

## The Use and Abuse of Class Reductionism for the Left

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The class struggle is not what it used to be. The call by some on the newly revived American left to engage in class war rather than culture war reflects the challenges that have been raised in recent years by identitarian thought and activism.<sup>1</sup> Since the countercultural sixties, the organized left and organized labor have often been depicted as “class essentialist” and, as such, ill-equipped to grapple with the different forms of oppression based on race, gender, sexuality, and other lines of social difference.<sup>2</sup> In the years following Occupy Wall Street, the success of Black Lives Matter, the MeToo movement, and similar hashtags around Indigenous struggles, gun violence and ecology, suggests not only that it is no longer possible to provide a Marxist analysis of contemporary social conditions without at the same time addressing issues of structural and systemic oppression, but that the inoperativity of the former leaves socialists without a coherent agenda.<sup>3</sup> In the realms of intersectionality, decoloniality, Critical Race Theory and Afro-pessimism, for example, if not in post-human new materialisms, Marxist class analysis is characterized as a limited and problematic politics. Rather than the correct perspective through which to understand the history of capitalist social relations, the broad thrust of Marxism is downsized to a critique of “classism” and due respect shown for the feelings of the working poor.

Whereas the culture wars of the 1980s were by and large fought by progressive liberals and the remnants of the New Left against the neoconservative New Right, the “woke” wars of the period 2012 to 2022 came on the heels of the relative success of alter-global new social movements, which after decades of neoliberal austerity led to the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. Despite a renewed interest in socialism and communism among the new generation of activists who rallied around the electoral campaigns of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders, the micro-political tendencies that had been incubated through postmodern theory, discourse theory and post-structuralist social constructionism allowed various forms of identity and difference politics to also make a quick comeback, leading in some cases to attacks on Marxism as an

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Some of the arguments presented here were first developed in two articles that were posted on my *Blog of Public Secrets*, “Untimely Wokeism” (August 12, 2021) and “The Mismeasure of Marx” (September 2, 2021), as well as in *Bernie Bros Gone Woke: Class, Identity, Neoliberalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

<sup>1</sup> Dustin Guastella, “We Need a Class War, Not a Culture War,” *Jacobin* (May 25, 2020) <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/05/we-need-a-class-war-not-a-cultural-war>; Ben Burgis, “We Don’t Need a Culture War. We Need a Class War,” *Jacobin* (December 18, 2020) <<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/12/culture-war-class-polarization-medicare-for-all>>.

<sup>2</sup> This claim is made for example by Chantal Mouffe in *For A Leftist Populism* (London: Verso, 2018) eBook, 12.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Endnotes, “Onward Barbarians,” *Endnotes* (December 2020), <[https://endnotes.org.uk/other\\_texts/en/endnotes-onward-barbarians](https://endnotes.org.uk/other_texts/en/endnotes-onward-barbarians)>.

outmoded form of Eurocentric universalism.<sup>4</sup> To take only one example, Marcie Bianco, a feminist with degrees from Harvard, Oxford and Rutgers, who has published in *Rolling Stone* and *Vanity Fair*, worked as editor of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* and was the winner of the 2016 National Lesbian & Gay Journalists' Association Excellence in Online Journalism Award, made the bald assertion: "If you say 'working class' your white supremacy is showing. THE END."<sup>5</sup>

Marxism, socialism and the workers' movement have addressed issues of class and nationality, class and gender, class and race, and class and sexuality since its earliest moments in the nineteenth century. Contrary to current opinion, it is not with the appearance of the Combahee River Collective in the late 1970s that the "intersection" of issues of class, race and gender was first considered. The main difference between Marxism and these newer forms of thinking is that Marxism provides a class analysis of the rise of identity politics in the postwar era, a period in which civil rights struggles were separated from the labor movement within which they had emerged. Conceived through the lens of social justice activism, the various forms of oppression have commonly been treated in transhistorical terms and separated from questions of political economy, a process that retroactively interprets the universalism of radical and progressive movements as exclusionary and oblivious to questions of difference. This new diversity and demographics-oriented cultural politics, which I refer to here as "wokeism," has coincided with postwar shifts from Fordism to post-Fordist globalization, from rights-oriented liberal pluralism to difference politics, and from a petty-bourgeois countercultural anti-statism to a discourse theory-based logic of empowerment. Rather than defend the centrality of class in Marxist analysis, many on the postmodernized New Left have sought instead to make materialism and political economy more intersectional.<sup>6</sup> Those who resist this trend are dismissed as class reductionists, or, to use the neologism concocted by David Roediger, as "class-splainers."<sup>7</sup>

Like the term political correctness, the concept of class reductionism first emerged on the Marxist left as a term that is used to describe a theoretical mistake. And like the term political correctness, it has been appropriated and misused as a term with which to dismiss Marxism and move critical theory further in a non-Marxist, anti-Marxist, pseudo-Marxist or post-Marxist direction. That the term class reductionism is now used as a blunt instrument against Marxists and Marxism requires that we have a better grasp of its meaning. In the most rudimentary sense, class reductionism is rejected by Marxists as a vulgar form of "economism," which means the reduction of complex social and historical processes to economic factors. Since at least the postwar era, and through the study of phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, discourse analysis and deconstruction, the "cultural turn" in critical social theory has been championed because it is presumably better able to take social theory beyond the most reductionist, deterministic and teleological aspects of Marxist class analysis. However, rather than simply avoiding the pitfalls of economism, postwar theory has for the most part replaced historical and dialectical materialism

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<sup>4</sup> See Verso Books, "Is Socialism Just a Western, Eurocentric Concept? with Nivedita Majumdar," *YouTube* (March 21, 2017), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2i583cJs9M>>.

<sup>5</sup> Bianco cited in Dan Kovalik, *Cancel This Book: The Progressive Case Against Cancel Culture* (New York: Hot Books, 2021) 26-7.

<sup>6</sup> See Ashley J. Bohrer, *Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality Under Contemporary Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019) and Nancy Folbre, *The Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Systems: An Intersectional Political Economy* (London: Verso, 2021). See also Ellen Meiksins Wood, "Why Class Struggle Is Central," *Against the Current* (September/October 1987) 7-9.

<sup>7</sup> David Roediger, *Class, Race and Marxism* (London: Verso, 2017) eBook, 37.

with an eclectic materialism that today avoids the critique of political economy altogether and instead reinforces identitarian metaphysics within the progressive movements that operate through a neoliberalized academy, cultural institutions and the NGO third sector. The general political orientation of these departments and organizations, and the funding that they receive, is designed to neutralize anti-capitalist struggles. In the following I address the ways in which contemporary wokeism attacks Marxism by recourse to the concept of class reductionism. I refer to this phenomenon as “woke baseball.” To oppose this trend, I examine the term reductionism and address the reasons why its use on the left, as well as its misuse by critics of the left, deviate from Marxist analysis.

### **Marxism Against Reductionism**

The term class reductionism cannot be separated from the method of Marxist class analysis and the politics of class struggle. Without the struggle against capitalism, the notion of class reductionism is meaningless. One therefore needs to begin with Marx and Marxism to consider how the problem of class reductionism is related to the politics of emancipation from capitalism. Erik Olin Wright argued that class analysis makes distinctions between class structure and class formation.<sup>8</sup> Different modes of production in different historical and geographical contexts give rise to different kinds of class formation. There is no automatic and determinate link between class structure, class consciousness and class formation. Since class structure exists independently of class struggle, class interests can be as variable as class organizations. The terms that we use to understand material reality are themselves the products of class struggle. The validity of Marxist concepts is therefore not only based on their ability to describe objective reality, but more importantly, to offer a valid explanation of social phenomena and give an orientation to politics. In any class formation, social differences and social psychology may be more significant than the mechanisms of class structure. Regardless, for Marxist analysis, it is class structure, which is defined by the capitalist mode and relations of production, which shapes the organizational dynamics of class consciousness and class struggle, which alone are able to transform class structure. Wright argued that all Marxists are class reductionist, in one way or another, to the extent that they model social typologies on the social organization of production as well as the class structures and mechanisms of surplus appropriation that derive from it.<sup>9</sup> However, class structure and class formation are not reducible to the economic. That is why, for Marxist politics, there is nothing inevitable or pre-determined when it comes to the overcoming of capitalist class relations. In order to elucidate these theoretical problems, let us take an example from the field of biology.

Along with Stephen Jay Gould, the geneticist Richard Lewontin was considered one of the most prominent scientists to reject the kind of race-based science that is associated with the work of researchers like E.O. Wilson and Charles Murray. According to Lewontin, minor genetic differences among human populations are not significant enough to validate the scientific concept of race. Human culture, he argued, cannot be explained by genetics. While genetic diversity within a species provides the raw material upon which it may draw, different forms of adaptation are possible based on different environmental pressures. Lewontin argued that *Homo sapiens* have lower rates of genetic diversity than other species, with seven percent variation between major

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<sup>8</sup> Erik Olin Wright, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985) 9.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Olin Wright, “Review Essay: Is Marxism Really Functionalist, Class Reductionist, and Teleological?” *American Journal of Sociology* 89:2 (September 1983) 452-9.

population groups. Since all human groups can interbreed successfully, we all belong to the same so-called race. The use of racial differences to distinguish human groups is entirely superficial and has no scientific value.<sup>10</sup> What is significant here is that Lewontin made a theoretical distinction between the terms *reduction* and *reductionism*. Based on a dialectical critique of scientific reductionism, Lewontin argued that scientists do not know why some traits are exhibited in some groups of humans and not in others. What characterizes the genus *Homo* is the reliance on culture and technology as modes of adaptation. Organisms do not simply react to environmental factors, surviving if they are fit enough, as the social Darwinist Herbert Spencer would have thought. Interaction with environmental factors is therefore dynamic and dialectical.

According to Lewontin and co-author Richard Levins, reduction is a method and reductionism is a worldview.<sup>11</sup> While reductionism is widely used in science, the ascription of effects to designated causes easily leads to what these scientists refer to as statistical tautology and the reification of natural or social processes.<sup>12</sup> What requires scientific explanation is instead taken for granted. The more mechanistic the approach, the less holistic it will be, even if it can yield satisfactory results in disciplines like chemistry or physics. In class struggle, the working class and the wider society are simultaneously object and subject of a historical dialectic that has evolutionary dimensions that are non-teleological with respect to the emancipation from capitalism. There is nothing inevitable about communism. However, just as there was nothing inevitable about the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, the species *Homo sapiens* does exist.

The term *reductionism* explains the relations between the elements within a complex system and refers to their root causes. Such reductionism defines the relation between the parts and the whole in a mechanistic way that has very little to do with dialectical materialism. A reductionist version of class analysis, for example, is commonly rejected or at least criticized as vulgar Marxism. The notion of *reduction*, in contrast to that of reductionism, allows for flexibility, for example, between elements of the economic base and the ideological superstructure. Reduction does not presume a direct and mechanical continuity between elements. Although the notion of reduction is concerned with causes, the advanced and unpredictable characteristics of a system, or a society, are not reducible to earlier or more “essential” forms.<sup>13</sup>

Since Marxist politics are anti-capitalist and communist, the association of social phenomena with class structure is accepted so long as it is non-reductionist, meaning, not determined in a mechanistic way. Non-reductionism is not to be confused or conflated with relativism, eclecticism, randomness or chaos. As Lewontin would argue, it is certain that we have genes, but it is not certain how our genes affect our behavior. The same logic applies to class. In the theory of revolutionary politics, Karl Marx did not describe what a communist society would consist of exactly, but he did believe that capitalism made class struggle inevitable and that class struggle is oriented towards the disappearance of class hierarchies. In his letter to Joseph Weydemeyer from March 5, 1852, Marx writes:

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<sup>10</sup> See Richard C. Lewontin, *Biology as Ideology: The Doctrine of DNA* (Concord: House of Anansi Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) 2.

<sup>12</sup> See the analogous critique of race reductionism in Barbara J. Fields and Karen E. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> See Kaan Kangal, “Engels’s Emergentist Dialectics,” *Monthly Review* (November 1, 2020), <<https://monthlyreview.org/2020/11/01/engelss-emergentist-dialectics/>>.

And now as to myself, no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this class struggle and bourgeois economists, the economic anatomy of classes. What I did that was new was to prove: (1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with the *particular, historical phases in the development of production*; (2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*; (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*.”<sup>14</sup>

Consider also this quote from Friedrich Engels’ 1877 *Anti-Dühring*, where Engels discusses the notion of the withering of the state in the transition from socialism to communism:

*The proletariat seizes state power and turns the means of production into state property to begin with. But thereby it abolishes itself as the proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions and class antagonisms, and abolishes also the state as state. Society thus far, operating amid class antagonisms, needed the state, that is, an organization of the particular exploiting class, for the maintenance of its external conditions of production, and, therefore, especially, for the purpose of forcibly keeping the exploited class in the conditions of oppression determined by the given mode of production (slavery, serfdom or bondage, wage-labor).*<sup>15</sup>

There are countless differences among leftists and no two radical philosophers think alike. However, because all self-described Marxists are “orthodox” with regard to some basic aspects of materialist theory, they cannot simply go along to get along with everything that has been advanced under the rubrics of identity politics, radical democracy, intersectionality, decoloniality or privilege theory, among others approaches that focus on identity vectors. In a critique of Critical Race Theory, Tom Carter asserts: “For Marxists, yes, we plead guilty to being ‘class reductionists.’ Class for us is not just another form of subjective prejudice.”<sup>16</sup> By rejecting the centrality of class or by remaking class domination into classism, he argues, Critical Race Theory attempts to avoid the charge of ideological collusion with the bourgeois class. Marx, Carter argues, was not satisfied to register the unequal distribution of wealth. Such distribution has been the case ever since human societies produced enough surplus for there to develop social inequality between the poor and the wealthy, who guard their bounty with military force. Marxist criticism is based on the difference between feudal regimes, where force is used to protect wealth and compel labor, and the bourgeois order, in which the compulsion to accumulation compels both those who must sell their labor and the capitalists who compete among one another.

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<sup>14</sup> Marx cited in V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, [1918] 2014) 70.] [(pottage) 63.]

<sup>15</sup> Engels cited in Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Carter, “The ideological foundations of Critical Race Theory,” *World Socialist Web Site* (August 29, 2021), <<https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2021/08/30/crit-a30.html>>. For another instance where a leftist accepts the term class reductionist as a self-description, see Michaels in Jacobin, “Antiracism Can’t Overcome Capitalism – Adolph Reed and Walter Benn Michaels,” *YouTube* (August 5, 2021), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYuzFZfsxEY>>.

Marx's focus on the commodity and on wage labor as a contradictory social relation begins with the actuality of capitalist society in the mid-nineteenth century. Noting that capitalism's laws of development have become a global phenomenon, Marx devised a strategy of revolutionary transformation. Marxists need not plead guilty on the count of class reductionism, however. For the bourgeois class, workers are a particular class that will always exist because capitalist social relations must always exist. For the bourgeoisie, this working class sector of the social space does nothing, and should not be allowed to do anything, to transform the totality of global capitalism. For Marxists, the working class, conceived as the proletariat, is the universal class. Only the working class has an interest in ridding the world of capitalist social relations. The plight of the working class therefore stands in for universal claims of equality, freedom and solidarity. To make good on these claims is the challenge of socialism.

Although the Marxists of the nineteenth century believed that the withering away of the state and social classes was a necessity, they did not presume that this was inevitable. In other words, their theory of revolution was not mechanistically deterministic. That is why Lenin argued that the building of party organizations to seize power from the capitalist class was a task to be accomplished. One could not simply wait for this change to occur by itself. Lenin's writings on the communist supersession of class in *State and Revolution* are dedicated to the clarification of Marxist ideas and the distinction of these from the non-Marxist ideas of the leaders of the social democratic movement in Germany, Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky. His difference from them eventually caused the split between the Second and Third International. Based on his reading of Marx and Engels, Lenin demonstrated that Kautsky's position, as described in his 1909 book, *The Road to Power*, is the bourgeois position and not the proletarian position. As a particular class, the working class can remain the exploited class indefinitely. Accepting capitalism is a means through which social reforms can be advanced without the aspiration to build a communist society that would overthrow the bourgeois class of profiteers and abolish the capitalist state. Lenin writes:

It is often said and written that the main point in Marx's theory is the class struggle. But this is wrong. And this wrong notion very often results in an opportunist distortion of Marxism and its falsification in a spirit acceptable to the bourgeoisie. For the theory of the class struggle was created *not* by Marx, *but* by the bourgeoisie *before* Marx, and, generally speaking, it is *acceptable* to the bourgeoisie. Those who recognize *only* the class struggle are not yet Marxists; they may be found to be still within the bounds of bourgeois thinking and bourgeois politics. To confine Marxism to the theory of the class struggle means curtailing Marxism, distorting it, reducing it to something acceptable to the bourgeoisie. A Marxist is one who *extends* the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*. That is what constitutes the most profound distinction between the Marxist and the ordinary small (as well as big) bourgeois. This is the touchstone on which the *real* understanding and recognition of Marxism should be tested. And it is not surprising that when the history of Europe brought the working class face to face with this question as a *practical* issue, not only all the opportunists and reformists but all the Kautskyites (people who vacillate between reformism and Marxism) proved to be miserable philistines and petit-bourgeois democrats *repudiating* the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 70-1.

Lenin rejects anything short of the Marxist theory of revolution as opportunistic. Needless to say, revolutionary Marxism-Leninism is not the regular diet of new social movement activists or the Sanders and Corbyn left within institutionalized parties.

Slavoj Žižek has argued that there is no need to repeat the specific strategies adopted by the Bolsheviks in 1917 for us today to repeat Lenin's determination to act radically in a situation that seems hopeless.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, but with less vanguardist enthusiasm, Todd Chretien concludes his 2014 "Beginner's Guide to *State and Revolution*" with the recollection of Popular Front strategies, the degeneration of the Soviet empire, decolonial struggles, the social rebellions of the 1960s and the political pluralism of the 1970s, such that Lenin's ideas about organized action, however indispensable, must reflect new conditions and concerns.<sup>19</sup> Taking Marxism in a more intersectional direction, Jules Townshend revises Kautsky's Marxism for "open minded" radicals, concluding a text on Kautsky in the twenty-first century with the following:

And if we want to go beyond Marxism, doesn't the fecundity of Gramsci's thought offer deep reflections on both the failure of Marxism to become working-class "common sense" in the West while offering hope through a refashioning of Marxism's theoretical tools, especially in the notion of "hegemony"? From this it might be possible to see that the distinction between "class" and "identity" politics is potentially a false one, that Marx through his class-in-itself / class-for-itself distinction was constructing a hegemonic revolutionary *identity* for the working class. In other words, can we not see the question of identity as at the heart of [a] fundamental political mobilization? Of course the task of creating a mobilizing intersectional narrative which should be at the heart of a democratic socialism is not easy. Kautsky's thought, however, is a valuable reminder that such a narrative needs Marx's values and insights.<sup>20</sup>

Not only does Townshend blame Lenin for attempting a premature takeover of power, but he defines Marxism as a form of identity politics. This can only happen when a post-left mistakenly reads the reductionist aspects of identity politics back into Marxist analysis. If a Marxist wished to remain "allied" to the overwhelming mass of petty-bourgeois progressives who like Townshend have abandoned revolutionary theory, they would have to nevertheless critique the kinds of eclectic materialism that consider issues of identity, ecology and other matters to be as central to our analysis as the critique of political economy. The problem with this prospect is that class would have no distinct significance with regard to the mode and relations of production. It would be defined in advance, and to no end, as differentially mediated. The result of such politics, from a Marxist perspective, is not only class relativism, where for example a homeless man is perceived to be more privileged than a female CEO, but also a repressive desublimation of politics, where radical class struggle is proscribed as not only violent and authoritarian, but as racist, sexist and Eurocentric.

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<sup>18</sup> Slavoj Žižek, ed. *Lenin 2017: Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through* (London: Verso, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Todd Chretien, "Introduction: A Beginner's Guide to *State and Revolution*," in Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 31-4.

<sup>20</sup> Jules Townshend, "The 'truth' of Kautsky: Comments on 'Kautsky in the 21st century'," *Platypus Review* #139 (September 2021), <<https://platypus1917.org/2021/09/01/the-truth-of-kautsky-comments-on-kautsky-in-the-21st-century/>>.

## Woke Baseball and the Class War

If materialist dialectics is non-reductionist, who makes use of the term class reductionism and to what ends? The accusation of class reductionism is a popular red herring in today's conversation on race, class, gender and sexuality. Not exactly a Marxist dictionary, the Urban Dictionary nevertheless has one handy definition of class reductionism that reflects a common perception: "The idea that class-based oppression should be the foremost concern among revolutionaries, with things like gender, race, sexual orientation, etc, taking a back seat until 'after the revolution'."<sup>21</sup> The use here of the term oppression, instead of exploitation, reflexively inscribes the problem it addresses. Given that Marx and Engels would never have suggested that English workers should wait until after the revolution to make common cause with Irish workers, and vice versa, we are here in the realm of stereotype rather than anything remotely approaching Marxist materialism. As the prerogative of an educated and professional elite, much of today's wokeism is not concerned with the destruction of capitalist class relations. For this reason, the Urban Dictionary qualifies its definition more or less correctly: "For the most part the term is used as a pejorative by liberals against socialists and materialists, rather than being advocated by anyone."

Whether one receives the accusation of class reductionism as a compliment, a joke, an insult or a challenge is not simply a matter of psychology. The epithet "class reductionist" is not something that a radical leftist can simply wear as a badge of honor because this slur, when used by postmodernists, is almost always presumed to imply a lack of understanding rather than political antagonism. To take one example, Yanis Iqbal twists various strands of critical social theory – an abstractly universalist and de-historicized Hegelian notion of the master-slave dialectic, an anti-colonial but de-universalized Frantz Fanon, Cedric Robinson's anti-European concept of "racial capitalism," as well as the de-Marxified Cultural Studies version of Gramscian hegemony – to suggest that in the days of BLM, the "obdurate" Bernie Sanders left was unable, due to its "class reductionism" and obsession with the "merely economic," to understand the "complex reality of oppression."<sup>22</sup> As Adolph Reed has argued, this charge of class reductionism against the Sanders left tells us less about the people who are accused of it than it does about the class allegiances of the accusers.<sup>23</sup> It is highly ironic, for Reed, that those African Americans who have the most to gain from universalist policies designed to address problems of economic inequality should be interpellated by their middle-class peers on the basis of a uniquely black notion of racial solidarity that just happens to complement the aims of neoliberal elites in and around the Democratic Party.

In this type of discussion, the shibboleth of class reductionism is usually tempered by intellectuals and activists who advocate a more "balanced" view of materialism and material interests. While such social critics can typically offer a genealogy that takes different strands of

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<sup>21</sup> See the Urban Dictionary entry for "Class Reductionism" at <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Class%20Reductionism>.

<sup>22</sup> Yanis Iqbal, "Tackling the US Left's Class Reductionism," *Hampton Institute* (July 29, 2021), <https://www.hamptonthink.org/read/tackling-the-usamerican-lefts-class-reductionism>.

<sup>23</sup> Adolph Reed Jr., "The Myth of Class Reductionism," *The New Republic* (September 25, 2019), <https://newrepublic.com/article/154996/myth-class-reductionism>. See also Adolph Reed Jr., "Why Black Lives Matter Can't Be Co-opted," *Nonsite* (July 23, 2021), <https://nonsite.org/why-black-lives-matter-cant-be-co-opted/>.



analysis into account, they also tend to disarticulate race from class and class from political economy.<sup>24</sup> That these critics typically accept the postmodern rejection of Enlightenment universality along with concepts like progress, humanity, objectivity, truth and human rights allows them to seem as though they are carrying forward the Marxist critique of bourgeois idealism. For example, Asad Haider calls for a strategy that does not depend entirely on class struggle to do all of the work, since, he argues, anti-racist struggles against police violence can also benefit labor struggles.<sup>25</sup> Falsely presuming a symmetry, on the one hand, between Hillary Clinton's charge against Sanders in 2016 that breaking up the banks will not end racism, and on the other, Reed's counter-strategy of "reframing" racial disparities in class terms, Haider believes that the labor movement should support but not criticize movements like BLM that are against police violence. The reason Haider fails to see the asymmetry in his example is due to his overestimation of racism rather than capitalism as the cause of disparities between American blacks and whites. Unless we wish to make racism into America's original and eternal sin, the radical democratic logic of equivalence that one finds in both-and logics of anti-racism plus class struggle need to be challenged as not only divergence from Marxism, but as activist wishful thinking. While nothing about socialist politics guarantees that struggles will lead to equality, as Haider charges, a struggle that is not premised on class solidarity cannot be considered radical. For this reason, as Reed and Walter Benn Michaels correctly argue, the solution to problems of racism, as in the case of police violence, should not be presumed to be anti-racist.<sup>26</sup>

The dramatic increase in global economic inequality over the last several decades is not due to racism. Not only will specifically anti-racist solutions not reduce economic inequality, they will do nothing to reduce the recourse of the state apparatus to police violence. Unlike class exploitation, there is nothing about racial oppression that gives it more structural importance than any other form of oppression. Whereas Marxism seeks the elimination of class society and the destruction of bourgeois rule, anti-racism cannot be defined as the elimination of racial difference and the destruction of people of European descent. Capitalism can also make use of anti-racism rather than racism.<sup>27</sup> This can be noticed in the corporate and establishment support for BLM, much of it designed to reinforce its own domination and the interests of a minority in the black middle and upper class. While the relations between national, religious, ethnic and gender groups are only arbitrarily conflictual, and need not be, class relations of exploitation are inherently conflictual. This makes the demand that working class movements be articulated in relation to the particular interests of demographic groups as well as along intersectional lines more problematic than social movement activists either let on or care to know. The point is not that the socialist movement must not advance the concerns and rights of all members of society, which it must do, but rather that attention to identity groups obscures the workings of capitalism at the same time that it obscures the differences between a conservative, a liberal and a left politics.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Preston H. Smith, "Which Black Lives Matter?" *Catalyst* 4:3 (Fall 2020), pages.

<sup>25</sup> Asad Haider, "How calling someone a 'class reductionist' became a lefty insult," *Salon* (July 25, 2020) <<https://www.salon.com/2020/07/25/how-calling-someone-a-class-reductionist-became-a-lefty-insult/>>.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed Jr., "The Trouble with Disparity," *Nonsite* (September 10, 2020) <<https://nonsite.org/the-trouble-with-disparity/>>.

<sup>27</sup> Ronald W. Cox, "A Left Critique of Class Reductionism," *Class, Race and Corporate Power* 8:2 (2020), <<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1163&context=classracecorporatepower>>.

<sup>28</sup> On the fine points of these issues, see the discussion between Adolph Reed and Ellen Meiksins Wood in Diane E. Davis, ed. *Political Power and Social Theory* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2006).

While there is no question that the capitalist ruling class has used class, gender, racial and national differences to divide organized socialist movements, the question that concerns us here is the use of anti-racism and anti-sexism to weaken rather than strengthen the organized left. The broad outlines of this dilemma were evident in the 2020 exchange between Ben Burgis and Noah Berlatsky that qualified the concepts of class and identity against the notion of reductionism.<sup>29</sup> While Burgis used the term (race) essentialism rather than (race) reductionism, the concept of (class) reductionism was used in Berlatsky's retort as he attempted to expose Burgis as insufficiently solidaristic. In more extreme cases, Marxists are simply sidelined as incorrigible and outdated. Because there is nothing new about anti-Marxism, this practice has been updated through the stratagems of a social media-influenced cancel culture. Marxists are not universalist because they are reductionist, the story goes, they are reductionist because they are racist, sexist, homophobic or xenophobic, because they refuse to abandon their settler privileges, or some other failing that is identified in order to advance the agenda of the virtue signaling professional-managerial class.<sup>30</sup>

In the era of wokeism, the discourse of anti-oppression has become one of the ways through which postmodern academics and activists unwittingly collude with the neoliberal status quo. As a neoliberal politics, the relationship of wokeism to Marxism can be conceived as a game of woke baseball. The game begins as soon as a Marxist or radical leftist makes their first pitch. To get on base, the woke player then accuses them of one form of discrimination or other. Accuse them of being racist, sexist and homophobic and you have all the bases covered. Further afield are questions having to do with ageism, sizeism, ableism, and so on. The woke player can aim for a home run by comprehensively accusing the Marxist of class reductionism. When the Marxist is on plate, various pitches are available, depending on what league you play in: the privilege soft ball, the Eurocentrism hard ball, the universalism curve ball, the masculinism fast ball and the phallogocentrism spit ball. To end this game of political relativism and will to power, wokesters accuse leftist universalists of being no different than the political right. Woke baseball is unlike most sports, however, to the extent that woke players are player, umpire and fan all at once. They can cheat and provoke someone to the point where the player cannot but be guilty of something. Or they can simply be proactive and presume in advance that the Marxists are the losers. In some quarters, for example, one can be considered white supremacist for any of the following traits: perfectionism, defensiveness, paternalism, either/or thinking, avoidance of conflict, individualism, objectivity or seeking emotional and psychological comfort.<sup>31</sup> Infinitely demanding criteria like these imply that woke baseball is not a game that Marxists can play to win.

Woke baseball has nothing to do with a given Marxist's actual social commitments. As with the Holy Inquisition and other forms institutionalized corruption, the burden of proof is imposed on designated parties whose guilt and redemption are irrelevant since the game obeys its

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<sup>29</sup> Ben Burgis, "Racial Essentialism and the 2020 Election," *Arc Digital* (November 17, 2020), <<https://arcdigital.media/racial-essentialism-and-the-2020-election-dac4810f2deb>>; Noah Berlatsky, "Why Class-First Leftists Are Wrong," *Arc Digital* (December 6, 2020) <<https://arcdigital.media/why-class-first-leftists-are-wrong-fc768d0666d8>>; Ben Burgis, "Noah Berlatsky's Critique of My Alleged 'Class First Leftism'," *Arc Digital* (November 6, 2020) <<https://benburgis.medium.com/noah-berlatskys-critique-of-class-first-leftism-c9a738caf77a>>.

<sup>30</sup> Catherine Liu, *Virtue Hoarders: The Case Against the Professional Managerial Class* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

<sup>31</sup> Tema Okun, "White Supremacy Culture Characteristics" (2021), available at <<https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>>.

own rules. For example, when Nikole Hannah-Jones was corrected by the nation's leading historians about the fact that the American Revolution was not fought to salvage slavery, as claimed by the *New York Times* '1619 Project,' she retorted on Twitter: "Trump supporters have never harassed me and insulted my intelligence as much as white men claiming to be socialists. You all have truly revealed yourself for the anti-black folks you really are."<sup>32</sup> For her neoliberal hack work Hannah-Jones received a Pulitzer Prize and a well-endowed Chair alongside Ta-Nehisi Coates at Howard University. Similarly, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez defended Critical Race Theory at the same time that she denounced those people who critique it from the left as being "privileged" and acting in "bad faith."<sup>33</sup> This was before she voted to spend billions of dollars to assist the NATO-backed Zelensky regime in Ukraine.

It is a sorry state of affairs when progressives are playing woke baseball against one another rather than organizing against capitalism and a resurgent far right. The reasons for this are not simply ideological but relate to relations of competition within contemporary knowledge and creative industries, where trading on markers of difference symbolizes progress under conditions of economic stagnation and socio-political decline. The post-Fordist context in which questions of identity, difference and lifestyle function as integral aspects of the commodification of all forms of social life makes it such that the politics of anti-oppression are part of a post-politics that abandons revolutionary change in favor of surface changes within global capitalism. As Žižek argues, "the plural contingency of postmodern political struggles" is not opposed to the totality of capital.<sup>34</sup> Rather, capitalism functions as the background, or condition of possibility, for the emergence of new subjectivities. As he puts it elsewhere:

Today's celebration of "minorities" and "marginals" is the predominant majority position; even alt-rightists who complain about the terror of liberal political correctness present themselves as protectors of an endangered minority. Or take the critics of patriarchy – those left-wing cultural theorists who focus their critique on patriarchal ideologies and practices: they attack them as if patriarchy were still a hegemonic position, ignoring what Marx and Engels wrote 170 years ago, in the first chapter of *The Communist Manifesto*: "The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations." Is it not the time to start wondering why patriarchal phallogocentrism was elevated into a main target of criticism at the exact historical moment – ours – when patriarchy definitely lost its hegemonic role, when it began to be progressively swept away by the market individualism of "rights"? ... This means that *the critical statement that patriarchal ideology continues to be today's hegemonic ideology is today's hegemonic ideology*: its function is to enable us to evade the deadlock of hedonistic permissiveness, which is effectively hegemonic.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See Eric London, "Audio recording refutes Hannah-Jones' claim that she was falsely quoted by the World Socialist Web Site," *World Socialist Web Site* (November 27, 2019), <<https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/11/27/hann-n27.html>>. See Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The Idea of America" [lead essay of The 1619 Project], *The New York Times Magazine* (August 18, 2019) 14-22.

<sup>33</sup> See Don McIntosh, "Talking Socialism | Catching Up with AOC," *Democratic Left* (March 19, 2021), <<https://www.dsausa.org/democratic-left/aoc/>>.

<sup>34</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!" in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000) 108.

<sup>35</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Relevance of the Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019) 14-16.

Communities and social groups worldwide do not have distinct properties, even if they are unevenly served by the dominant relations in place. They emerge *abstractly*, that is to say, as a function of alienation from the social totality. While rejecting imperialism, Marxism does not begin with organic community, but with the contingent and changing social totality, examining the relations between and within groups at all levels of material reality.

The fortunes of class struggle depend on the balance of class power and class consciousness at any given moment. Those progressives who think that a pluralist “all of the above” social justice activism does not raise issues and problems for the left typically take pro-allyship stands against the presumed “class-only” politics of the radical left.<sup>36</sup> In this, as Jodi Dean has argued, the term comrade, and the communism it implies, is exchanged for the kinds of post-politics in which identity and class are simply interchangeable moments of a capacious progressivism.<sup>37</sup> Consider in this regard Christian Fuchs’s cautious mediation of the divergences between David Harvey and Michael Hardt with Antonio Negri on the issue of identity and class in the special 2018 Marx @ 200 issue of the journal *tripleC*.<sup>38</sup> Whereas Hardt and Negri were once more Deleuzian in their critique of post-Fordism’s real subsumption of all facets of social life, including the way that capitalism captures subjectivity through identity constructs, they are now following the diversity zeitgeist that developed among activists after Occupy Wall Street came under attack as a brocialist movement. This attack, however, like the Bernie Bro meme, emerged as a corporate media smear.<sup>39</sup> Its achievement has been the reinforcement of postmodern theory among new social movement activists, in some ways taking the left back to where it was in the 1980s and 90s. Identity and class are not equivalent. As Alain Badiou argues, the infinite multiplicity of ontology is irrelevant to the generic truths of politics.<sup>40</sup> Activism should look to renew its strength through the labor movement rather than through hashtag movements that reorient politics around counterproductive forms of moral blackmail.

### Revolution Is Non-Reductionist

Since communism is at present inoperative in most countries, one might at the very least avoid being drawn into the game of woke baseball and question the term class reductionism. This means rejecting the particularity of the working class and insisting on its universality as the gravedigger of capitalism. The particularity of class has always been acceptable to the bourgeoisie, regardless of how charitable, reformist and progressive capitalists may have been in different historical instances. The bourgeois view of the working class is today redoubled in neoliberal

<sup>36</sup> See for example, Douglas Lain, “Class Consciousness vs. the Fiction of ‘Class First’ Politics,” *YouTube* (December 19, 2020), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bU5s7COxp10>>. On this subject, see Jodi Dean, *Comrades* (London: Verso, 2019).

<sup>37</sup> Jodi Dean, *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (London: Verso, 2019).

<sup>38</sup> See the special 2018 issue of *tripleC*, *Karl Marx @ 200: Debating Capitalism & Perspectives for the Future of Radical Theory*, available at <<https://www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/issue/view/38>>. See also Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “Empire, Twenty Years On,” *New Left Review* #120 (November/December 2019) 67-92.

<sup>39</sup> See the section “On Berniebros, Hillbots, the Russians, Alt-Right Racists, and a Whole Lot of Really Great People,” in Jeff Weaver, *How Bernie Won: Inside the Revolution that’s Taking Back Our Country – And Where We Go From Here* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2018) eBook, 190-216.

<sup>40</sup> See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1997] 2003); Alain Badiou, *Philosophy and the Event*, trans. Louise Burchill (Cambridge: Polity, [2010] 2013).

capitalism's promotion of identity politics. The class reductionism that forecasts the eternal subordination of workers is echoed in the race and gender reductionism that takes personal experience to be more relevant than theoretical generalization and that is used to attack the politics of emancipatory universality. Paradoxically, the position of "universal norm" that is the bugbear of postmodern feminists, anti-racists, intersectionalists and decolonialists is reinforced when those who are associated with this norm – cisgender and hetero-normative white male settlers – self-position and impart to others the requisite tolerance of difference.<sup>41</sup> The only alternative to this is to reach for the universal, as Fanon once recommended, and that means avoiding the reduction of culture and politics to matters of identity. Those pseudo-Gramscian postmodernists who oppose Enlightenment universality so as to critique the normativity that is associated with social inequality simply affirm capitalism.

Is there a limit to what today's woke postmodernists will say against the Marxist left? I would suggest that there are social limits to anti-Marxism and that these are informed by contemporary social conditions and ideology. Since many postmodern discourse theorists, social constructionists and left populists make claims to be the actually existing left, they must characterize the Marxists who disagree with them as furtively bourgeois or right-wing. Although many postmodernists claim that they do not believe in modernist macro-politics, they resort to its terms when the need arises. This opportunism ironizes the abuse of the concept class reductionism when it is wielded by woke identitarians. Nevertheless, what characterizes such accusations is the way that they have been conditioned by variants of wokeism. Just as whiteness studies considers whites to be guilty and inherently flawed, the postmodern left goes on the attack against the Marxist left as if it constitutes an identity category of the wrong sort. According to this hermeneutic, there must be differences and incommensurabilities that macro-politics cannot countenance.

The avenues that constitute the crossroads of intersectionality tend to be one-way streets. Within the terms of identity politics, whites, men and straights are not allowed to enjoy with the same license as blacks, women and queers. For instance, Derrick Bell, who is considered the "godfather" of Critical Race Theory, approvingly cites this description of CRT by the literary theorist Stanley Fish: "a ramshackle ad hoc affair whose ill-fitting joints are soldered together by suspect rhetorical gestures, leaps of illogic, and special pleading tricked up as general rules, all in the service of a decidedly partisan agenda that wants to wrap itself in the mantle and majesty of law."<sup>42</sup> At best, what white allies can do is eat their own. Once the bogeyman accusation of class reductionism has been shown to be misinformed and opportunist, the charge shifts to individualized *ad hominem* attacks and social media blasts. One is accused of just about anything or one is censored according to procedural issues like "tone" and other in-group mysteries that Jo Freeman defined forty years ago already as problems of organizational – and now intellectual – structurelessness.<sup>43</sup> Since the advent of online mobs, the activist structurelessness of struggles against various social norms is now affecting educational institutions, the media, business and

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<sup>41</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, "Tolerance as an Ideological Category." *Critical Inquiry* #34 (Summer) 660-82.

<sup>42</sup> Fish cited in Derrick A. Bell, "Who's Afraid of Critical Race Theory?" *University of Illinois Law Review* 1995:4 (1995) 900.

<sup>43</sup> Jo Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" (1970), available at <<https://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>>. See also Roediger's rather hapless discussion of tone and his rejection of the concept of solidarity in *Class, Race, and Marxism*.

government. While one might think that this petty-bourgeois reform agenda has something to do with social critique, the generally individualized nature of the attacks and the refusal to debate matters with sound arguments betrays the reactionary anti-Enlightenment attitudes that now inform the trendy agents of wokeism.

There is a class position on the various forms of oppression, but the rejection of left critiques of identity politics by the denizens of what Mark Fisher referred to as the “vampire castle” will not help anyone come to that understanding.<sup>44</sup> In fact, the goal of this social justice reform agenda is to prevent people from coming to that level of class consciousness and collectivize through principled organizational means that are oriented towards mass movements rather than professional, academic and subcultural in-groups. A postmodern culture that is ostensibly beyond all forms of prejudice in actual practice enacts the worst kinds of positivistic laziness, taking identity classification for granted. The Marxist materialism that was defended by postwar leftists is now a lost referent to the woke wave of neo-postmodernists. Since one cannot advance new ideas on the Marxist left without also knowing the foundations of radical and critical theory, the perspective of class reduction is essential. That Marxist method is non-reductionist without at the same time being eclectic, nihilistic and relativistic makes Marxism the better way to approach fields like science, economics, culture and law. That Marxism also provides a better overall social theory than all postmodern theories combined will very likely remain the case as long as we are living under the yoke of capital. This realization brings historical time into consideration.

In an August 2021 discussion on “The Uses (and Abuses) of History” on the *Jacobin* YouTube channel, Adolph Reed and Walter Benn Michaels comment on the irrelevance of the past to the politics that someone proclaims in the present.<sup>45</sup> This line of critique reiterates Michaels’ analysis in *The Shape of the Signifier*, in which he argues that the heightened significance of slavery, the Holocaust or Native genocide to contemporary anti-racism is by and large derivative of the need to affirm questions of ontology rather than politics. Under the rubrics of postmodernism, post-structuralism or post-historicism, he writes, the world is organized “by subject positions instead of beliefs and divided into identities instead of classes.”<sup>46</sup> For Michaels, the fact that someone’s ancestors were slaves or were killed in the Holocaust should not matter if their politics is concerned with improving the lives of everyone, including the descendants of victims of the Gulag and other atrocities. Appeals to history and memory, like experience, is sometimes taken by people as justification for nearly anything. While one can fully appreciate Michaels’ argument, there are legitimate uses of history for the present that are not limited to justifications of identity.

Wokeism argues that we cannot settle macro-political issues until we attend to demands for equity. This makes social life complicated since these demands are tied up with the interests of the ruling class and its neoliberal ideology of post-representation. Woke enclaves are perverse microcosms whose purpose it is to make class consciousness dissolve into affects, clicks and other

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<sup>44</sup> Mark Fisher, “Exiting the Vampire Castle,” *Open Democracy* (November 23, 2013), <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/exiting-vampire-castle/>>.

<sup>45</sup> Jacobin, “The Uses (and Abuses) of History – Adolph Reed and Walter Benn Michaels,” *YouTube* (August 6, 2021), <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_p78eyK-7s4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_p78eyK-7s4)>.

<sup>46</sup> See Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 17.

fetishes of the technocratic-cybernetic class. This is why crony politicians who “look like me” have taken up woke ideology as fodder for their intramural exchanges. Since, according to this class strata, the power of capital cannot be challenged, its reified parliamentary powers seek to reflect its reified subjects. They do not represent us. They simply look like us since that was all that we asked of them. The CIA now advertises its intersectional staff, as does the U.S. Army, which now proposes the decolonization of the Russian federation.<sup>47</sup> While such appropriations are no reason to abandon anti-oppression causes, they also cannot be denounced by the groups that are thereby invoked because, at the very least, identity groups, however tenuous such classifications may be, are not politically monolithic. What people require is not better representation within capitalism but organizations that advance the strategies necessary to bring historical time and human becoming in line with social needs.

Consciousness brings historical time into the political frameworks that advance emancipatory social change.<sup>48</sup> In socialism, the working class ceases to be a particular class that can be satisfied with higher wages and short-term gains. It becomes universal as a class only when it seeks the abolition of class society, the capitalist relations of production and private property regimes. Wokeism, in contrast, is a petty-bourgeois politics of the decadent professional-managerial middle class. It is a defense of the established order. By attacking wokeism, conservatives only pretend to be radical. The only way in which the right can strike a correct note with the working class is when it mocks the political correctness of the suburban elite. The rest is deception. Only the left has a legitimate critique of wokeism because only socialism has a conflictual sense of time that is open to social change. Wokeism is not committed to historical change but rather to the infinite forms of being. Like everything else about capitalism, it evades serious scrutiny. Wokeism has the aura of the capitalist command structure. That is why it is successful in today’s neoliberalized postmodern academia, media and culture industry. Its function is paradoxical insofar as diversity is used to induce ideological cohesion through differences that make no difference. When people struggle against capitalism, they shed their short-term wokeism for a long-term vision of human freedom and equality. They take up the burden of historical time and fight for the survival of a now endangered humanity.

### Author

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<sup>47</sup> See for example, Maroosha Muzaffar, “CIA mocked from all sides over new ‘woke’ recruitment video,” *The Independent* (May 4, 2021), <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/cia-recruitment-video-backlash-woke-b1841656.html>>; Louise Hall, “US Army launches new animated recruitment video featuring LGBT+ family to diversify intake,” *The Independent* (May 13, 2021), <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/army-recruitment-lgbt-pride-b1846891.html>>; Casey Michel, “Decolonize Russia,” *The Atlantic* (May 27, 2022), <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/russia-putin-colonization-ukraine-chechnya/639428/>>. On this subject, see also River Page, “The CIA and the New Dialect of Power,” *American Affairs* 5:5 (Winter 2021), <<https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2021/11/the-cia-and-the-new-dialect-of-power/>>.

<sup>48</sup> On this subject, see István Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time: Socialism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008).



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