enraged Orwell’s more sanctimonious left-wing critics. They had a point: they were, after all, living in an era when capitalism seemed to be imploding, fascism was ascendant, communism was fighting for its life – and this guy was writing about the mating habits of toads!

And yet, Orwell had no problem reflecting deeply on things that most of us barely even notice. Smells, habits, and routines mattered. He argued, for instance, that the shelves of small newsagents were “the best available indication of what the mass of

the English people really feels and thinks,” whereas movies were “a very unsafe guide to popular taste” and the novel limited, too, as it “aimed almost exclusively at people above the £4-a-week level.” So, he wrote a long essay on the contents of newsagents’ shelves. Similarly, Orwell’s explanation of enduring class boundaries amounted to four words: “the lower classes smell.” This, he said, was the most dominant prejudice of *all* “bourgeois” Europeans, “the real secret of class distinctions in the West”, because “no feeling of like or dislike is quite so fundamental as a physical feeling.” He then devotes the best part of two chapters to the politics of smells.

Nothing was trivial to Orwell because everything was political. This view is the most basic foundation of what we now call “Cultural Criticism, and the fact that we now seriously study the daily experiences of others owes a great deal to Orwell’s extraordinary eye for the ordinary. Orwell also attempted a less successful revolution in the medium of political and cultural expression. In practice, it was more of a restoration: a case for the pamphlet. The pamphlet, he wrote, is a one-man show. One has complete freedom of expression, including, if one chooses, the freedom to be scurrilous, abusive, and seditious; or, on the other hand, to be more detailed, serious, and “highbrow” than is ever possible in a newspaper or in most kinds of periodicals. At the same time, since the pamphlet is always short and unbound, it can be produced much more quickly than a book, and in principle at any rate, can reach a bigger public. Above all, the pamphlet does not have to follow any prescribed pattern. It can be in prose or in verse, it can consist largely of maps or statistics or quotations, it can take the form of a story, a fable, a letter, an essay, a dialogue, or a piece of “reportage.” All that is required is that it shall be topical, polemical, and short.

This is actually a summary of Orwell’s view by Bernard Bailyn, the leading historian of North American pamphlets between 1750 and 1776. This was

the spirit and the time that Orwell was appealing to, and it shaped the style of his essays, which were at once straight-talking, unstructured and often rude. Orwell’s taste for the pamphlet didn’t really catch on, and the great British historian A.J.P. Taylor accused him of nostalgia. Yet both the essay and, now, the blog, have retained some of the pamphlet’s soul. The essays of Christopher Hitchens, for example—on everything from wine and comedy to Thomas Jefferson and the Vietnam War —were tremendously popular, at least until his late-in-life transformation into a neo-conservative mouthpiece. More recently, websites and magazines like the UK-based *Open Democracy*, and our own *Current Affairs* and *Jacobin*, among others, have revived the tradition of medium- to long-form essay writing. At their best, they are funny, thoughtful, acerbic and reflective. Inheritors, in other words, of a style picked up, enlivened and passed on by Orwell.

Reason and emotion

There is also something more philosophical to Orwell’s revolution in culture, and one of his most interesting insights comes from a 1940 review of *Mein Kampf*, in which he argued that Hitler had “grasped the falsity of the hedonistic attitude to life”:

Nearly all western thought since the last war, certainly all “progressive” thought, has assumed tacitly that human beings desire nothing beyond ease, security and avoidance of pain. In such a view of life there is no room, for instance, for patriotism and the military virtues. The Socialist who finds his children playing with soldiers is usually upset, but he is never able to think of a substitute for the tin soldiers; tin pacifists somehow won’t do. Hitler, because in his own joyless mind he feels it with ex-

ceptional strength, knows that human beings don't only want comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth-control and, in general, common sense; they also, at least intermittently, want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags and loyalty-parades... "Greatest happiness of the greatest number" is a good slogan, but at this moment "Better an end with horror than a horror without end" is a winner. Now that we are fighting against the man who coined it, we ought not to under-rate its emotional appeal.

I recoiled when I first read this. Do human beings really want or need "drums, flags and loyalty-parades"? It certainly would have seemed so in 1940. But even if it was or is true, where does that leave the socialist, whose most basic guiding principle is internationalism? Obviously, Orwell did not think that chauvinistic human instincts should be accepted. He went to Spain to physically fight them. He did, however, see humans as overwhelmingly emotional animals. One of his most consistent problems with "book-trained" socialists was their "machine-worship" and hyper-rationality: a vision of endless, mechanized, conflict-free material abundance. For Orwell, a society without foolishness, vulgarity, toil or prejudice would not be human, and the methods required for building it would have to be close to Stalin's.

This outlook strongly shaped Orwell's views on patriotism, an aspect of his thought that remains popular among conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic. He left them plenty of material, admitting that he preferred his upbringing "in an atmosphere tinged with militarism" to that of "the left-wing intellectuals who are so 'enlightened' they cannot understand the most ordinary emotions." Orwell's

fans on the right leave out the part where he argues "patriotism has nothing to do with conservatism." Instead, "it is a devotion to something that is changing but is felt to be mystically the same," something you feel and don't think. Even so, it remains hard to reconcile patriotism with socialism. Orwell's best attempt can be found in *The English Revolution* (1941):

England has got to be true to herself. She is not being true to herself while the refugees who have sought our shores are penned up in concentration camps, and company directors work out subtle schemes to dodge their Excess Profits Tax... The heirs of Nelson and of Cromwell are not in the House of Lords. They are in the fields and the streets, in the factories and the armed forces, in the four-ale bar and the suburban back garden; and at present they are still kept under by a generation of ghosts. Compared with the task of bringing the real England to the surface, even the winning of the war, necessary though it is, is secondary. By revolution we become more ourselves, not less. There is no question of stopping short, striking a compromise, salvaging 'democracy', standing still. Nothing ever stands still. We must add to our heritage or lose it, we must grow greater or grow less, we must go forward or backward. I believe in England, and I believe that we shall go forward.

This is very good propaganda. Clear, emotive, stirring and, yes, 'patriotic.' Would something like it work for us today, modified with some appeal to the traditions of the United States? We won't know until we try.

Against "timid reformism"

Orwell called for revolution and for socialism: explicitly and repeatedly until the day he died in 1950. Sometimes it is necessary to repeat this, with his legacy now so distorted by people who got no further than a few pages and online summaries of *Animal Farm*. He hated that the Russian Revolution devolved into Stalinism, but what did he see as the alternative? Not capitalism. "Hitler's conquest of Europe," he wrote in *Shopkeepers at War* (1941), "was a *physical* debunking of capitalism," confirming both its inhumanity and ineffectiveness. Liberalism, in the North American sense of the word, didn't work either. Adjusting a largely rotten system incrementally seemed almost laughable in 1941, and Orwell regularly fumed at the "timid reformism" of the British Labour Party. In '41, for instance, he wrote that the party "has never been able to achieve any major change," because "all through the critical years it was directly interested in the prosperity of British capitalism," devoted as much as anyone else to "the maintenance of the British Empire," and had turned 'revolutionary' politics into a "game of make-believe."

It might be said that Orwell's solution was anarchism. You would certainly say so if you've read his moving account of anarchist Barcelona in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). Noam Chomsky, among others, have referred to *Homage* in this context. Although they are right to do so from a theoretical standpoint, they could equally refer to Orwell's practical "Six-Point Programme" presented in *The English Revolution*:

1. Nationalization of land, mines, railways, banks and major industries.
2. Limitation of incomes, on such a scale that the highest tax-free income in Britain does not exceed the lowest by more than ten to one.
3. Reform of the educational system along democratic lines.
4. Immediate Dominion status for India, with power to secede when the war is over.
5. Formation of an Imperial General Council, in which the coloured peoples [sic] are to be represented.
6. Declaration of formal alliance with China, Abyssinia and all other victims of the Fascist powers.

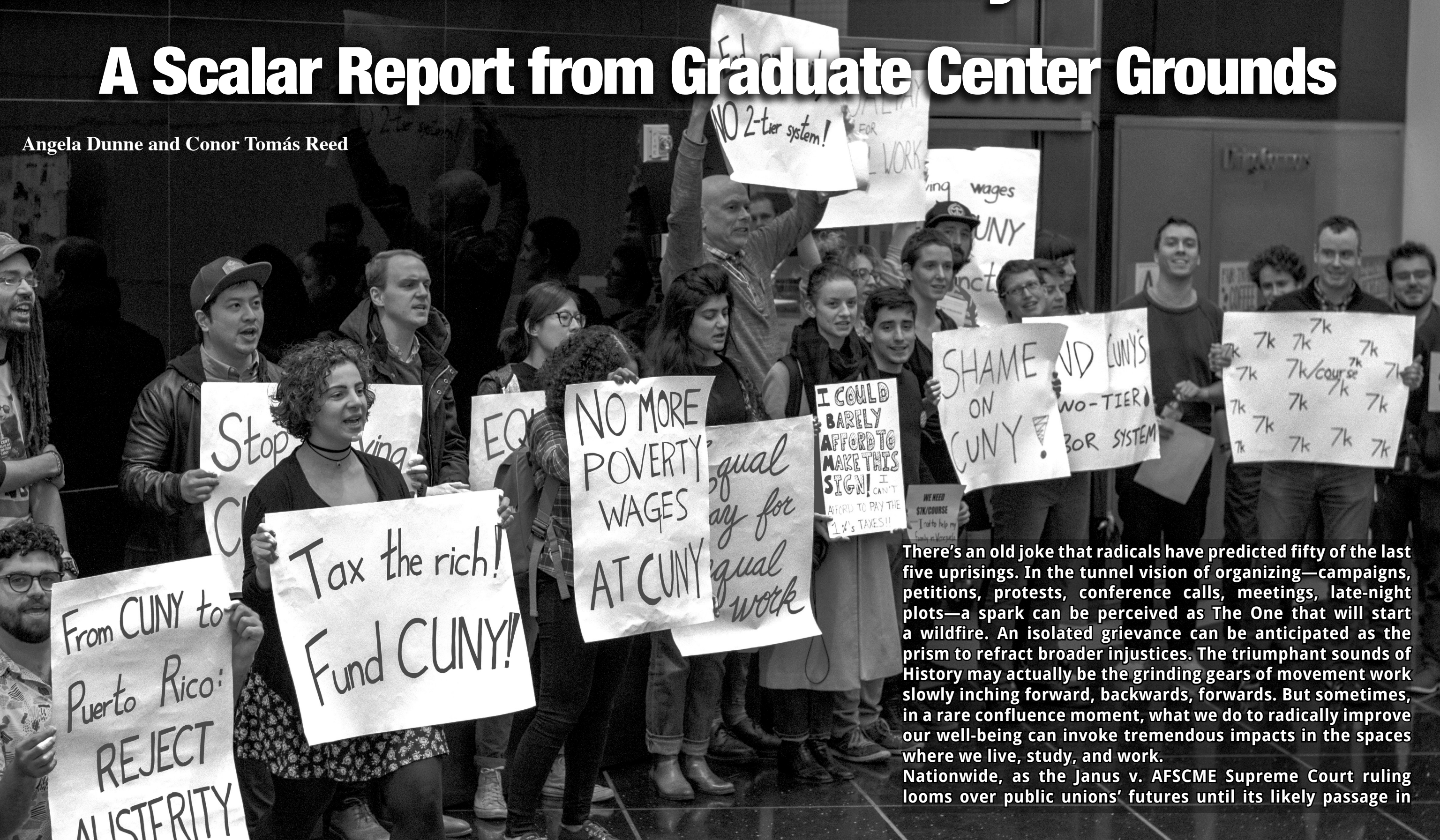
At the time – remember, Britain was still at war – these proposals were extremely revolutionary, amounting to calls for the end of the Empire, the beginning the end of capitalism, and the complete upending of the British class structure. These were the first steps on the path to Orwell's "democratic socialism," which would aspire not just to nationalized industries, but to a classless society.

There's a lot not to like about George Orwell. He didn't put much effort into developing female characters in his novels, and made little mention of women in his most noted essays. His attacks on pacifists during the war were often overwrought, more than once insinuating that they were Hitler sympathizers. His obsession with the 'common man' can be grating, along with his endless denigration of the 'intelligentsia.' Orwell would have rejected any claim to sainthood and so should we. But the least we can do is salvage him from the scrap-heap of cheap quotes and shallow memes, and appreciate him for what he was: a uniquely human revolutionary.

Whose Community?

A Scalar Report from Graduate Center Grounds

Angela Dunne and Conor Tomás Reed



There's an old joke that radicals have predicted fifty of the last five uprisings. In the tunnel vision of organizing—campaigns, petitions, protests, conference calls, meetings, late-night plots—a spark can be perceived as The One that will start a wildfire. An isolated grievance can be anticipated as the prism to refract broader injustices. The triumphant sounds of History may actually be the grinding gears of movement work slowly inching forward, backwards, forwards. But sometimes, in a rare confluence moment, what we do to radically improve our well-being can invoke tremendous impacts in the spaces where we live, study, and work. Nationwide, as the Janus v. AFSCME Supreme Court ruling looms over public unions' futures until its likely passage in

June 2018, graduate students are calling for walkouts on 29 November against a federal tax revision that could eviscerate our funding packages. At the City University of New York, CUNY Chancellor Milliken has announced his resignation from a four-year tenure for the end of Spring 2018. The job contract between the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) and CUNY management expires this 30 November, a date that will mark grassroots PSC actions across the university to center adjuncts' demands for \$7k/class and job security. The Campaign to Make CUNY Free Again (Free CUNY) is pressuring the City Council, Mayor de Blasio, and Governor Cuomo to fully fund tuition with taxes on New York's ultra-wealthy. Meanwhile at the Graduate Center, a new Budget Transparency and Democratization (BT&D) and labor rights campaign has besieged the Graduate Center's administration, especially as GC President Chase Robinson has proposed an "Academic Excellency Fee" increase of up to \$1,200/semester for Master's students.

Neil Smith, the late Marxist geographer who taught for over a dozen years at our school before his early death, once spoke of "scales" that enact "spatialized politics." For Smith, the *body*, *home*, *community*, *urban city*, *region*, *nation*, and *globe* were key co-constitutive sites of

transformative change. In pivotal moments, people can "jump scales" so that the interplay between ourselves and each other,

can reconfigure the country and world (and vice versa, back and forth). To *jump scales at CUNY*, then, suggests that between our



our living conditions at home and our neighborhoods, and political shake-ups across our city,

individual livelihoods, campus struggles over the PSC contract and tuition, the GC and CUNY

administration's worsening legitimacy, de Blasio and the city, Cuomo and the state, and tax attacks and the Janus ruling on a

We CUNY students, faculty, and staff can powerfully co-conspire in this moment. Key to jumping scales is circulating our

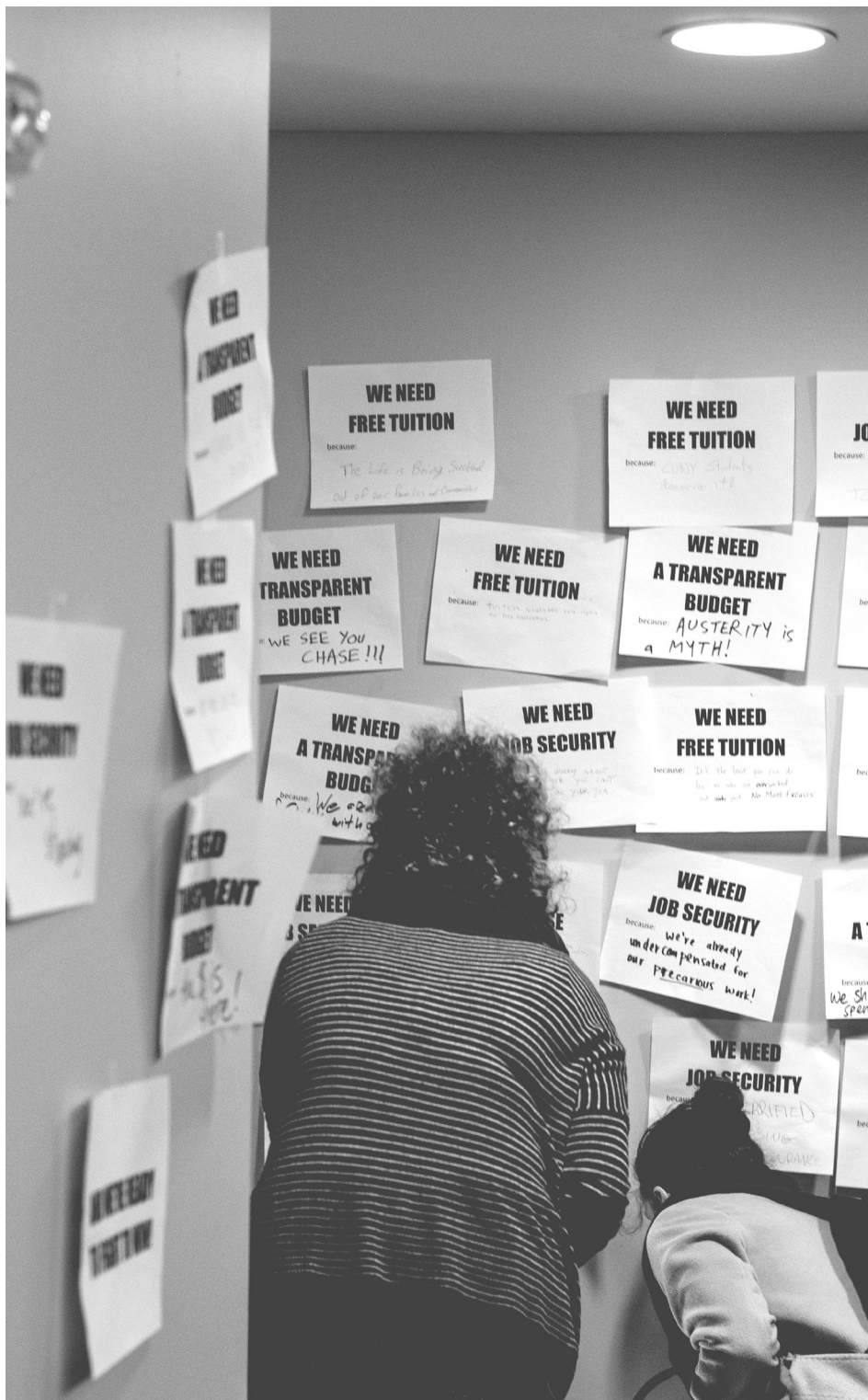
can be remixed in different arenas by wider groups of people. The Graduate Center and the PSC have crucial roles to play. GC campaigns for \$7k/class, job security, and free tuition can outwardly spread at the campuses where we fan out to work, as BT&D's demands to intervene in GC budgeting can scale upwards to address rampant CUNY fiscal mismanagement. The GC's politically activated and increasingly precarious graduate student body mirrors the national scene of graduate students/adjuncts that demand sweeping changes in universities and the government. Moreover, the PSC's position as a public sector union advocating salary redistribution for adjuncts can redefine the momentum for adjunct struggles nationwide.

From our Graduate Center grounds, how can we measure the stakes of this conjuncture, and how can we work together to shape it? The Fall 2017 semester's escalation campaign has been formed by an emerging ad-hoc coalition that includes the CUNY Adjunct Project, CUNY Struggle, Doctoral Students Council (DSC), Free CUNY, the Graduate Center PSC chapter, and concerned GC students -- a cross-organizational collaboration of students, faculty, and staff not seen at this university for several years. In truth, these groups are but a fraction of our GC and CUNY communities. As a way to welcome many new

national level roiling with public outrage, a multitude of sparks can spread widely.

first-person testimonies towards group base-building, and creating relevant direct actions that

All photos credit to Stephen Jones



and seasoned participants into this process, we offer a semester chronology of how we got here:

The **Fall 2017** semester began with a new elected leadership of our GC PSC chapter, the New Caucus and Fusion Independents (NCFI), who had won two-thirds of the vote to CUNY Struggle's third in May. Despite a combative Spring election campaign season, both slates agreed to continue working together at the Graduate Center. Indeed, because of Spring debates that compelled people on both slates to clarify their positions on union democracy, adjunct demands, and protest strategies, a reciprocal engagement between radicals of various stripes has improved the cohesion of campus organizing. A CUNY Struggle-initiated **26 September picket line** outside the offices of Cuomo and CUNY Central, amassed 100 people from around CUNY and NYC. The PSC central leadership refused to mobilize members for the rally, which placed it in the embarrassing position of being outflanked on the new contract campaign by its own grassroots rank-and-file dissenters.

A **10 October City Hall Press Conference** announced that Free CUNY had accrued over 4,000 petition signatures towards a public referendum to eliminate tuition, which they urged the City Council Task Force on CUNY Tuition to

adopt as part of its December report to the Mayor. At the event, dozens of people from around the university linked free tuition to the future of ethnic studies, immigration reform, admissions requirements, and teaching conditions. A **12 October event** by CUNY Struggle, "Get the Contract You Deserve! \$7k and Job Security for Adjuncts," laid out a strategy for the new contract campaign that could more "horizontally" connect adjuncts across campuses, instead of only taking top-down perspectives and orders from PSC central communications and mobilization calls.

At the **16 October CUNY Board of Trustees Public Hearing**, members of Free CUNY and the CUNY Rising Alliance demanded that the Board not raise tuition by \$800 over four years, stop paying poverty wages to adjuncts, and do everything in its power to urge Cuomo to sign the Maintenance of Effort (MOE) Bill to secure basic operational CUNY funding. The Chancellor disappeared halfway through the testimonies, in violation of the public hearing's regulations. A week later, the Board kicked out concerned students, CUNY workers, and community members, and raised the tuition anyway.

The **19 October PSC Delegate Assembly** was a differently disorienting affair, in which the central

leadership proclaimed \$7k/class for adjuncts as their top priority (without mentioning the above events that rank-and-file adjuncts had organized), but then urged the delegates to vote down every single other adjunct and graduate teaching fellow (GTF) amendment to the contract demands regarding pay parity, seniority, etc. One long-time professor even made an important point that the contract demand for a 5% pay increase across the board would maintain pay inequities between adjuncts and non-disposable faculty, instead of redistribute salaries more equitably, but they were then accused of embracing the "austerity logic" of the CUNY administration. With great familiarity with Robert's Rules of Order, the central leadership interjected multiple times, as a line of a dozen mostly adjuncts and graduate students waited to speak once. At the 9pm discussion cut-off time, tenured/tenureable faculty proposed for the stack list to be cut, thus silencing their fellow contingent union members, at which point a majority vote was taken to accept the contract demands.

Even with this disheartening experience, it was good to see a few dozen of the attending delegates who have been immersed in CUNY and NYC movement work over the last several years around tuition hikes, budget cuts, free

speech rights, anti-ROTC and campus militarization, the last contract's strike authorization, and various citywide campaigns. GC organizers noted that if we systematically develop a list of these delegates, and consistently reach out to them with our events and perspectives for the new contract, we could bypass the Delegate Assembly and begin to cohere a more direct democratic orientation to membership collaboration and communication. A sizeable number of these sympathetic delegates could pass along our efforts to their chapters (and vice versa, back and forth), as we map out which chapters might "turn" towards rank-and-file militancy.

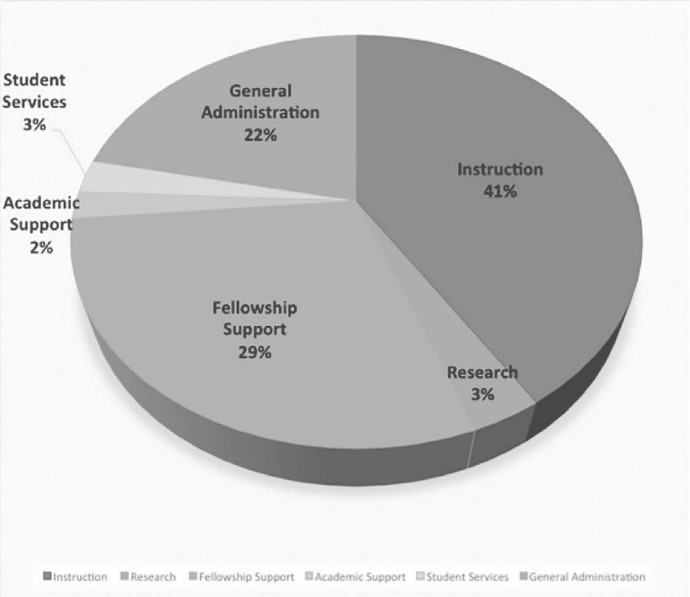
Back at the Graduate Center, a **27 October DSC Town Hall**, hosted by the Student Life and Services Committee, collated concerns by Master's and Ph.D. students to bring to the administration. Then, a 31 October Adjunct Project "Haunting" went trick-or-treating for \$7k/class, universal grad fellowships, health insurance, and tuition remission in the GC lobby and then right to Chase Robinson's office door. Although he was in the office, he did not make himself available, so they informed the GC's Public Safety Director about their trick-or-treat demands. He wrote them down and said he would pass them on to the President.

At a **2 November Community Meeting**, Chase Robinson and Provost Joy Connolly discussed budgetary matters, the proposed “Excellency Fee” tuition increase of up to \$1,200/semester for Master’s students, new faculty hires, and departmental diversity. Below we outline this meeting’s contents in-depth to present the GC administration’s purported commitment to community, in contrast to the grassroots initiatives otherwise laid out in this chronology. While the Graduate Center has 3723 students (3200 PhD and 500 Master’s), 140 central faculty, and hundreds of staff members in several unions, the meeting of three dozen people was mostly populated by the administration and their upper-level staff. Even though it was framed as a place to talk “among colleagues” in which Robinson and Connolly were open to hearing community concerns, it proved to be a rigidly designated hour to address the GC administration and each other to perform the bare minimum of creating community. The limited amount of critical information came as a result of persistent questioning from several concerned students in the audience, including members of the DSC and the GC PSC chapter:

1. Will you release itemized budgets for the last 3-5 years?
2. More details on budget transparency: Who sits on the budget committee and how is it formed?
3. How can we democratize budget decisions/design/implementation?
4. How do we know the money from the proposed “Academic Excellency Fee” -- will go to services for Master’s students?
5. To Robinson: you are the one of the top five highest paid CUNY administrators, will you commit part of your salary for the excellency fee?
6. To Connolly: Your office’s data on diversity is missing class information. GC is at risk of becoming a gentrifying force in CUNY, what about data on students who come here from the senior colleges?

1. Budget Itemization:

One Biology PhD student asked: Is it possible to have access to itemized budgets from the past five years? Chase Robinson answered that the budget at the Graduate Center is extremely dynamic and 79% goes to academic affairs. He also stated that there is a breakdown of major budget categories available online. He was referring to this graph (see picture attached). The student responded that asking for the historical data from the past five years will not change and thus would not be dynamic, and also, that the bulk calculations online do not pro-



vide much transparency about how the funds are actually being used. Robinson then deferred the question to Sebastian Persico, the Senior Vice President for Finance and Administration, who, along with President Chase Robinson, are two of the five highest paid administrators at the Graduate Center. Persico replied, “I’m not sure what itemized means” and subsequently added that the organization on a massive 125 million dollar budget could be overwhelming. He suggested that the student “have a better idea of what itemized means.” Robinson offered that he was happy to make the major categories available, as is the practice, but has seen no benefit in detailing the budget, implying that this leads to questions about decisions on discretionary funds. The student stated that they would follow up on an itemization request to the Finance and Administration office.

2. Budget Committee. Who makes the decisions?

The next question also pushed on budget transparency and specifically asked about the individuals that sit on the Budget Committee that Robinson mentioned throughout the meeting, as well as how that committee is formed. The student asked about ways that students at the Graduate Center can get onto the committees. Robinson responded that the members are drawn from both the Faculty Steering Committee and the Council of Executive Officers. He also admitted that in these 3-4 years of budget cuts, there has been virtually no discretionary spending, and that budget decisions have been left up to the VP offices, and especially the Office of the Provost. The mechanisms that he offered for more student input were simply to present requests at a meeting with the Provost or himself. The

Provost also provided information about how her office requires more transparency from departments in requiring them to record their requests for hires, units, and fellowship lines in a written document. However, neither of these answers addressed the question of student involvement in budgetary decisions. Making verbal requests at meetings with an undemocratically appointed President and Provost, with no voting or consensus procedure, is hardly as democratic a process as Chase Robinson claims.

3. What about Participatory Budgeting?

One student wanted to push further on this question of democracy, stating that everything he heard in the meeting suggested that the governing processes at the Graduate Center were undemocratic. He proposed the implementation of Participatory Budgeting (PB): a process where community members decide how to spend part of a public or institutional budget. PB has been implemented at other CUNY campuses, like Queens and Brooklyn College, as well as within local New York City government. The Doctoral Student Council (DSC) has already begun a PB initiative that opens up the Student Activity Fee for the development of student-led projects. The further expansion of Participatory Budgeting at the GC would provide a more equitable and democratic process to develop budget resolutions, rather than leaving decisions about student needs up to the mercy of those at the top.

4. What’s so “excellent” about a tuition increase for Master’s students?

In his initial address, Chase Robinson mentioned that the GC has filed a request to CUNY Central Offices for a tuition increase for its 500 Master’s students of 100 dollars more per credit. They are calling it the “Academic Excellency Fee” and claim that the money will go toward more resources for those students, namely, advisement, career training, internships, and scholarships. A Master’s student and member of the DSC asked: How can we be sure where the money from this tuition increase will go if the budget is not transparent? He asked if Robinson would commit to making decisions around this fee transparent with an itemized report. The student also addressed the fact that the DSC has a clear and itemized budget available for each spending year and there is no reason that the administration cannot do the same. Robinson responded that the proof of allocation will be in the infrastructure that is built for Master’s students. The Provost responded that the money will be used for resources that Master’s students themselves have said that they want.

This brings back the question of the claim that the request-making procedures at the Graduate Center are democratic. Does it make sense to charge more tuition for the students at the Graduate Center that receive no fellowships and are starved for resources? The Provost and President claimed that they have been thinking on this issue for three years and this is the decision that they came to reluctantly. However, a more democratic budgetary decision process could have developed more egalitarian solutions that don’t sidestep the rights of Master’s students.

5. How do you fix a deficit? Chop from the top.

One English PhD student noted that, according to June 2016 figures, Chase Robinson was among the top five highest paid administrators in CUNY with an annual salary of \$350,000. The student proposed, if Robinson wished to demonstrate his support for the excellence of Master’s students in the Graduate Center, would he then consider paying the tuition increase himself? Robinson was furious to hear this suggestion, which he quickly refused.

6. Diversity, Class, and Gentrification at CUNY

In response to Joy Connolly distributing to the room a series of colorful graph print-outs about improved ethnic and gender student diversity at the Graduate Center, the same English student noted that these changes had occurred as a result of student, faculty, and staff pressure upon the administration and their departments across the last several years. However, the student added, Connolly’s graphs didn’t include information on class diversity or stratification, and in particular, statistics on how many CUNY students were being admitted into the Graduate Center. The student offered that if the Provost’s Office was concerned with diversifying the student body, then they could focus more on orienting admissions to the existing CUNY student population. Otherwise, the Graduate Center runs the risk of gentrifying its graduate student body with wealthier students (even within broader ethnic and gender spectrums) who may pursue certain upper-class-oriented studies and teach diverse working-class CUNY undergraduates from elite outsider positions. Connolly agreed that the information for economic class is important but that she imagined it would be difficult to get. The student responded that data about those admitted from CUNY undergraduate colleges would suffice. Connolly then evaded the previous question addressed to Chase Robinson, by reiterating how important Master’s students were to the Graduate Center community, which unintentionally made Robinson glare again.

At the **13 November GC PSC Chapter meeting**, a resolution against the master's students tuition hike was unanimously passed, and members were urged to practice cross-title solidarity, with the demand for \$7k/class minimum to be fought by adjuncts alongside everyone else. Then on **15 November**, twelve master's and doctoral students held a collective meeting with Chase Robinson and Matthew Schoengood that lasted almost an hour. Under the umbrella demand of Budget Transparency and Democratization (BT&D), students opposed the "Excellency Fee" tuition hike, uneven funding and limited tuition remission, and their general hardship. Students also identified the president's overall failure to be available, accountable, and effectively raise money for the college. While Robinson vaguely offered to include students in the budgetary process and reach out to alumni for fundraising, he refused to rescind the tuition increase or address uneven funding packages. In contrast, at the **17 November DSC Plenary**, representatives unanimously passed resolutions on three issues: 1) Endorsing a Tuition Freeze for Academic Year 2018-19, 2) Supporting the Adoption of the MOE Bill, and 3) Opposing the Plan to Implement an 'Excellency Fee' for Masters' Students.

Also on **17 November**, the Murphy Institute (CUNY) and the Worker's Institute (Cornell) put on a joint conference, *Janus and Beyond: The Future of Public Sector Unions*. It featured talks and workshops that asked participants to re-imagine and explore strategic options toward a new labor movement in response to the threat of *Janus vs. AFSCME*. There was a strong current that spoke about Janus as an opportunity to restructure the top-down mechanisms in our unions, a sentiment that echoes many of the democratization and adjunct struggles at CUNY. City Council Member, I. Daneek Miller, spoke about how unions need to adopt the philosophy of starting from the shop floor. He also mentioned the dire situation of Local 3 and their now eight month strike against Spectrum Cable with many workers running out of their unemployment and Spectrum showing no signs of giving in. In a show of solidarity, PSC participated

in a rally to support Local 3 in their fight for a fair contract earlier this Fall.

Alongside calls for democratization, there were also speakers with market-minded solutions that further entrench public sector unions into a business model, like taking a sales standpoint in recruiting with bonuses and new member rebates. When confronted with a question about participatory budgeting with regard to union dues, one PSC speaker seemed uneasy and dismissed the proposal, suggesting that until the members can understand the issues, it would be precarious to give them that sort of access to the budget. This conference illustrates some of the deeply conflicting opinions on how unions should be structured, all of which have implications on their survival in an open-shop environment. We need to be aware of the philosophies and practices that we adopt with relation to our unions. The resistance to rank-and-file empowerment from the top (be it from CUNY or PSC administrators) is still prevalent and indicates the need for ongoing organizing from below. We need a new democratic vision and stronger cross-union solidarity if public sector unions are going to survive these attacks.

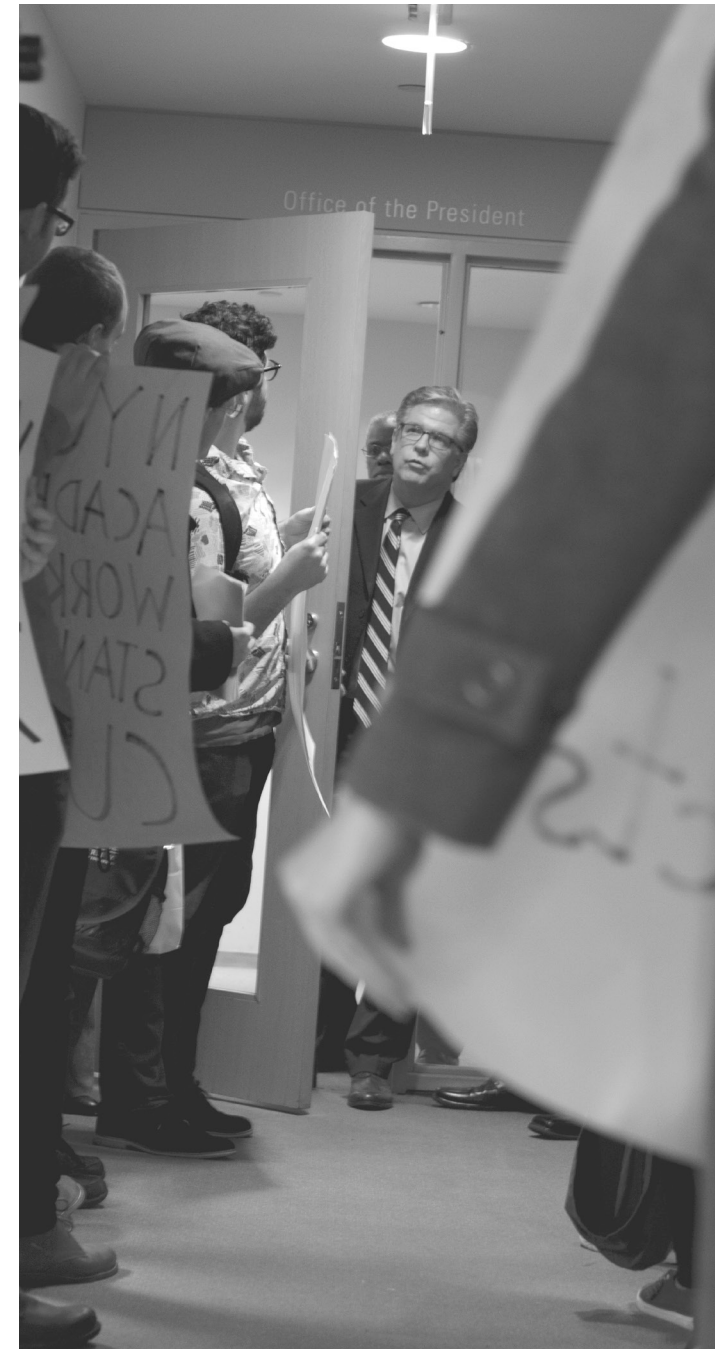
As the *Advocate* goes to press, three action dates put Neil Smith's invitation for us to "jump scales" into further (com)motion. A **29 November national grad students walkout** against the federal tax hikes included a local Union Square rally co-hosted by Barnard, Columbia, CUNY, New School, and New York University teachers unions. Then on **30 November, CUNY actions for \$7k and free tuition** were held at Bronx Community College, the Graduate Center, and Hunter College on the date that the current PSC contract expires and almost 50,000 CUNY teachers and staff began working without a contract. At the GC, we held a speak-out in the Dining Commons and then swarmed Robinson's office doorstep with our demands. At Hunter, students and teachers rallied outside and then had a brief stand-off with security when we took our speak-out into the building lobby. These 30 November actions—coordinated by rank-and-file adjuncts, graduate teaching fellows, and undergraduate

students in the Adjunct Project, CUNY Struggle, Free CUNY, DSC, PSC, and more—have set the tone and tenacity of the campaign, so that hopefully it's not another several years before we get a new contract. A **4 December PSC Contract Rally** will meet outside the Graduate Center at 4:30pm to march to Baruch College and rally again at a Board of Trustees Public Hearing.

Our vision for Community stands in direct contrast to how Chase Robinson, James Milliken, and the CUNY administration deign to engage with us. As we demand participation in deciding the new CUNY Chancellor, we should also begin to advocate at the GC for a "No Confidence" vote against Chase Robinson. With a note of caution, we see that the DSC Plenary and PSC Delegate Assembly demonstrate similar problems of limited representational democracy (and an attendant lack of trust in rank-and-file involvement), even as we believe the DSC and PSC have students and campus workers' interests at heart.

This new participatory coalition of the Adjunct Project, CUNY Struggle, Free CUNY, DSC, and PSC rank-and-file assembles its strength in political heterogeneity and creative experimentation. As we map out the deliberative bodies that the GC and CUNY administration must address in accordance with university governance policies, we also shape these negotiations with protests and direct actions that operate beyond how we are rigidly governed. These new glimpses of student and worker solidarity outlined above are the kind needed for cross-title solidarity on the PSC level and cross-campus/cross-borough solidarity on the CUNY and NYC level. Even so, our grassroots groups have a similar problem of representation – we'll only be acting on behalf of the general GC and CUNY communities unless we re-arrange our efforts so that people can participate on a mass level from where they're positioned in the university and city.

Looking towards 2018, members of this new coalition will host a CUNY winter retreat on 20 January to share materials for syllabi and classroom announcements about BT&D, the Free CUNY campaign, and the



PSC contract, as well as to establish a Spring organizing plan. For the first week of class, actions around CUNY will highlight \$7k and free tuition as the two main demands across our communities. With broad involvement by *Advocate* readers and beyond, this collective work can amount to much more than fleeting sparks.

Women and the Russian Revolution

Tatiana Cozzarelli

Marxism is not always associated with the fight against sexism. It's often stereotyped into "Bernie Bros" or reduced into that one white guy who insists that discussing patriarchy divides the working class. It's true that some left groups adopt class reductionist positions, and it's just as true that socialist feminisms exist as well. In my view, class reductionist "Marxists" are not Marxist at all, for Marxism has taken up the question of gender oppression ever since its inception. August Bebel wrote *Woman and Socialism* in 1879; Engels wrote *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in 1884. A few years later, Clara Zetkin was editor for the German Social Democratic Party's women's newspaper *Equality*. She was the head of the women's division within the party, recruiting women to Marxist ideas and fighting for women to become subjects of the struggle against capitalism and patriarchy.

It is the Russian Revolution that best illustrates my argument. For leaders such as Lenin and Trotsky, revolution was insufficient to rid society of patriarchy. It was just the beginning of a profound social transformation of women's role in society, as well as a transformation of all social values and culture. This is demonstrated by the laws enacted by the Bolsheviks, as well as the broad vision and debates about

women's rights within the party. Yet, as Lenin put it, equality in law does not mean equality in life. As a result of the war and isolation, the real economic conditions for women's equality did not exist. It is under these dire circumstances that Stalinism took hold, erasing workers' victories and specifically, women's rights victories won by the Russian Revolution. It is from Stalinism that the dogma that Marxism is unconcerned with patriarchy was born.

Women as the Spark for the Russian Revolution

The context for the 1917 Russian Revolution is one of complete misery for the country and its people. Russia had recently gone through a series of wars: with Japan in 1905, a failed revolution in 1905, and World War I in 1914. During the World War I, the price of products went up 131 percent in Moscow and women would spend hours waiting in the blistering cold for basics necessities like wheat and sugar. While Marx believed that the socialist revolution would first occur in advanced industrialized nations, Russia stood far from the economic and productive power of countries such as Germany. Peasants made up eighty percent of the population—mostly illiterate and isolated from the political debates in the city. Peasant life was based on a strict division of labor and women were taught to be obedient to their father and later their husband. It was only after 1914 that women were allowed to separate from their husbands, but

only with a man's permission; likewise, women could only get a passport or a job with a man's permission.

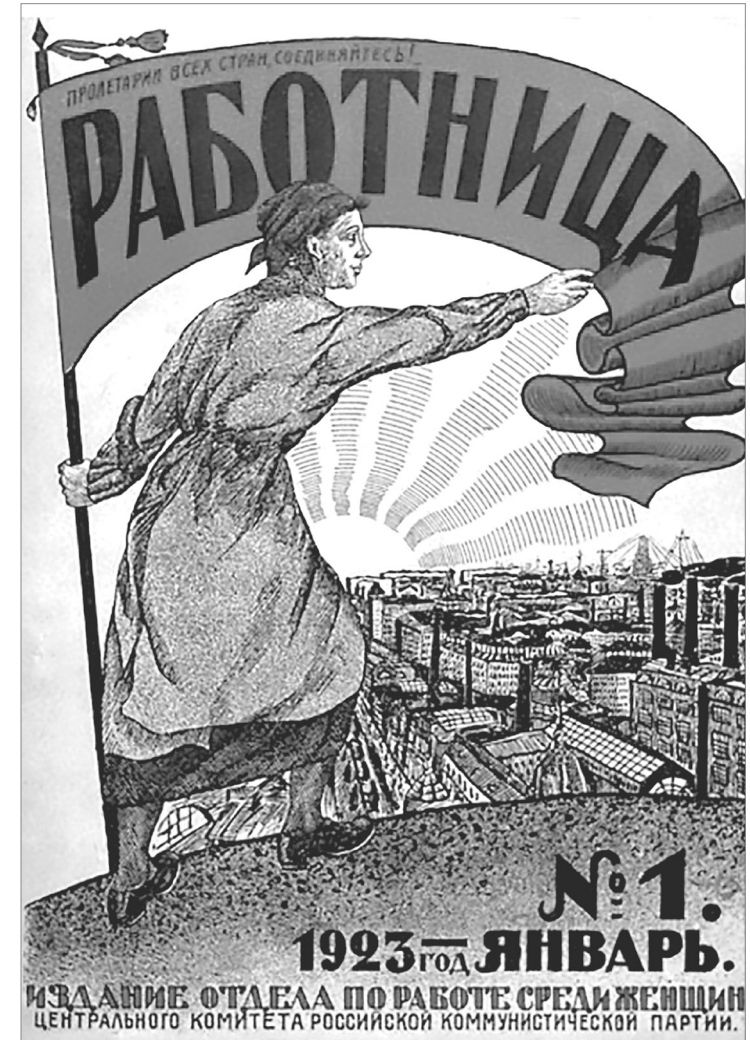
There was, however, a proportionally small but strong proletariat in the cities. World War I played an important role in increasing the weight of women workers in the Russian proletariat; as men went off to war, more women joined the workforce – women were nearly half the workforce by 1917. Women industrial workers suffered inequality as well, over the already miserable conditions afforded to workers. They were paid lower wages and were not allowed to organize within the same unions. And yet women were the spark for the Russian Revolution.

In late February 1917, the women in factories in Petrograd left their workplaces on strike, going to neighboring factories calling on the men to also leave their jobs and join. The Bolshevik newspaper, *Pravda* stated, "The first day of the revolution – that is the Women's Day, the day of the Women's Workers International! All honor to the International! The women were the first to tread the streets of Petrograd on that day!" After the February Revolution, like in the 1905 uprising, the workers organized delegate assemblies to make decisions about the burgeoning movement: soviets. The Bolshevik paper *Rabotnitsa* (*The Woman Worker*) was relaunched in May 1917 and discussed equality of the sexes, as well as the need for the State to take up domestic labor tasks. The stage for the October Revolution was set by the radical activism of women. It was the tireless organizing of women such as Aleksandra Kollontai, as well as the rest of the Bolshevik party that allowed the Bolsheviks to win over the majority in the soviets and take power in the October Revolution. Women also participated in the October Revolution, providing medical help, communication and even joining the Red Guard.

What Did the Bolsheviks Think About Women's Issues?

The Bolsheviks saw women's role in society as a measure of the society as a whole; it wouldn't be un-

til women had achieved full equality that they could consider the socialist revolution ultimately successful. After the revolution, immediate measures for women's liberation were taken. The Bolsheviks put forward four primary ways to support women's equality: free love, women's participation in the workforce, the socialization of domestic work and the end of the family. Long before the "Wages for Housework" campaign, the Bolsheviks argued that there was nothing natural or biological about women doing domestic work or raising children. This was an ideology perpetuated by capitalism that had no place in a socialist society, and thus liberating women from "domestic



1923 cover of *Rabotnitsa*, the women's journal published in the Soviet Union and Russia and one of the oldest Russian magazines for women and families – source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/93/Rabotnitsa.jpg>

slavery” was a central discussion within the party and an important task for the revolution. As Trotsky writes in *Revolution Betrayed*,

The revolution made a heroic effort to destroy the so-called “family hearth” – that archaic, stuffy and stagnant institution in which the woman of the toiling classes performs galley labor from childhood to death. The place of the family as a shut-in petty enterprise was to be occupied, according to the plans, by a finished system of social care and accommodation: maternity houses, creches, kindergartens, schools, social dining rooms, social laundries, first-aid stations, hospitals, sanatoria, athletic organizations, moving-picture theaters, etc. The complete absorption of the housekeeping functions of the family by institutions of the socialist society, uniting all generations in solidarity and mutual aid, was to bring to woman, and thereby to the loving couple, a real liberation from the thousand-year-old fetters.

Unlike the Wages for Housework campaign, the Bolsheviks sought to take housework out of the hands of individuals and put it in the hands of the state. As Argentine socialist Andrea D’Atri argues, the Bolsheviks did not want to maintain domestic work in the realm of the household, equally

dividing those banal tasks between men and women. Rather, they wanted to divorce these tasks from the family unit and put them in the hands of the state. In this way, the family and women in particular, would shed much of their “reproductive role.”

There was far from a consensus about these matters among the Bolsheviks; Lenin was notoriously conservative about sex, while Kollontai argued that our perceptions of sex and sexuality are socially constructed. There were lively debates about the role of parents in the upbringing of children; while some argued that parents would still play a central role, others argued that prioritizing familial ties was contrary to a socialist form of social organization. One Bolshevik educator even thought up the possibility of settlements that would be self-governed by children with the help of educational professionals.

Equality in Law

The Bolsheviks put these into practice. In 1918, less than a year after the Revolution, the Family Code was passed, which historian Wendy Goldman calls the “most progressive family legislation ever seen in the world.” It took the church out of the business of marriage, making marriage civil. It not only legalized divorce, but streamlined the process and made it accessible to anyone without needing to provide a reason. The code

stopped centuries old laws that privileged the private property of men and provided equal rights to all children – including children born outside of a registered marriage. If a woman did not know who the father of her child was, all of her sexual partners would share child support responsibilities. The author of the family code, Alexander Goikhbarg saw this law as transitory: one that was meant to strengthen neither the state nor the family, but to be a step towards the extinction of the family.

In 1920, abortion was legalized, making the Soviet Union the first country in the world to do so. Prostitution and homosexuality were no longer banned in the USSR. The Bolsheviks also opened public cafeterias, laundry-mats, schools and day care centers as a step towards the abolition of women’s double shift. It was a step towards placing the responsibility for domestic work on the state, not on individual women. The Bolsheviks saw women’s political participation as central to the advancement of the Soviet Union. They organized *Zhenotdel*, the women’s section of the party, made up of workers, peasants and housewives who organized women on the local level, while delegates from *Zhenotdel* were elected for internships in the government.

Although the Bolsheviks made major advances by passing laws

for women’s rights, they were very conscious that this was insufficient to guarantee true equality. They stressed the material basis for inequalities, but they also knew that a profound personal change would have to occur in members of the new Soviet society—a social reorganization won by proletarian revolution. This is what Lenin meant, perhaps, when he said “the proletariat cannot achieve complete freedom unless it achieves complete freedom for women.”

The Struggles of a Young Workers’ State

The young workers’ state had to face considerable challenges in its first years. It was attacked by fourteen imperialist armies and survived because of the morale and the sacrifices of workers and peasants in the Red Army. Facing its fourth war in twenty years, the people of the Soviet Union faced starvation and high unemployment. Women suffered the most under these conditions. Although under explicit orders not to do so, women were laid off before their male counterparts. Many of these women turned to prostitution as the only way to survive, and the 13th Congress of the Bolshevik Party discussed this problem explicitly, making new regulations to protect women’s employment arguing “that the preservation of women workers in production has political significance.”

Alexandra Kollontai (center) with female deputies at the Conference of Communist Women of the Peoples of the East, circa 1920 – source: <http://inrussia.com/woman-on-the-march>

A tenet of communism, to each according to her need and from each according to her ability, can only work in a society of plenty. Advanced capitalist mass production provides such a basis. However, when there isn’t enough, a bureaucracy eventually decides who has and who does not. This is why Lenin and so many other Bolsheviks placed their hopes in a German revolution, which would ensure that the USSR was not isolated. It would provide access to German industry and the goods it produced. However, the third international failed and the German revolution was squashed, leaving the Soviet Union to fend for itself. It is from the conditions of scarci-

ty that the counter revolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy emerged, going back on the advances made during the early years after the Russian Revolution. Stalinism went on to play a counterrevolutionary role around the world based on the theory of socialism in only one country.

Stalinism, the Counter Revolution and Women’s Rights

The Stalinist bureaucracy staged a counter revolution which murdered the left opposition within the Bolshevik party, locking up, exiling or killing those who attempted to carry on the legacy of the 1917 revolution. Theorists who wrote about the end of the



family such as Nikolai Krylenko were arrested and murdered while the author of the 1918 Family Code was taken to an asylum. When Stalin began to exhort the idea of socialism in only one country, he also re-criminalized homosexuality and prostitution. In 1936, Stalin banned abortion, arguing that women had the “noble duty” to be mothers. In order to put forward such reactionary ideas about gender, Stalin squashed the women’s committee within the Central Committee of the Communist Party, as well as all women’s organizing on the local level. He made government efforts to bring traditional gender roles, the very gender roles that the Bolsheviks had worked to break with. By 1944, Stalin had organized designations for women based on how many children they had. The “Order of Maternal Glory” created categories of women and provided women with 10 or more children with the designation of “Mother Heroine.”

The Left Opposition and The Bolshevik Legacy

As Stalin continued to play a counter-revolutionary role around the world, Trotsky created the Fourth International, which was dedicated to the legacy of the Bolsheviks. The Transitional Program that laid out the tasks for the Fourth International returns to the discussion of women’s rights as central to the socialist revolution. Trotsky says, “Opportunist organizations by their very nature concentrate their chief attention on the top layers of the working class and therefore ignore both the youth and the women workers. The decay of capitalism, however, deals its heaviest blows to the woman as a wage earner and as a housewife. The sections of the Fourth International should seek bases of support among the most exploited layers of the working class; consequently, among the women workers. Here they will find inexhaustible stores of devotion, selflessness and readiness to sacrifice.” Far from any class reductionism, Trotsky sees the organization of women in a revolutionary party as a central task for communists. Trotsky also

wrote about the theory of the permanent revolution in which he argues that society will undergo changes even after a socialist revolution, including changes in the role of women in society.

What Can We Learn?

A hundred years have passed since the Russian Revolution and it has been several decades since the last successful revolution. Some believe that revolution is impossible. Others believe that it will enshrine in law the racist, sexist or homophobic attitudes that some workers hold. Many equate Marxism with the struggle against exploitation, not the struggle against oppression.

When the Bolsheviks took power and immediately made laws supporting women’s rights, they had no illusions that even the most progressive gender legislation in the history of the world could end patriarchy. They had lively debates about how to end the family and what society might look like when all bourgeois morals and patriarchal prejudices were rooted out. They saw women as political subjects in the workers’ state, as well as in their own home and lives. Stalinism put an end to all these dreams, reverting the Soviet Union to the most patriarchal kind of society.

We cannot leave the legacy of Marxism to those who pervert its meaning to crude class reductionism. We cannot leave Marx’s legacy to Stalinism and the patriarchal and counter revolutionary construction of gender and society that it upheld. This is not about some fetish with Marx, but rather a concern with drawing from the most advanced revolutionary tradition for women’s liberation. Not leaving the legacy of Marxism to those who associate with class reductionism is important because they erase the legacy of the Bolsheviks, of Clara Zetkin, of Rosa Luxemburg and all of those Marxists who saw Marxism as a strategy for women’s liberation. Those who saw it as in fact the only strategy that could truly liberate all women.

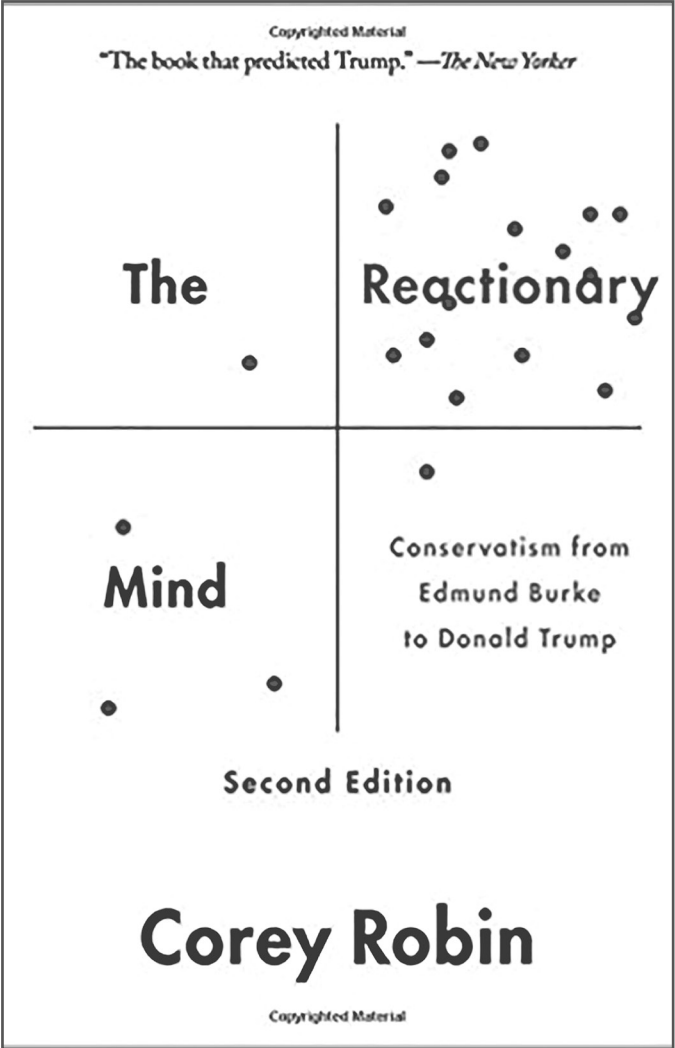
Between Value and Valor

Review of Corey Robin’s The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump

Asher Wycoff

The first edition of Corey Robin’s *The Reactionary Mind* was published two years into the Obama administration, at the height of the Tea Party reaction. Between the Three Percenters’ armed marches on the National Mall and Glenn Beck’s frantic chalkboard drawings on cable news, US conservatism seemed to have lost its bearings and its dignity. Popular magazines overflowed with laments for the lost, sensible conservative of yesteryear. One of the chief purposes of Robin’s intervention was to demonstrate that the seemingly new, fringe elements of the US right were, in fact, wholly in line with the conservative tradition.

Tracing the conservatism of the new millennium back to its origins in post-Revolutionary France, Robin contended the movement’s philosophical bedrock had never been a temperate “preference for the familiar,” as Michael Oakeshott would have it. Rather, conservatism has always been motivated by a mission to recover privilege either lost or threatened. It is animated not by a romantic attachment to the old regime, but by a desire to dismantle the old regime, purge it of its decadent elements, and radically re-



construct it in a more potent form. This is the conservative project in all its iterations, from the monarchism of Joseph de Maistre to the originalism of Antonin Scalia. One could, as the book's subtitle indicated, follow a steady path from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin.

For obvious reasons, *The Reactionary Mind* has gotten a revised second edition, with a revised subtitle, a scant six years later. The new edition is substantially reorganized, and swaps out a few of the more conspicuously dated chapters on neoconservative foreign policy for newer entries on Edmund Burke's concept of value, the Austrian School, and (who else?) Donald Trump. The new essays coalesce around a theme largely absent from the first edition: the right's longstanding project of instilling market economics with the prestige of nation-building. This tendency has been prominent in the Global North over the last forty years as market rationale has come to permeate every part of political life, but its origins can be found well before the dawning of the neoliberal era.

The foundations are laid in Burke's later writings, where Robin finds a conspicuously *modern* notion of value. For most classical economists, Adam Smith among them, a clear distinction existed between value and price. The former is intrinsic to the commodity, a substance comprised of the various expenditures of manufac-

turing (labor, rent, and capital, in Smith's account). The latter is a practical decision buyers and sellers make at market. Price is thus, at best, a rough approximation of value. Burke rejects this metaphysics, holding that "there is no value to a commodity apart from its price at market."

In a manner befitting a partisan of the aristocracy, however, Burke declines to banish value from the market altogether, opting instead to relocate it from the commodity to the parties of its production: capital and labor. The relation of capital to labor is a subject-object dyad. Capital decides value; labor has its value decided. Burke's conception of value is double-sided. When it comes to the commodity, value is price, and price is strictly subjective. But when it comes to class relations, value operates through an objective and immutable "chain of subordination." As Robin sees it, this is the inaugural statement of conservative economics: an affirmation of market spontaneity, propped up by fixed social hierarchies.

Burke's notion of commodity value as a subjective determination made at market becomes central to the marginal revolution and reaches maturity in the work of the Austrian School. Figures of the former, such as William Jevons and Carl Menger, theorize a more consistent system of the processes by which *all* market values (not just commodity val-

ues, but also the values of labor and capital) are spontaneously and subjectively decided. In turn, Austrian School economists, like F. A. Hayek, develop this system from a technical into a moral one. The Hayekian market is an ongoing "drama of choice," wherein individuals are compelled to determine their own hierarchies of desires and work to fulfill said desires to the best of their ability. The market is thus transformed from an expedient site of exchange to "the disciplining agent of all ethical action." For the Austrian School, Robin contends, the market gives rise to a Nietzschean "great politics" of strength, mastery, and civilization-building. It is the realm in which both economic and cultural values are decided, the realm in which great men are made.

This brings us to the obligatory final chapter on Trump. Like the first edition, the newer, shinier *Reactionary Mind* sets out to combat conventional wisdom. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, once-maligned elements of the US right enjoyed a tremendous rehabilitation in liberal outlets. Neocon hardliners like Bill Kristol were rebranded as "moderate" voices against Trumpism. Glenn Beck found new allies in Samantha Bee and *The Atlantic's* editorial board. *New York Magazine* celebrated George W. Bush for (reportedly) calling Trump's inaugural address "some weird shit."

However strongly one may object to them, the implicit consensus now ran, yesterday's conservatives were of a finer breed than Trump.

Robin contests this consensus at length in the second edition's closing chapter. Little about Trump is especially novel, he notes. While "the racism of the Trumpist right is nastier than its most recent predecessors," it finds ample precedent in Nixon and Reagan. While Trump's "freewheeling disregard of norms and rules" is unusually pronounced, a performative aversion to business-as-usual has been common on the US right for generations. Ditto for Trump's faux populism and his cult of elite victimhood. Trump is not an aberration, but an *amplification* of currents long pulsing through the conservative vein. What needs to be explained is thus not where Trump came

from; his origins in the movement are plain enough. Rather, the question is *why* US conservatism gave rise to a bloviator like him in 2016.

Robin's answer comes in three parts, the first two of which are not entirely satisfying. First, Trump's "mix of racial and economic populism" spoke clearly to "the lower orders of the right," assuaging the anxieties of a white working class left behind by the Republican Party mainstream. Its truth-value aside, this is a painfully familiar argument printed and reprinted in thousands of op-ed pages following the election. Robin does improve on the usual iterations of it, correctly interpreting Trump's "populist" appeal as a factor in keeping old voters rather than mobilizing new ones. Nonetheless, anyone who has read even a modest amount of post-election commentary may



Corey Robin outside his apartment in Park Slope. Hostile reviews of his new book, "The Reactionary Mind," have prompted much back and forth on the Web – Credit: Sasha Maslov for The New York Times

feel their eyes glaze over at this point.

Second, Robin suggests that Trump rose to prominence because he most tidily encapsulates the present state of US conservatism: disorganization and directionlessness. This is exacerbated by the absence of a strong left. In happier times, leftist organization provided vital opposition for conservatives, imposing discipline and giving the movement a sense of purpose. As this opposition weakens, so does the right's focus, and before long it collapses into heap of inconsistencies and epithets. This line of argument follows a central thesis from the first edition – that conservatism is most successful as an opposition movement – through to its logical conclusion. As Edmund Burke remarked of the French Third Estate, US conservatives have found punishment in their success. In the process of triumphing over the left, they have become fractured and unmoored. This is how we ended up with a Republican Party that controls the House, the Senate, and the Presidency, and still remains unable to enact most of its agenda.

Third, and most pertinently, Trump brings to a head a key riddle of conservatism generally: he reconciles “great politics” and market economics. The neoconservative orthodoxy that preceded Trump emphasized war-making and state-building over market expansion, adopting “two cheers for capitalism” as a catchword. The free market was a social good, certainly, but not a good-in-itself. For Goldwater and Reagan, it was legitimated through its utility in the Cold War. The free market and an “adventurous” foreign policy were parallel dimensions of the fight against Communism. Even after the end of history, war-making remained the dominant modality of US conservatism. In the second Bush administration, unfettering the market at home took a backseat to fighting terror abroad.

In the shadow of the Great Recession, however, with all the bubbling discontent it fostered, the conservative balance between economic and foreign policy became increasingly uneasy. Trump resets

this balance, sinking great politics into the economic domain. For Trump, the market itself is the terrain of momentous power struggles, of heroism, and of national glory. Trump's promises to restore jobs, restore “fair” trade relations with Mexico and China, to restore the coal industry, etc., are promises to restore honor. They are promises to return each link in the “chain of subordination” to its proper place. Trump's anti-elitism consists not in a condemnation of elites generally, but a promise to reestablish a ruling elite comprised of only, as he puts it, “the sharpest, toughest, and most vicious people in the world.” The refiner's fire of market competition will purify the social body, restore order to the nation, make it great again.

An abridged version of the chapter on Trump has been published in the latest issue of *n+1*, under the title “Triumph of the Shill.” Presented in that rhetorical context, as a standalone piece of commentary, one more drop in the “Leftist Analyses of Trump” bucket, it isn't particularly striking. Robin centers the essay on a close-reading of *The Art of the Deal*, which is a clever conceit, but not quite enough to make the piece stand out in the oversaturated Trump Studies market.

This issue is attenuated, however, in the context of the book. One thing the new edition of *The Reactionary Mind* does exceptionally well is situate each individual essay within a clear thematic arc. The result is a political theory book that *feels* like a political theory book, whereas the first edition felt more like an anthology of magazine essays (because it was). As Robin traces the twin threads of great politics and bourgeois economics throughout conservative intellectual history, the chapter on Trump appears on the horizon as a natural destination. It is not a climax, but a denouement. It is the vantage point from which the reader may look upon the roads already traveled and, like Benjamin's angel of history, watch them unfold backward into a single catastrophe.

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DOCTORAL STUDENTS' COUNCIL PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING PROCESS 2017-2018



Our Goals: Why Participatory Budgeting?

The Doctoral Students' Council aims for Participatory Budgeting to have the following impacts:

- 1. Open up Spending of Student Activity Fee:** Allow students a greater role in spending decisions, and inspire increased transparency throughout CUNY.
- 2. Expand Civic Engagement:** Engage more students in activities within the GC community.
- 3. Develop New Community Leaders and Infrastructures:** Build the skills, knowledge, and capacity of students.
- 4. Build Community Infrastructure:** Inspire students to more deeply engage and invest in the GC community, while also developing a sustainable project to improve the community.
- 5. Make Spending More Equitable:** Generate spending decisions that are fairer, so resources go where they are needed most.

Proposals

The proposal submission deadline passed as of November 30, 2017 at 11:59 PM. Depending on the number of applications, partial awards may be granted in lieu of a full award. If it is feasible for your project to receive a partial award, please indicate the amount of both the full and partial amount of funds requested for the project. In general, the following will be considered approximate amounts for full vs. partial awards:

- Full award amount: up to \$3000
- Partial award amount: up to \$ 1500

For questions about the Participatory Budgeting application process, please email dsc@cunydisc.org. Comments or feedback about the process this year is helpful as it may shape the process in years to come.

Voting on Submitted Proposals

All students registered during the fall 2017 semester will be eligible to vote. Before the voting period ends, there will be a Town Hall meeting where eligible applicants will interface with students to explain and answer questions about their project proposals.

Timeline

- October 20: Participatory Budgeting process is announced
- November 30: Deadline for Participatory Budgeting project proposals at 11:59 PM
- December 1-December 8: Ad-hoc Review Committee will review final submissions for eligibility. Voting system is prepared.
- December 11-20: Voting opens
- December 11-15 (Scheduled on one or two afternoons/evenings during this week): Town Hall meeting where eligible applicants present their projects (Format: Poster Session)
- December 20: Voting closes at 11:59 PM
- January 2: Winner(s) announced
- January 2-May 15: Project spending and implementation