

# Counter-Response to Richard Wolff

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There is no middle course (for humanity has not created a "third" ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or above-class ideology). Hence to belittle Socialist ideology *in any way*, to *deviate from it in the slightest degree*, means strengthening bourgeois ideology.

-- Lenin, *What is to be Done?*

## THE RE- (AS IN RE-THINKING MARXISM) OF REVISIONISM

### ONE

Richard Wolff has become a big boss. A big left boss. And like all bosses he sees any critique-al engagements with his (very successful) writings first and foremost as a threat to his power as a left boss. In his "reply" to me therefore he, like all left bosses, is primarily concerned with protecting his territorial power. This is one reason -- among others -- why his "reply" is really not a "reply" to my text but a tirade against revolutionary Marxism -- which he sees as the most threatening threat to his growing propaganda empire (Rethinking Marxism) and the market value of his writings. It is, after all, not the theoretical, philosophical or political analysis of his writings that have made him a member of the established left. Rather, it is their soothing rhetoric, reconciliatory message, revisionist tenor and counter-revolutionary thrust that have made his writings so popular and made him the boss of the RE-industry<sup>1</sup>. The RE- (as in Rethinking Marxism) is, of course, the code of a reversion: the turning back of radical and revolutionary work in order to put in its place an ameliorative, reformist and revisionist centrist view. Richard Wolff is the Blair of the U.S. left and his "reply" to me is one of his many efforts to carve a "third" way (RE-) between Revolutionary Marxism and capitalism. He has -- this is the Blair Age -- managed successfully to do so. Like all good capitalists -- Blair model again -- therefore, he is concerned to get rid of the "competition" -- whom he marginalizes as "sectarian."

2. For Blair (as his systematic silencing of the revolutionary left in the Labour Party shows) anyone who does not go along with his fairytale about the left is "sectarian." In other words, there is a "third way" (see Anthony Giddens -- his political-philosophical guru's book -- *The Third Way*) and then there are "sects." "Sectarian" for the Wolff-Blair axis is anyone who "still" believes in revolution, in labor, in class and in class struggle. What Wolff calls "class" is really a code for "lifestyle" -- a return of Weberian "life

chances" in the market. The time, it seems, has come when sectarianism is the only remaining name for the revolutionary (all other names have been erased from the lexicon of the Western Left) -- which is another way of saying that the time has come to stand up for Red Sectarianism if that is the only space available now to continue the revolutionary tradition of Marxism in the face of triumphalist global capitalism. . . which has now as its consultants Wolff, Blair, Butler, Aronowitz, Jameson,. . . .

## TWO

"The bourgeoisie," as Marx and Engels explain, "cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society" (*The Communist Manifesto* 83). The rapidity with which the bourgeoisie now updates the means of production requires a "force" that will augment and rapidly disseminate the ideologies necessary both to (re)producing and maintaining a "varied" (hierarchizable) but quiescent workforce (one from which surplus-value -- "profit" -- can be extracted with little resistance) and to managing the antagonisms that emerge within and among the hierarchized worker-subjects being invented and re-invented. From the middle-class fraction being rapidly disaggregated in the moment of "globalization," and through a system of concessions (in the last instance, economic), capitalism has produced that requisite "force": the assimilationist left. It is in relation to this historical development that Richard Wolff's attack on "absurdly sectarian diatribes" must be understood.

## THREE

The thought climate necessary to represent assimilationism as the reasonable and "natural" way of the left today is constructed daily in the so-called left publications in the U.S. From *Social Text* to *The Nation*, the assimilationist left is busy distracting the proletariat from its objective interest in abolishing class society. In the place of the red -- ruthless and revolutionary -- critique of everything existing, which aims to produce a proletariat that is conscious of and can explain and pressure in order to break existing contradictions caused by material contradictions the assimilationist left advances some form or other of "coalitionist" politics. This politics is founded on the notion that to posit that there exists a revolutionary class which "holds the future in its hands" (Marx and Engels *The Communist Manifesto* 91) is to do violence to ("reduce") the plenitude of existing, identitarian social movements. For example, Judith Butler (a star in Wolff's propaganda industry), in an essay in *Social Text* ("Merely Cultural") that was first presented at the 1996 RE-conference (RE- is for revisionism as in REthinking Marxism) in Amherst, Massachusetts (organized by Wolff and Stephen Resnick, among others), asserts that "to fault new social movements for their vitality, as some have done ["orthodox" Marxists], is precisely to refuse to understand that any future for the Left will have to build on the basis of movements that compel democratic participation, and that any effort to impose unity upon such movements from the outside will be rejected once again as a form of vanguardism dedicated to the production of hierarchy and dissension, producing the very factionalization that it asserts is coming from outside itself" (270). I leave aside here Butler's pedestrian understanding of vanguard which is clearly based on

her reading of political tabloids rather than Lenin. Rejecting the classical Marxist critique that difference is produced by property relations and crystallized in culture by the labor aristocracy in the service of capitalism as "natural" permutations of the Derridean-based "*self-difference of movement itself*" (269 original emphasis), Butler advocates "that these movements articulate their goals under the pressure of each other without therefore exactly becoming each other" (269). "The self-difference of movement itself" is that which enables the very difference that opens the possibility of articulating difference, "articulating" in a double sense: any difference can be spoken, but *that* it can be, in Butler's framework, always points back to and demands "recognition" of and "respect" for the "others'" voices which are its condition of possibility. The goals of those movements, therefore, must not be suppressed but must also be allowed "voice." The ensuing "dialog," which reiterates the "self-difference of movement itself," provides "experience" of the "common ground" of possibility of difference, awareness of which is the condition of possibility for "negotiation" and coalition. For what specific coalitionist "goal" beyond ongoing negotiative dialog, however, it is "impossible" and even useless to say, for "what makes difference's articulation possible is at the same time what makes any final or closed articulation impossible" (269).

Apparently attempting to "go beyond" such negotiative dialog, which in their view would be "non-progressive," Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Cornel West, in both *The Future of American Progressivism: An Initiative for Political and Economic Reform* and in *The Nation's* "First Principles" series (which I will focus on here), "reject the choice between a view that would promote interests without reimagining and remaking institutional arrangements [the "inconclusive bargaining among organized interest groups"], and a view that sees such arrangements as pieces of a take-it-or-leave-it system [Marxism]" (12). What they advocate is "motivated, sustained and cumulative tinkering with institutional arrangements" (11; 15). While unlike Butler (they are "different" from her) they acknowledge that the "basic problems" of "America" are caused by "the economy," and even criticize politics as determined by "the ability of money to talk" (12), Unger and West nevertheless claim to reject "a blueprint to map out a path" (12). Instead, they "propose" -- and as if it were not a "blueprint" -- "a deepening of democracy: strengthening the tools for the collective discussion and solution of collective problems" (13). For the negotiative dialog of Butler's "reiterative" coalitional politics, Unger and West substitute "deep" democratic dialog as the basis of "tinkering" coalitional politics.

Despite the "differences" in these "visions" of what a left politics needs to be based on, both are assimilationist left proposals, fundamentally because in their rejection of a revolutionary class unified ("articulated") by the bas(e)-ic and planet-wide capitalist practice of extraction of surplus-value, they say "yes" to capitalism. "Yes," we are stuck with capitalism, and "yes," we will work within its existing boundaries in an effort to produce change. The assimilationist left contributes to the fact that, as Arthur Rymer writing for *Proletarian Revolution* argues, "today, another specter haunts the world, the specter of financial collapse and economic depression. The reason the specter is not communism is that the leadership of the working class in every country accepts the capitalist system and is thus unable and unwilling to defend workers against the capitalists' attacks" (1).

Katrina vanden Heuvel, editor of *The Nation*, agrees with Unger and West that the left needs to build a "Progressive Majority." Her plan for how to do so reveals the marketeering tendencies of the assimilationist left. Rather than critique the capitalist class practices producing Unger and West's talking heads of money, whose real "idiocy" is transformed "into intelligence" precisely on the basis of power derived from the theft of proletariat labor-power (Marx "The Power of Money" 168-9), vanden Heuvel wants to tap the "enormous potential market for a new progressive politics"(12). Rather than educate the proletariat to critique through the public practice of it, so that the class society that now ruthlessly "dumbs down" workers and thereby reduces the possibility of a real and RED democracy to a parodic and dissimulating deMOCKracy (which Unger and West think they can "improve" by chastising "Americans" to resolve their "ambivalence" about politics [13]), vanden Heuvel wants to SELL the "progressive" platform to the proletariat! "With the different pieces in place (labor commitment, expertise, local coalitions)," vanden Heuvel argues, "now is the time to build the progressive equivalent of the Christian Coalition. Such an organization could identify and train thousands of people to run for local, state and national office; provide support to candidates (training, polling, message development, legislative assistance); run our kinds of ballot initiatives (more on campaign finance, on a living wage, on the right to organize, on investing in kids rather than prisons); provide a natural vehicle for coordinated national issue campaigns; and build a network of talk-show guests and pundits with a coordinated message" (12). With the very power (of "money") stolen from the proletariat, the "progressives" aim to coalesce ("articulate") the "differential" "pieces" by "marketing" (12) a political program to them. Knowingly "marketing" a "program" to the proletariat, rather than educating them to exposure of the contradictory forces already aiming to force their ideological acceptance of "what is," is a cynical, marketeering move which is necessary to critique.

Even Martha Nussbaum -- no revolutionary herself -- sees through the political shell-game of the left when, in her essay on Judith Butler, "Professor of Parody," she writes that there "lies a dangerous quietism" in the argument that "it is within the oppressive structures that we must find little spaces for resistance, and this resistance cannot hope to change the overall situation" (43).

What advances the marketeering of the left is a Group -- what I have theorized in "Desire and Class" as the labor aristocracy of the knowledge industry constituted through concession from the rapidly disaggregating middle-class fraction -- whose resources and interest in maintaining the condition of possibility of those resources (class society) compels and enables it to fight for the capitalist practices always threatening to disaggregate it entirely, but without which it cannot exist at all. The work of this Group, integrated into the right and effectively acting as a wing of the right, is to augment ideologies by arguing that workers should push for and accept concession upon concession with what Unger and West call "an informed vision" involving the notion that "piecemeal" change will produce "cumulative change," and that this "is the way and the solution" (and this immediately following their rejection of "a blueprint to map out a path" [12]).

The historical record has already revealed this vision to be a lie. "Progressive" assimilationist politics is an unabashed recycling of a past falsehood as the horizon of possibility for the future. That past falsehood, which emerged out of the democratic socialist movement's rejection of the revolutionary principles of Marxism in the late nineteenth century, is that of evolutionary socialism. Eduard Bernstein, who along with Karl Kautsky and Konrad Schmidt did much to propagate evolutionary socialism, wrote in the pages of *Neue Zeit* (1891) and wrote again in *Evolutionary Socialism* (1899) that "the movement means everything for me and that what is *usually* called the final aim of socialism' is nothing" (xxix). It was this earlier form of the current assimilationist left that weakened the German Social Democratic Party such that during World War I, it voted to support its imperialist government. Today, Butler argues for ongoing dialog, vanden Heuvel for "a third force" using the Democratic Party as its base (12), and Unger and West write yet again what Bernstein wrote: "Progressives do not need to create a blueprint to map out a path. . . . The direction -- and its effects upon people's understanding of their interests and identities as well as upon their practical problems -- is what matters" (12). As Rosa Luxemburg argued regarding Bernstein's vision, this "program" abandons the aim and keeps the movement; "but as there can be no socialist movement without a socialist aim," it will end by renouncing the movement ("Reform or Revolution" 84).

Such evolutionary, assimilationist movements need justification to alibi their liberal bourgeois practices. Today, they manufacture that justification through the charge of "sectarianism." If having revolutionary ideas and acting on revolutionary principle means "sectarian," then what is necessary now is indeed a New Sectarianism to combat the U.S. left's New Assimilationism. This, in outline, is the politico-theoretical frame within which Wolff marks my text as "sectarian" and "replies" to it. Now my "reply" to the "reply."

#### FOUR

Whenever the very framing assumptions of established practices are critiqued in order to begin changing them, the defense of those practices almost uniformly takes the form of a defense of reason itself. Wolff's "reply" is just such a defense. In a rearguard attempt to re-establish his authority to legislate "the particular prioritizations proper to Marxism," his opening move is to defend, against the "absurdity" of Marxist critique, the certainty and "reasonableness" of his and Resnick's "Marxian" revisionist "understanding" ("for renewing and rebuilding the Marxist theoretical and political traditions") with an attack on certainty itself: it is "absurd," unreasonable. In order to establish the authority by which he can claim that what I have written is an "absurdly sectarian diatribe" while what he has written and will write is "reasonable," he treats the knowledge practices in question -- which are historical -- as "natural" practices that are beyond change. Instead of critiquing them, one must simply accept them as "facts" and get adjusted to them. This is an instance of cynical pragmatism deployed to defend the status quo of anti-democratic, exploitative practices through silencing (as "illegitimate") public critique of those practices.

The purpose of such a defense is, of course, to render any critique of entrenched knowledge practices as itself unknowledgeable, self-satisfying and, certainly, (to use his favored word) SAVAGE. (Articulated in his favored word are the racism and the bourgeois essentialism that underlie the marxian view of history, contradictorily in the writing of a person who has put forth his "marxism" as anti-essentialist and contested all revolutionary Marxist practices as the other of his own -- that is, as "essentialist.") Retracing the steps in this tested protocol, Wolff declares he "will leave to the many others -- likewise blithely, grotesquely and probably equally inaccurately savaged in this article -- the decision as to whether it is worth responding." Here, by re-inscribing "lack" of certainty ("probably") regarding the "accuracy" of my critique of "others" within the field of his own certainty that he and Resnick have been "inaccurately savaged," the boss of the RE-industry reassures the reader that he is a person of reason, the exemplary post-subject who in refusing certainty about anything (save his own "exact words" and the value of continual RE-thinking; more on this later), is open and fair-minded.

In thus offering his "credentials" to all equally open and fair-minded persons (subjects of his RE-thinking empire), he has already engaged in the "real" business at hand: to attack my text and discredit my argument as "unreasonable." His business here can "be brief," and the "brevity. . . itself [be] part of the substantive critical response" because not only do big bosses have behind them the power of property (which they rely on to REpresent, packaged in big books by big presses, their idiocy as intelligence), but because what they write simply adds another (thin, but resealing, resuturing, . . . reassuring) layer to the bourgeois commonsense, to which they appeal with a reiteration of it. Why is my critique a "tired old formula"? BECAUSE, Wolff claims, "both Marxist and non-Marxist theoretical work" has "provided profound critiques of those formulas." In other words, it is "unreasonable" to critique knowledge practices (criticisms of Marxism) that are common! In Wolff's text, as I have indicated, the "established" -- "what is" -- has the status of a "law of nature" to which one must assimilate one's practices or be regarded as a "freak." The "fact" that many engage in a certain knowledge practice, in short, puts that knowledge practice beyond question! How far would feminists, who fought the "reason" of unfair practices, have gotten if they had obeyed the law put forth in Wolff's "reply": if it is commonly practiced, it must be fair! "Global" injustice, according to Wolff's "reasonableness," must be "just" since it is commonly practiced.

## FIVE

Ideology always treats the oppositional logic either with "silence" or with a repetition of the very premises under critique, hoping that such a repetition will reinstitute them as the "truth" of the matter. Wolff's reaction (it is more a spontaneous recoil rather than a considered argument) carries out the ideological work of burying in the folds of bourgeois reiteration any questioning of the premises upon which established knowledge practices are founded. His reply, in other words, is only on the surface about "my" text. It is in actuality a passionate defense -- against the "absurdity" and "savagery" of critique -- of assimilationist knowledge practices and the unjust division of labor that produces and requires those knowledge practices. Critique, on the dominant "reason," is quite "absurd"

in pressuring the capitalist contradiction and demanding equity. The "politics" of current practices, that is, are more "overdetermined" than critique acknowledges. Critique is "savage" in its demand for equality and justice whereas his and Resnick's (big) book is complicated, subtle ("overdetermined") and. . . civil.

Wolff's program merges with the pragmatist program of Richard Rorty, who argues that "there are no unwobbling pivots, and that seeking objectivity is just a matter of getting as much intersubjective agreement as you can" (45). The pragmatist program-- which equates "truth" with "usefulness" but never asks "useful for which class?" -- now finds even fuller expression in the neopragmatist return to civility advanced by, for example, Mark Kingwell. Kingwell argues that "the constraints of civility, as I conceive them, are . . . two-sided: on the one hand, a willingness not to say all the true, or morally excellent, things one could say; and, on the other hand, an interpretive sensitivity to the legitimacy of claims made by others" (44). Kingwell's approach is that of the post-al reader who takes comfort in the belief that the "social" is "post" every injustice and all that is left to be done is to tinker with talk. He argues for refraining from saying "all that is true" "in the political-pragmatic interests of continuing the conversation. . . . I do this not because the conversation is culturally uplifting or edifying, but because the conversation is all we have -- politically we are what we say, and social compromises are forged nowhere else than in a vigorous public discourse" (44-45). This ignores the historical necessity of work towards revolution, which involves the refusal to compromise because such compromise in class society always means compromise on the terms of the ruling class and consequently assimilation to the terms of class society.

Angela Davis' recent comments indicate the extent to which the Western Left has become a "yes" left to the state. The "assumption [with the election of Clinton] that now, yes, the state will fulfill the goal that was set for it during the transformative period of the civil rights struggle" has "led to the absorption of oppositional organizations -- and sometimes almost entire movements -- into state structures" (307). Using her own "work. . . on prisons" as "a case in point," Davis argues that while "in many instances people truly believe that they will be able to bring about radical transformations from and within new positions of state power," "under such conditions [working from within state structures] transformation is conceptualized very differently. The formulation of radical prison work as leading toward the reduction of prison populations and the abolition of jails and prisons as the primary means of addressing social problems such as crime, unemployment, undereducation, etc. recedes and is replaced with the goal of creating better, more progressive jails and prisons. . . . once one becomes integrated into state structures, it becomes increasingly difficult to think about ways of developing radical oppositional practices" (307-8). Against the "yes" left's self-interested "thinking differently" about transformation, it is necessary to advance a politics that refuses and critiques assimilation to the knowledge practices that relegitimate the theft by the capitalist class, on an international scale, of the "surplus-value" produced by the proletariat. Doing so means critiquing the violent exclusion of critique itself, violence now carried out under the sign of "civility."

Ignoring the material conditions which determine the possibility of being able to think that all that is now necessary is tinkering talk, Wolff returns the "social" to a civility determined by existing hegemonic configuration. In the framework of civility, questions and confrontations solicited by historical necessity can be deemed unsolicited, incivil, and therefore suppressible through appeal to moral imperatives -- treated as transhistorical "truths" -- of what is right and wrong, imperatives which ignore and displace what is historically necessary. Wolff lends the support of his RE-industry to all the think tanks concerned to foster civility, among them the National Commission on Civic Renewal; the Penn National Commission on Society, Culture and Community; and the New Century/New Solutions Project. There is also the Institute for Civil Society, whose head Pam Solo argues that "what we need to do is have a civilized conversation and civilized disagreements, all with a commitment to solving problems and not winning points" (quoted in Greenhut). And, of course, there is Mobil Corporation whose *New York Times* ads announce that the goal of becoming a "great, global company" "demands great, global citizenship," citizenship Mobil pumps money into producing: "over the years, we have learned that partnerships thrive when common ground is discovered, shared and nurtured. To bring nations and cultures closer together and to demonstrate our long-term commitment, Mobil has supported a rich procession of art and cultural projects around the world" ("Great"). It is this corporate interest in producing "a great, global citizenship" -- one that will ultimately make exploitation easier and therefore profit for the capitalist class greater -- that drives the interest in civility.

Benjamin DeMott for *The Nation* argues that the war against incivility launched by such (corporate) commissions and endorsed by President Clinton marks the issue of civility as a stake in maintaining class society: "The incivility railed at by the elite should be seen as a protest by Americans outside the ranks of the publicly articulate against the conduct of their presumed betters. The current orthodoxy on volunteerism and immoderacy shuts its ears to this protest, simultaneously beatifying the undeserving and sapping democratic energy and will. Sold as diagnosis or nostrum, civility is in fact a theater of operations -- the classless society's new class war zone" (12). Against the "elite" attack on incivility, he argues that "the new incivility' needs to be recognized. . . for what it is: a flat-out, justified rejection of leader-class claims to respect, a demand that leader-class types start looking hard at themselves" (14).

DeMott is accurate, as far as he goes, but he does not go far enough in his explanation of civility as a stake in class war. Ultimately, his is a neo-liberal position that stops short of a revolutionary critique of capitalism at the point it substitutes the "elite" and the "leader-class" for the ruling capitalist class. Writing for *The People*, Michael James argues for the revolutionary necessity of polemical critique (what Wolff would call "savage" "incivility"). "Capitalism," he argues, "works against civility" because "our economic relations are rude and even violent." He asks: "Is it polite to downsize workers? Is it polite to produce and distribute for the gain of a mere few? Is it polite to be one of the most warlike nations on the planet, with more than 150 military interventions since 1850? Is it polite to deny health insurance to 40 million Americans? Is it polite for an idle ruling class to appropriate the wealth created by a productive working class? Is it polite to abandon so many of our children to poverty that even the bourgeois National School



Boards Association is forced to admit that America's children are a truly endangered species'? Is it polite to pollute the air that we breathe and the water that we drink?" (11) James here indicates that workers are taught to read these material incivilities as the way things are, as civil. Confronting them is repressed through the ideology that confrontation of "what is" amounts to "barbarianism" that would altogether abolish the civil society which, since the possibility of revolution has been jettisoned by post-al ideologues, the proletariat believes is the only bulwark against the state.

At base, the argument for civility is an argument for civil society to accept the laws of motion of the free market policed by the state, as critique of the *Cato Handbook for Congress: Restoring Civil Society* reveals. Tom G. Palmer, the author of the *Handbook*, argues that political society has displaced the civil society in which "industry, civility, rectitude, science, and prosperity arise" (1). Political society, he argues, is fundamentally "coercive" (1;2) while civil society is "voluntary" (2). The core of this voluntarism is, he claims, the "freedom of the individual, who voluntarily assumes obligations and accepts responsibility for his or her behavior" (1). This freedom and individuality is pre-empted by the coerciveness of the government, institutionalized in such social nets as social security, welfare, government regulation of business, and the war on drugs (2-3). These, he asserts, delink rights from responsibility by according responsibility to the state, such that the consequences of the exercise of rights do not fall to the individual who exercises them but are "shifted to unwilling parties." By delinking cause from effect, he argues, the conditions through which individuals might learn to act responsibly are removed, the consequence being the production of irresponsible individuals and, ultimately, the breakdown of society (3). In short, it is the displacement of civil society by the government -- political society (the state) -- that is the cause of the breakdown of the family (3) and, notably, economic crises, for example, the post-1973 oil embargo decline in economic growth (4).

Of course, this argument can be made only by ignoring that material conditions, as James indicates, put limits on both "individuality" and "responsibility." That is, the argument presumes a level playing field of rights in capitalist society when, as Marx argues, in capitalist society, "between equal rights, force decides" (*Capital* vol. 1 235). This is because capitalist society is not based on individuals, but on classes, and the working class, with nothing to sell but its labor-power, is thereby forced to sell that labor-power to the capitalist class in order to meet their needs. Palmer, however, following F.A. Hayek, presumes that the market is not coercive (2). What his argument aims to do is garner support, through the ideology of civility (which is at base the ideology of the individual whose behavior conforms to dominant notions of style), for the deregulation of business he privileges and argues for more of (3-4). Why does he privilege the deregulation of business? Because from his bourgeois perch, civil society based on the free play of the market has "worked relatively well" (!). . . "with the notable exception of the very uncivil institution of slavery" (6)! The violent reduction here of slavery to an incivility, simply a glitch in the development of individual responsibility, is symptomatic of the dependence of the ideology of civility on the erasure of the material relations of production that make it possible.

What is at the core of arguments for civility is an attempt to remove from public view the binary opposition of bourgeoisie and proletariat by undercutting -- through the threat or charge of "incivility" -- committed, principled debate. In the framework of civility as outlined by Palmer and backed by Resnick and Wolff, Inc., the committed, principled and historically necessary debate enabled by critique is blocked by threats and turned into Solo's "civilized disagreements"; that is, red critique is compromised and opened to reform through an injunction (actually, it is a buy-out leveraged by those with the money to "support a rich procession of art and cultural projects around the world") to deploy "requisite" (determined by the interests of the ruling class and policed by Palmer and Wolff's RE-industry) linguistic protocol. If, then, an argument is in any way aimed at exposing a bourgeois-interested basis and does so in an uncompromising way, so that it will *not* be open to assimilation to capitalist interests, that argument immediately falls under the heading "incivil," and anyone is licensed to shut the speaker up on the basis of the "incivility." The argument against incivility and for civility is an extension of legislation and corporate action aimed at dismantling workers' ability to strike. The strike is, in the view of the bourgeoisie, an incivil act, so incivil, in fact, that it has been outlawed far longer than it has been allowed. It is incivil because it is -- albeit often in the register of trade-unionist spontaneity -- a form of public pedagogy in which the capitalist class's "right" to appropriate labor-power is massively and publicly put in question, refuted, and acted on.

What the discourse of civility aims to do is to set free the play of market forces so that nothing -- least of all questioning of entrenched practices -- will stand in the way of accumulation of PROFIT. In deploying the discourse of civility, Wolff is simply ensuring that his RE-empire will remain PROFITABLE.

## SIX

In accord with the coalitionist line of "respecting" the "other" (Wolff's practice of "civility in refusing to "speak for" any other persons I critique and in labeling critique as "absurd"), Wolff performs the Butlerian practice that professes to hold open "space" in order to enable the "dialog" which provides the "common ground" of experience of the "self-movement of difference itself." In his metaphysics, critique does not "represent a class" (Marx, Afterword to the Second German Edition of *Capital* vol. 1 16), but is reduced to an expression of individual priority for which there can be no knowable, fundamental cause. By substituting individual priority for the priority of class, Wolff both jettisons theory as an integrated world-historical understanding of social totality -- as Lenin writes, "without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement" (*What Is To Be Done?* 28) -- and he reinscribes the bourgeois pillar of individualism which upholds private property. This, among other places, is where Wolff's theory of "class" is revealed for what it is: a neoWeberian legitimization of "life chances" wrapped up in a marxian terminology. His notion of "class" is, in other words, the return -- in the moment of "RE" -- of the cult of the individual.

Of course, Wolff's individuals are not those who are "unique" owing to any "essence." But as I have already indicated, Wolff's anti-essentialism is a cynical use of epistemology

in order to make the interest of the ruling class more credible in an age of relativism. Thus his individuals are individuals updated through the "reason" of "overdetermination" as sites of differential overdetermination. However, as they are "unique" on that count, they are nevertheless individuals, and not proletariat class subjects. While the jettisoning of critique claims to allow for the "dialog" that will produce evolutionary "change," what it actually does is reproduce the "hollow talking shops" Lenin critiqued: "In the government itself a sort of permanent quadrille is going on in order that, on the one hand, as many S.-R.'s and Mensheviks as possible may get at the gravy, the 'soft' jobs, and, on the other hand, the attention of the people may be occupied. All the while the real state business is being done in the offices, in the staffs" (*State and Revolution* 41). That is, the practical outcome of such "dialog" -- owing to the "uniqueness" of the "individuals" involved -- is a stalemate (you say this, I say that, she says the other thing) that allows business to proceed as usual. In such a circumstance, where the limit of consciousness is "partial" knowledge of the "others" one dialogically assimilates oneself to, consciousness of what is necessary for the proletariat class in its entirety -- class consciousness -- is muddled and stunted. Here, where there can be no class-conscious praxis to abolish class society, but only more reiterative "meetings" from which emerge ad hoc -- because unprincipled -- prioritizations, the proletariat is made subject to the "change" that is in Resnick and Wolff's view "unavoidable" (277): that of changing the way one thinks about the world, rather than revolutionizing that which objectively produces the world. "Our concepts change," they write, and "this change is unavoidable." Why? "Because the definition of any concept is nothing other than the varied relations in which it stands to other concepts" (277). In a single sentence -- and here I use their "exact words" which on their view are unambiguously representative of a "truth" (their own) despite the fact that these "words," like mine, have been "debated" -- they at once offer in their theory of anti-essentialist overdetermination an *essential determinant* (language flow) of the only change they can imagine in their (false) dialogic consciousness, *and* they provide themselves with an alibi for veering from their anti-essentialist overdetermination. That by the end of their book they claim something different from what they began with is "OK" -- they just changed their minds. . . and determination by class had nothing to do with it since in their theoretical world, "class processes" can be separated out from "non-class processes."

The recent history of the U.S. left is, of course, littered with so-called Marxists whose thinking has been made hazy by their assimilation (by means of economic concession) into the dominant ideology. For example, the work of E.O. Wright (who along with John Roemer and Jon Elster and others has his own RE-empire; see, for example, *Reconstructing Marxism*) was, in his own words, influenced by the money given him by the agents of exploitation at the University of Wisconsin -- money given, to be sure, to enable him to manufacture knowledges which retreat from revolutionary Marxism, and which in fact resulted in "analytical Marxism" which characterizes the dialectical method at the core of revolutionary Marxism as a "yoga" (Roemer 191). Wright notes that "in the transition from graduate student to tenured professor I have also become integrated into a nexus of rewards that is very alluring. My research on class has led to a series of large research grants which pay parts of my salary and allow me to take time off from teaching to write. As my reputation has grown, . . . I have been handsomely rewarded by my

Sociology Department and the University of Wisconsin. As a Marxist materialist and class analyst, I cannot suppose that all of this has no effect on me and that by an act of will I can immunize myself from the seductions of the safe and comfortable life of an affluent academic in a liberal-democratic advanced capitalist society. . . . I do not know the ways in which the ideas elaborated in this book have been shaped by these institutional and political realities and choices. I do not even really know whether or not . . . the work has benefited or suffered from the particular conditions under which it was produced." Wright reassures the reader he has tried to be "aware of these issues" (he, like Wolff, is a "reasonable" person) (3). "Awareness," however, is not enough. Revolutionary praxis is necessary, and in order to be revolutionary that praxis must be *principled*, based on reliable knowledge of that which produces the objective world rather than on some "awareness" that is, according to Wright himself, foggy at best. Wright's claim to "not know," however, together with the suggestion that his ideas may have been "co-opted" is in actuality simply the alibi he, like all post-al theorists, deploys to legitimate his unprincipled acceptance of bribes from the agents of exploitation.

The New Assimilationist Left, however, cannot claim to have had its "ideas" "co-opted" by agents of exploitation. From the pages of *The Nation* to those of Michael Apple's work (also supported by the University of Wisconsin), the New Assimilationist Left's rallying cry is "Learn from the Right!" Thus in *The Nation* there is Ronald Aronson writing that "we should start [a new progressive majority] by listening to those on the right who have been trouncing us for twenty years. That means not only studying their tactics but also what they've been saying, especially about moral values. If we did so we might learn what has drawn people to listen to them, not us" (23). Michael Apple argues that "the Right has succeeded in part by listening to (and, as well, manipulating) genuine feelings and in the process has once again demonstrated the power of the cultural and ideological. Here, too, we have much to learn" (42).

29. Before critiquing the presuppositions informing Resnick and Wolff's "change of mind," it is necessary to note that, by pointing to their "words" ("she offers no textual support [there is none]") as "proof" that they do not "view. . . class [as] . . . an aspect of culture or a cultural concept," Wolff displaces concepts as abstractions historically determined by class contradiction in favor of "words" as floating signifiers buffeted by other words (see Marx's Introduction to *Grundrisse*). This is an attempt to suppress contestation regarding the class-determined practical effectivity of theories in class society -- which was the point of my critique of their text. For Resnick and Wolff, there is nothing beyond the surface of what they perceive; all "processes" occur on the (intersecting) plane(s) of culture (which is why their understanding of class is indeed as a cultural phenomena). With this presupposition, then, they can search the surface of their texts (their "words") and proclaim with relief that "There is no support for her claims! We wrote no such words!" In presuming that a text is identical to what the "words" of it "add up to," Wolff suppresses the critique-al reading of texts -- inquiry into their condition of possibility, the principle on which all of Marx's and Althusser's works rely -- and privileges an embarrassingly naive literalism. This, by the way, is another way of saying that his demand for "textual" evidence is a code for "literalism," the very "realism" that he -- in the name of "anti-essentialism" -- claims to reject! However, as I have said, Wolff

is an epistemological opportunist: he adopts whatever "theory" can save his "argument" from its (unending) contradictions. In the end -- after trading one position for the next, situationally--he emerges as a bourgeois eclectic, which is another name for the position concealed in the RE- of his revisionism.

To try to think beyond the surface of a text is, on Wolff's view, simply "mastication," something a cow does. It is here, of course, that the "reasonable" tone Wolff tries to assert can no longer contain the ideology and sexism of the text, which finally surface in full view. It is one of the tested tactics of the ruling class and its clerks such as Wolff (and. . . and. . . and. . .) to mark as unworthy of engagement the very knowledges that contest their hegemony. His tactic is the tactic of the candidate (in an election) who is (by the power of his war chest) way ahead of the contesting candidate and refuses to "debate" her. He knows that any debate will show him for what he is: that he is ahead not because he "knows" but because he "has." Wolff "knows" that any engagement with revolutionary knowledges will demystify his "popularity" -- he is popular because he writes what is ideologically needed, not because what he says is "truth" or "just." He refuses to "debate" because he is ahead -- in the media: he is a left boss, a left celebrity, and I am a "nobody" in his circles, a "nobody" and a woman "nobody" at that. Not only am I a "savage" who destroys, but I am also a "woman." I am, in his non-essentialist, renewed and rebuilt marxism, a "castrating woman." This is the "race" and "gender" theory that lies behind Wolff's "liberated" and "liberating" marxism.

31. In manufacturing and circulating a planar reading practice, Resnick and Wolff deny theoretical abstraction to the proletariat whose labor-power is viciously abstracted through tactics which are auto-occulting, and which thus necessitate what Marx called "the force of abstraction" (Preface to the First German Edition of *Capital* 8) in order to apprehend and break the binary division of labor at their root. Class consciousness, in short, is not the ad hoc changing of one's mind depending on which signs are channeled by the knowledge industry into one's field of vision. Class consciousness is the principled theoretical knowledge of that which is the condition of possibility of knowledge itself -- class contradiction. Resnick and Wolff are resolutely opposed to enabling such consciousness. Thus when the "exact words" they wrote are not unambiguously accepted as pearls of wisdom but exposed as the signifying chains they are, Wolff is outraged. His RE-empire is threatened.

## SEVEN

Resnick and Wolff's fantasy that "words" are the only cause of a change which is itself limited to changing existing concepts (when other "words" "swim into play") is at the core of their theory of overdetermination. All of the class and non-class "processes" which in their theoretical world "overdetermine" any event produce such a cascade of "ideas" and "possibilities," so many "things," which are themselves always changing and have no essential priority, that all Wolff can think to say in the face of it all is "we can't do everything in theory or in politics or in any aspect of life; no one can. We all prioritize all the time."

On Wolff's view, then, "we" have to prioritize not because the theoretical understanding of the movement of history as a whole reveals the necessity of prioritizing, and prioritizing international revolution rather than attention to everyday tasks. Rather, "we" have to prioritize because the possibilities of what might be done, on a local, "partial," level, are endless. This reveals that Resnick and Wolff's anti-essentialist epistemology operates on the post-al ludic logic derived from the Derridean theory of representation in which the signified always stands in a relation of excess to the signifier. As I have argued in "Desire and Class," Resnick and Wolff reject that there is a core and irreducible division -- the binary of class -- that (re)produces the objective world and our knowledge of it. Along with class, they reject the possibility of reliable knowledge of the objective world (the world of materially produced entities, including concepts, relations, and subjects). They argue -- in line with Derrida, though they do not cite him -- that "there can be no question of reducing this notion of causality -- this *play of differential relations* -- to any common standard or measure. Among the different relations between any one entity and all those others that overdetermine it, none can be ranked as more 'important' or more 'determinant' than another. To propose such a ranking is to reduce those differences to a quantitative measure of something presumed common to them all. Such a presumption is precisely what the concept of overdetermination contradicts. To explain the causes of any entity is to construct its differential relations with all the other entities that overdetermine it" (4 emphasis added). The (to them) plentiful world is produced by a plenitude of processes which can never be known fully enough, owing to the "differential play" which is accelerated and produces "excess" possibilities of relations in the instant any relation is posited (represented). Like Butler, they do not want to take up any principled position (one which is consistent with what is historically necessary because it can theorize what are cultural fads and styles and what are fundamental social practices) because to do so would be to "reduce" possible relations, "foreclose" possibilities of acting on desire to access the existing plenitude. What the rejection of the binary concept of class does is remove the possibility of reliable knowledge of the objective world without which there can be no principled position from which to act on the world, but only "constant prioritization" of what to do next in any given cultural conjuncture. Of all the possible possibilities, Resnick and Wolff want to rope off a few that are "proper to Marxism" -- specifically the prioritization of "practical efforts to alter state policies" over and against "revolutionary alteration of the class structure" (272). This managerial strategy of saying yes to tinkering and no to revolution was, of course, the core of evolutionary socialism and is now the core of the assimilationist left. The only "difference" is that Bernstein and Co. did not reject an empirio-essentialist position, and Resnick and Wolff, Inc., do. Wolff's "constant prioritization" is actually conjunctural reprioritization that legitimates and valorizes practices which prompt and react to rapidly changing desires of this, that, the other thing. Wolff wants to be able to chase the objects of his desire when he wants to and not have to worry about the proletariat and need. What he asserts is "proper" to Marxism, therefore, is the anti-revolutionary assimilationism that enables the middle-class fraction to pursue desires, and the only thing that can enable that is maintaining social relations of private property.

## EIGHT

Because in Resnick and Wolff's plane of non-prioritized determinations there can be no knowable cause (everything causes everything else, no "process" can be "reduced" to any other, and there are "too many" "things" to be able to "know them all"), persons cannot act on the basis of knowledge. They can think and think and think and believe, as do Resnick and Wolff, that all this thinking "changes the concrete-real" (56), but the ways in which it does so, inasmuch as nothing has any "essential" (basic) cause, remains unknowable. Persons will never have knowledge that is reliable knowledge of the objective world -- theoretical knowledge of the social totality exterior to individuals, what Marx and Engels conceptualized as theoretical comprehension of "the historical movement as a whole" (*The Communist Manifesto* 91) -- that can form the basis for principled action on that world. In the absence of this knowledge, what ultimately determines action in and on the world (what "partial" knowledge collapses to), is individual "sense." As their "exact words" say, the basis of political coalitionism is "sense": "persons sensitive to different injustices and oppressions gather together, forge alliances, and struggle actively for all manner of economic, political, and cultural changes in capitalist social formations. With many of them, Marx then and we now feel a sense of close agreement and sympathy" (279).

The return to "sense" as the basis for action returns the left to the "sensationalism" (the thousandth and first alibi for bourgeois moral aestheticism) deployed by Mach, which Lenin critiqued for its "rehash of Berkeleianism" (*Materialism* 29) -- the effective denial of the objective world altogether. In such "subjective idealist" theories, the brute matter of the body divides and recombines and this process is the source of "sensation" which does away with the objective world, for "if," as Lenin argues, "bodies are complexes of 'sensations,' as Mach says, or combinations of 'sensations' as Berkeley said, it inevitably follows that the whole world is but my idea" (29). While Resnick and Wolff do not regard the matter of the body to be brute (natural), they do, in their RE-rehash of Berkeleianism, regard subjects to be complexes of positions: "in simple terms, the Marxian commitment to overdetermination implies that occupants of the same class position will still be divided by the literally infinite different positions they variously occupy in the nonclass processes of social life" (308 n 17). It is this internal movement -- "the self movement of difference itself" -- that constitutes the "sense" which motors individuals in and out of coalitions and, on their view, precludes principled solidarity for revolutionary praxis. What informs Resnick and Wolff's theory of overdetermination is a ludic logic of matterism that amounts to an updating of sensationalism.

While they take the matter of the body to be "socially constructed" rather than "natural," because many strands of that "social construction" are presumed to be the effects of "non-class processes" the sense of the body is presumed to be relatively and on occasion utterly "free" of determination by class, as is the knowledge produced from this "sense." Thus, "spontaneous" action on their view is to be encouraged as it is capable of producing knowledge "free" from both class determination and the revolutionary Marxist theory which on their view simply reinscribes class determination, and in a moment of capitalist "evolution" that has now "exceeded" "simple" class determination.

The "matter" of the body, however, never produces sensations "freely," that is, it never produces sensations that are not already and fundamentally organized (and which therefore have priority) by the dialectic between life-needs and the social organization of labor that enables (re)production of life. The body has needs: clean water, food, shelter . . . . Sensation is first and foremost a response to these fundamental life-needs, and the capitalist mode of production works in relation to these needs. I do not mean satisfies them, but rather uses them as the basis for appropriating labor-power, and thereby shaping "sense" itself to the requirements of the mode of production. In this way, the needs of the body are harnessed to a mode of production and organized by it. Indeed, that the proletariat even "agrees" to be exploited is a practice that involves the dialectic between need and labor: the proletariat (re)produces itself as the proletariat in part because of the "sense" of need that compels these persons to sell their labor-power or die. "Sense" is fundamentally, in any society, socially organized by labor practices, whether or not need is met.

Resnick and Wolff's return to a "sense" presumably unorganized by labor practices seeks to make invisible the fact that making meaning of "sense" is the work of ideology, and that the dominant ideology works to make the degree of satisfaction of those needs as well as the way they are (un)met appear to be natural, socially unchangeable, simply "the way things are." For example, the woman who "senses" that she is oppressed as a woman can, on the basis of that "sense," join others in expressing moral outrage at this oppression, she can even join with others who "sense" this positioning as oppressive, and -- perhaps, based on her class position -- she can change her position in relation to the family (she can refuse to do domestic labor, etc.). But that "change" will not abolish the *fact* of unpaid domestic labor (which is "sensed" as unjust by those who are compelled -- by their "sense" -- to do that labor) and therefore someone (perhaps some "other") will continue to perform the unpaid domestic labor. "At best" the unpaid labor will be more equally distributed within the family (see Fraad, Resnick and Wolff's *Bringing It All Back Home*, which celebrates sharing unpaid domestic labor as "The Communist' Alternative" [37]). In short, the family as a site of unpaid domestic labor will not disappear because of a "sense" of it as unjust, no matter how many people join in such a coalition of sensitivity.

In other words, the move to posit sense and knowledge as effects of "non-class processes" puts some meanings (such as "family" as a site of unpaid domestic labor) apparently outside of history, where they are unchangeable and simply have to be accepted, an "explanation" which serves to mask as "natural" what is in fact a class-interested "move." What Resnick and Wolff leave out is the historical material dimension of the *cause of knowledge* of "sense." For instance, why at certain points in history have some women "sensed" that having to do (all or most of the) unpaid domestic labor is "unjust," and why have they explained this as they have -- as, for example, arising out of a natural conflict between the needs and interests of men and those of women -- rather than as an effect of class contradiction? By positing "sense" as the ground and limit of knowledge that can serve as the basis for action, Resnick and Wolff are legitimating the class-interested deprivation of the proletariat from the advanced knowledges of the age and ensuring their subservience to a "spontaneity" that is in fact the practice of the



dominant ideology. This is the case because they are, in effect, arguing that the only theory of "sense" workers need is one which says that "sense" (and not *theory* of "sense") is all that they need. Resnick and Wolff are producing a theory, then, that denies -- as I explained in "Desire and Class" -- the need for theory! Clearly, *Resnick and Wolff* need theory -- to maintain their RE-industry. To do so, they manufacture theory that denies that the exploited and oppressed need theory. All the exploited and oppressed need is "(common)sense." Resnick and Wolff thus legitimate the "(common)sense" -- and in the name of socialism! -- and it is this legitimation that lies at the crux of the usefulness of Resnick and Wolff's RE-industry to the capitalist class. In denying the necessity of theory for all workers, they leave the proletariat to "spontaneous action" that in reality makes meaning of "sense" in line with the dominant ideology. This is why a critique such as mine, which exposes the class-interests of the legitimation of "what is" must, from the bourgeois-interested position, be rejected as "savage."

As Lenin has argued, "it is only a few (bad) intellectuals who believe that it is sufficient for the workers' to tell them a few things about factory conditions, and to repeat over and over again what has long been known" (*What Is To Be Done?* 41). Wolff so violently rejects revolutionary Marxist critique because it implicates him as just such a "bad" theorist.

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### Note

1 This is the place to say (and say it myself) what most of the email messages regarding my "response" are going to remind me of.

In a reading climate delimited by bourgeois rhetoric (and its own assimilationist program of "persuasion") my writing here--like any red writing--will read as "heavy-handed" (too emphatic, too many quotes from the texts that most readers would rather forget about, too much advocacy without apology, too "in your face". . .). No one who "intends" to persuade (that is, to keep the present social institutions intact but manufacture a consensus on "redescribing" them and just thinking about them differently) would obviously write this way.

("Of course, long quotations will make the text cumbersome and in no way help to make it popular reading, but we cannot possibly avoid them" [Lenin *State and Revolution* 7-8]).

This is, by all bourgeois standards, a "wrong" tone with "wrong" words, in a "wrong" register--more evidence that it is "sectarian." But, as I have argued in my text, the heavy-handed (red) writing has become the only mode of writing by which one can face the thoroughly rhetoricized (commodified) languages of equivocation of the assimilationist left.

("We deliberately select this awkward formula, we deliberately express ourselves in a simple, forcible way, not because we desire to indulge in paradoxes, but in order to 'stimulate' the Economists to take up their tasks which they unpardonably ignore, to make them understand the difference between trade-union and Social-Democratic politics, which they refuse to understand" [Lenin *What Is To Be Done?* 77]).

So--sectarian and heavy-handed to boot!

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