

Building Societies in Which All Can And Do Prosper

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

Allen Marcus and Charles Menzies

The epigraph is drawn from Allen Marcus and Charles Menzies's introduction to the first issue of *New Proposals*, published fifteen years ago in May 2007. Indeed, it is the closing words of a remarkable essay which surveys the status and concerns of academic Marxism at the crest of neo-liberalism. At the time, most policymakers believed the window for fundamental political development had passed. What remained was merely efficient reform, that if not entirely beholden to the market nevertheless took great inspiration from it. And why not, these technocrats shrugged. In the United States, the real GDP had grown by more than 230% in nearly a quarter century; from US\$6.759tn in 1980 to US\$15.626tn in 2007. Aside from ordinary recessions in the business cycle in 1990 and 2001, growth rates had peaked at 7.2% in 1984, and stayed consistent at around 4.5% in the late 1990s (see Amadeo 2022). "As the 20th century drew to a close" Marcus and Menzies wrote:

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. (2007, 1)

Yet informed by anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist struggles before, and prepared to use the yardstick of centuries, Marcus and Menzies were unwilling to bend to capitalist realism. If the intensification of accumulation impulses was an automatic social good, why then were reactionary forces frequently beckoned to safeguard the flanks of this process?

If appearances were on the side of capitalists, facts were not. In a prescient inversion of the grammar of financialization, Marcus and Menzies wrote "we believe that Marxism is at an all time low and has the possibility for good long term growth" (Marcus and Menzies 2007, 2). The 2008 Great Recession was a material proof that 'reality always

asserts itself.' Unencumbered by disciplinary strictures, *New Proposals* was well positioned to capture the renewed interest in Marxism as the ramifications of the Great Recession spread across the globe. The turmoil prompted renewed discussions about the irreconcilability of democracy and capitalism. And just like that, what seemed impossible years before was up for grabs as movements like Occupy Wall Street crafted a succinct vocabulary to describe the totality of alienation and misery under capitalism. While undoubtedly committed to scholarship of the finest quality, more importantly *New Proposals* provided a venue for experimentation with Marxism, using this global body of knowledge as the starting point for conceptualizing (and revolting against) the failed project of capitalism.

Like any piece of intellectual work, *New Proposals* reflects its place and time. As the covers of the various issues show, this was British Columbia, Canada, a geography I have happened to traverse too. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, there were several clusters of concern. In urban areas these were homelessness, underemployment, and increasing rents, all telltale signs of growing social inequality. For a while it seemed that the only people not duly worried about a pressed public transportation network were the land developers who had the ears of municipal politicians with foreign direct investment from the Asia-Pacific region eager to assist in gentrifying the local real estate market (Ley and Dobson 2008; Ley 2017). Another matter was civil friction as new migrants integrated in Canada. Too often this took the form of vulgar interpersonal racism, but institutional racism played a not insignificant role as well. Activists sought to build solidarity between new-migrants and Indigenous groups, albeit somewhat unsuccessfully.

Rural areas had similar problems with gentrification as the wealthy bought second or third homes, leaving locals unable to live in the towns they were born in. Concurrently many towns built around resource extraction had to reinvent themselves, oftentimes becoming sites for weekend leisure or the creative economy. Proverbially, mountain guides replaced loggers while shipping clerks became pottery makers. The changing occupational composition was

reflected in local government, and factions emerged to safeguard old and new interests. Squamish, a town north of Vancouver, is the quintessential example of a town that sought to square the circle of extractive industries with environmental tourism. Finally, due to the consequences of uneven and combined development conservative politics took on new attributes, like intense resentment of 'distant metropolitan elites.' But if anything linked urban and rural British Columbia it was the prevailing belief that profiting from nature was a right; resource extraction or green capitalism were simply two different methods to achieve that goal.

The task of countering the many of the aforementioned developments is being made more difficult due to what we might describe as the great project of anti-critique. It is a truism that universities across the world are besieged by various pressure groups forces from the political right, far right, alt-right, and intellectual dark web. One common semiotic tactic has been to portray social science and humanities faculty as treasonous because they supposedly proselytize and indoctrinate young adults into becoming budding Bolsheviks. When taking power, the political right typically prioritizes dismantling the humanities. Whether Stephen Harper, in the wake of a 2013 terror threat, claimed that "this is not the time to commit sociology" (Toronto Star, 2013), Jair Bolsonaro's 2019 Twitter declaration of a state project to "descentralizar investimento em faculdades de filosofia e sociologia"¹ or the current manufactured outrage over Critical Race Theory in the United States, the underlying message is clear: "All scholars, regardless of how benign they think they are, are a clear political threat." Sadly, few friends are to be found inside the university as administrators view themselves as accountants. This is not to claim that administrators can never be allies in the politics of universities. Only that their goodwill will only ever go so far. If egalitarian progress is to be made, students and scholars must be the drivers. And in addition to the classroom, there needs to be venues to openly share analysis and thought, commentary and critique.

1 The English translation is to 'decentralize investment in faculties of philosophy and sociology.'

Given the place of *New Proposals*, it has always aspired to productively deploy Marxist and Indigenous social critique. As Volume 3(3) suggests, this was an “ambivalent relationship” with many failed efforts. Still Menzies proposed, “it does seem that the analytic reach of Marxist inspired theoretical concepts and frameworks should have some salience for navigating a path toward decolonization autonomy” (Menzies 2010, 5). With Indigenous peoples taking an active and visible leadership role in British Columbia fisheries unions, as but one example, in addition to a history of labour activism, Marxist analysis can assist people to understand the kinds of subordination set in motion by property ownership, and how that ownership is tied to (neo)colonial dis-possession. This is an area of work that *New Proposals* is a world leader in, and a concentration I hope the journal maintains as it further matures.

The introduction to this collection will be Charles Menzies’s last. Over the fifteen years he has been the editor he has embodied the ideal of ‘being a good ancestor.’ I acknowledge with gratitude his handing over the editorial reins of *New Proposals*. I will work hard and strategically to advance the project of *New Proposals* so that it can continue to be an incubator for the diversity of Marxist thought, showing it to be living political and scholarly tradition. The other commitment I make to keep the main thread that ties all of Menzies’s work together. This is his insistence on the variability of human life; his conclusion is empirically supported by decades of anthropological scholarship and field studies. Humans can build societies in which all can and do prosper. I invite authors and readers to join the project for there is a world to win. And maybe, if we are fortunate, perhaps we too might even be able find some satisfaction in the work itself.

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