

## Renewing the Vision: New Proposals for the 21st Century<sup>1</sup>

A. Allen Marcus

*New Proposals Editorial Collective*

Charles R. Menzies

*New Proposals Editorial Collective*

We join with fellow workers the world over in celebrating May 1st, the International Workers' Day, with the launching of our inaugural issue of *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry*. We do so in honour of all those who have passed before us clearing the way for progressive intellectuals, community activist, and, of course, proletarian militants and intellectuals of every variety and tendency, across time and space. We join with fellow workers in remembering the martyrs of the Chicago Haymarket Rally of May, 1884.

Much has changed since 1884. Workers movements have arisen, succeeded, and then failed. The major socialist experiments of the 20th century have, for the most part, faded from view. The few that hold on—China, Vietnam, Cuba, North Korea—are either transforming themselves into capitalist success stories, clinging to nominal collectivist poverty and geopolitical self-justification, or have degenerated into bizarre and horrific shadows of whatever promise they may have held. As the 20th century drew to a close those of us who managed to take hold of the dream of a classless society found ourselves gradually pushed to the sidelines as market-mechanisms and acquisitive individualism became ever more triumphant.

Nonetheless we persisted. In the late 1990s we organized "Counter Flows: Marxist Anthropology in the New Millennium," a session for the American

Anthropological Association. We then observed that between the publication of Bridget O'Laughin's 1975 review article, "Marxist Approaches in Anthropology," and William Roseberry's 1988 review article "Political Economy," (published on the eve of the fall of the Berlin Wall), a sea change had occurred within social science and humanities disciplines. In an ironic (tragic may be more apt) twist, anthropologists had answered Kathleen Gough's call for "New Proposals" by a radical engagement with the 'text,' simultaneously subverting and adopting Gough's critique of anthropology as the "child of Western Imperialism" (1968:403-407). We have taken Gough's call to arms as the title of our journal—New Proposals—and, in so doing we dedicate this endeavour to her unwavering support of revolutionary and socialist action in the pursuit of a better world for all.

So, a Marxist online journal—why now?

We are at the beginning of a new millennium, looking back at a 19th century philosophy, with no significant anniversary to lay our work on. It is more than 150 years since the publication of the Communist Manifesto, 130 years since the Paris Commune, 85 years since the October Revolution, and slightly more than half a century since the Chinese revolution. It would seem forced to make this a celebration of 30 something years since the Sandinista revolution, 40 something since Paris 1968, or 50 something since the Cuban revolution.

---

1 Portions of this introduction were originally published in *Anthropologica* Vol 47, Number 1: 2005.

So why now?

To use the popular language of contemporary finance, we believe that Marxism is at an all time low and has the possibility for good long term growth.

Call it intellectual bargain hunting—and belief that a better world is possible and we still do have the world to gain.

Robert Brenner has said that “Marxist economists are famous for having accurately predicted seven out of the last one international economic crisis” (Brenner 1998). There is a strong argument for sharing Dr. Brenner’s scepticism and not claiming the many signs of renewed class struggle and social protest as an indicator of a vast and powerful re-composition of the world working class movement and a new viability for Marxism. There are always mass class struggles and the young are always restless.

As we enter the new millennium, the forces of capitalism and reaction are in ascendance. The dream of a communist society organized for human needs and not for profit is in tatters. A century of bourgeois state terror, social democratic betrayal, Stalinist retreat and appeasement, and many varieties of opportunistic devaluing of the coin of human liberation have left us with what German social theorist Jurgen Habermas has called an exhaustion of utopian energies (Habermas 1989).

Political leaders in every country in the world, who barely 25 years ago were committed anti-capitalist militants, have joined the bourgeois governments of their former enemies and traded their AK 47’s for elite appointments and government portfolios, while rank and file militants have been deserted. Everywhere individual solutions are posed to the collective social problems of daily life and everywhere economies get leaner, meaner and more competitive, pitting neighbour against neighbour.

We predict no coming upsurge.

The world proletariat has been bombed, conned, and misled into doubt and aimlessness. Marxism, communism, and socialism as alternative means of organizing society have little credibility for most of the world. There is no current political, economic, or social program of the world proletariat and most

of its twentieth century mass organizations are disbanded or hopelessly discredited.

So why now? Because we must!

As bankrupt and proven wrong as socialism appears to be after a century of failed experiments, the capitalist future remains even worse. Their side claims that it will create a competitive world that pits neighbour against neighbour in the relentless search for accumulation and greater economic efficiency. Unlike our side, they are excellent at keeping their promises. In defence of bad planning over no planning, it is worth pointing out the fastest growing economy in the world during the first half of the twentieth century was the USSR and in the second half China (starting in the late 1960s). However, these repressive, corrupt, and often barely competent governments were never as efficient as capitalism at convincing their working classes to work hard for the bosses and support relentless war and competition.

The current situation, now that the world bourgeoisie has an open field looks even bleaker. As the world lurches from crisis to crisis, trade war between Europe and the New World constantly sits on the horizon. People on all continents rage about clashing civilizations and “the West,” while historians lend credibility to these indefinable culturalist blocs by backdating them to suit the current political accounting, suicide bombers reify the fantasies by bringing destruction to ordinary people, and the old colonial powers use vast armies to police streamlined post-Thatcherite proxy states. When the millions protest, they are ignored. Meanwhile the daily global environmental holocaust created by the anarchy of accumulation, has suddenly been narrowed into the tiny corridor of global warming; a threat to the world working class that seems to be a big issue now that property and accumulation are finally threatened. You don’t have to be a Marxist to be able to wax lyrical about the miserable state of the world today.

And yet, the worst thing that they have taken from us is not our environment, our blood, our sweat, or our right to shed tears. The worst thing that they have taken is the hope of our race, the human race. That is why we must. We continue

to believe that the human race is the subject of history. It is not god, capital, or even the environment, which we would put ahead of the first two. The human is the subject. This is an area where the contemporary university has been particularly criminal in its theft of hope. Whether it is social scientists promoting the text as the subject, doubt as hip, or worse yet, the contemporary historical fashion of pissing on big moments when ordinary people attempted to use hope to take history into their own hands. What, we wonder, is the goal of trying to argue, as contemporary historians love to do, that the French Revolution was unnecessary or the wrong direction, that the US Civil War that decisively smashed slavery in the Americas was an unnecessary loss of life and property caused by miscommunication between white people; or that the Russian Revolution was a mistaken attempt to create a better world.

Again, you do not have to be a Marxist to believe that hope is a reason to give it a try and that the human being should be the subject of all these tries. There are humanitarians, communitarians, indigenous activists, feminists, environmentalists, religious social justice groups and all manner of people searching for a better relationship between humans and a better way of living than the ceaseless competition and universal commodification promised by capitalism. However, we remain convinced of the elementary anthropological understanding that a competitive market system is not the only way to mobilize social labour, the elementary Marxist understanding that those who toil must rule, and the basic commonsense understanding that history is very long and twenty or thirty years of ubiquitous “death of communism” triumphalism may be less important than currently thought. What gives us hope about Marxism is not that it answers all questions, or even most, but rather that it provides the best, and perhaps the only serious starting point, for ending what we continue to understand as a failed project—capitalism.

This journal is our attempt to participate in this starting point. It comes at the end of a decade and a half of hunting the corridors of anthropology meetings for co-thinkers and kindred spirits, organizing

our colleagues around issues of importance to our social class, and studying the lessons of the past.

We are compelled to confess that our project is not driven by the rising interest in labour issues on university campuses throughout the U.S., Canada, and Mexico,<sup>2</sup> the massive strike waves in Europe in recent years, nor the global opposition to neo-liberalism, free trade and “the war against terrorism” which brought nearly 15 million protesters into the streets of cities across the world during one weekend in February 2003. Our project is driven by the Trotskyist idea, brought to anthropology in the 1950s and 60s by Eric Wolf (1959) and Marshall Sahlins and Elmen Service (1960) of the privileges of backwardness. To trade our financial metaphor for one from football, there is an open field.

With social democrats and Greens throughout Europe imposing the kinds of privatizations that “right of centre” parties never could and stealthily rebuilding national armies, rump Stalinists recanting the left nationalism of their communist past for the ultra-right nationalism of their capitalist present and academic Marxists jettisoning the last remnants of Enlightenment universalism for the particularism of post-modern doubt and revisionist history, it is time to return to the program of proletarian internationalism, before economic competition and inter-imperialist conflict destroys our planet and extirpates the idea of “humanity” in a frenzy of national action.

A revival of what Edmund Wilson (1972) called “acting and writing history” is long overdue. The retreat of the structuralism of the 1970s and 80s has made such a project more conceivable than ever. Objectivist analysis that reduces the social scientist to a Ptolemaic forecaster of glacial movements in the mode of production or development of the

---

2 In particular it is worth drawing attention to the shutdown and occupation of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) for ten months from April 1998 to February 1999. This protest at the largest university in the Americas was explicitly over the question of working class rights to a free and easily accessible university education in Mexico. It became a prominent forum and organising pillar of Marxism in the academy and drew anthropologists in on both sides of the struggle and both sides of the US/Mexican border.

forces of production has been hopelessly discredited and replaced by the subjectivism of the particular. No longer certain that the contradictions of history would inevitably work themselves out and yield a new society, social scientists have come to see themselves as witnesses to “post-ideology” local phenomena, cheerleaders for culturalism, or crafters of grand Wittgenstein influenced deconstructive word games.

For Marxist scholars of the generation of 2000 whose god never failed us in 1939, 1956, or 1968<sup>3</sup> we have been cursed by developing in a wasteland of doubt, despair and pessimism that leads the best among our mentors to laugh affectionately when we raise the question of praxis and social transformation. But we have also been blessed by the absence of gods. Rather than struggle to chart a course between structure and agency, history and theory, objectivism and subjectivism, or the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., we are developing in a fallow field. We can go back to the basics and do what Marxists have always done: wage an ideological battle in our own work place for a cooperative and proletarian vision. This journal is a modest attempt to renew the struggle for a proletarian centred and Marxist anthropology. We think that the field has been fallow for long enough. The time has come to start planting the old seeds of a new society in the fallow fields of the present.

We open this inaugural issue with a provocative commentary by our friend and mentor, Gerald Sider. Drawing upon research and political experiences that stretch from the civil rights movement to the contemporary moment Sider’s corpus of work challenges us to make our work count in ways more important than those normal measures of academic success—citation indexes or merit increments. As

3 These dates refer respectively to the Stalin-Hitler pact which disoriented and disillusioned a generation of communist militants; the crushing of the Hungarian uprising and the revelations that accompanied the death of Stalin, leading communists to hæmorrhage from parties around the world; and the combination of the Soviet intervention in the “Prague Spring”, the betrayals of Paris 1968 by the Communist Party of France, and the eventual failure of the global social movements of the 1960s and 70s.

a teacher, colleague, or comrade in struggle Sider leads us into thinking through the implications of what we are doing.

In his own work, which links field research with political activism and theorizing (see, for example, Sider 2003a, 2003b), Sider challenges anthropologists to conceptualize their commitments to those studied in ways that provokes a creative antagonism between those who ‘just want to get on with it’ and solve the world’s problems and others who remain locked in the ethereal worlds of text, theory, and reflection. Sider’s approach is notable for the way he picks up a concept, elaborates upon it via close ethnographic description, and ultimately stretches it beyond its normal configuration. Whether he is critiquing the notion of resistance, the everyday, or exploring the implications of hegemony for fisherfolk in Newfoundland, his underlying concern revolves around issues of power within a capitalist social formation. His commentary here, *Remaking Marxist Anthropology*, is no disappointment—it provokes and engages and urges us to reconceptualize our Marxist anthropology in a way that brings it fully into our contemporary world.

The opening article is a review paper by Marcus and Menzies in which we explore the dynamics and particularities of North American (Mexico, United States, and Canada) Marxism and Anthropology (originally published in *Anthropologica* Vol. 47, No. 1: 2005). In this paper our intention is to pull out the key themes and ideas that we see as critical for an engaged anthropology, a Marxist anthropology of the 21st century. As anthropologists we have a limited connection to the physical power of the working class, but we do have a public platform for exerting some small influence on the consciousness of the working class. Our opening paper is one small part of this project.

David Hakken’s paper fittingly, for an online journal, engages the new virtual world of work and communication. In what ways do social formations change when they take on the characteristics associated with “cyberspace.” Hakken challenges us to evaluate contemporary knowledge theories through his development of an alternative knowledge theory of value that draws inspiration from Marx’s classical

labour theory of value. Hakken then evaluates his alternative theory in relation to his current research on advocacy for and development of Free/Libre and Open Source Software in the Malay World and more generally.

Our final piece is a review of William S. Lewis's recent book, *Louis Althusser and the Traditions of French Marxism*, by Hristos Verikukis. The review highlights the importance of Althusser's work while also raising a series of critical points about Lewis' treatment.

We have seen that there are many Marxist anthropologists scattered among the generation of 2000 and though it could not, at present, be said to constitute a movement, we want to take this chance to predict an upsurge. To go back to Robert Brenner's sly comment about Marxist economists, we are ready to predict seven of the next one mass radicalization. None us will mind being wrong six times, if we get it right the seventh. With so many excellent scholars of the generation of 2000 working on the project of Marxist anthropology we are looking forward to eventually being right and contributing in some small way to consolidating and articulating the gains of whatever utopian energies are released.

Just as early 20th Century anti-racist Boasians in Mexico and the United States served the interests of big capital and sections of the petty bourgeoisie by helping to consciously articulate and rationalize the ethnic and cultural changes that were occurring in the make-up of North American capitalism, we Marxists of the early 21st Century can aid in the understanding and articulation of the changes in the world workers' movement and the struggle for a socialist future. We can, in classic anthropological fashion, question everyday commonsense and ask challenging questions about the existence, strength, and consciousness of the world working class. We can be both workers challenging our own conditions of production and supporting the struggles of our class brothers and sisters. We can be intellectuals fighting against bourgeois ideology that, diminishes the value of the working class in favour of individualism, obscures rationality with mystifications, views the world through the counter-enlightenment lens

of human ethnic zoology, councils passivity in face of so called human nature and naturalizes the market.

We can fight for the idea that history is what you make of it.

## References

- Brenner, Robert  
1998 The Looming Crisis of World Capitalism: From Neoliberalism to Depression? *Against the Current* 13(5):22
- Gough, Kathleen  
2002 (originally published 1968) New Proposals for Anthropologists. *In The Anthropology of Politics: A Reader in Ethnography, Theory and Critique*. Joan Vincent. ed. New York: Blackwell Press.
- Habermas, Jurgen  
1987 New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- O'Laughlin, Bridget  
1975 Marxist Approaches in Anthropology. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 4:341-370.
- Roseberry, William  
1988 Political Economy. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 17:161-85.
- Sahlins, Marshall and Elman Service eds.  
1960 *Evolution and Culture*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press
- Sider, Gerald M.  
2003a *Between History and Tomorrow: Making And Breaking Everyday Life in Rural Newfoundland*. Peterborough, Ont.; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press.  
2003b *Living Indian Histories: Lumbee and Tuscarora People in North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Wilson, Edmund  
1972 *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Wolf, Eric R.  
1959 *Sons of the Shaking Earth*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.