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“LEFT-TURN LANE UNMARKED: COMMENTS ON AN UNFINISHED MANIFESTO”

The Fifteenth Street Manifesto Group’s Open Letter is a welcome one. The voices of the Left have indeed been on the “defensive, fragmented and disoriented.” Many former radicals anxious to end their years with at least a few notches in the victory column have turned to the Democratic Party, painting grim scenarios of what will be lost if we don’t remain with them. They have not asked what would be lost if we do—like the preservation of a radical point of view, the ongoing struggle against the dominant ideological blather, and efforts to build practical alternatives to the ill-fated regimens of our times.

“Left Turn” calls for renewed efforts on all these fronts and offers theoretical insights to help in the process, and though I have questions about aspects of the call I pose them within a larger context of basic agreement with the group’s goals. My concerns are about three things: first, the audience: Who is this letter directed to? second, the program: What is the Fifteenth Street Group asking them to do? and third, the focus of the analysis: Where are readers supposed to locate themselves within the society? Before getting into these points, though, let me comment on the statement’s strong points.

I. “LEFT TURN’S” CONTRIBUTIONS.

The Manifesto Group starts, rightly I believe, with a candid assessment of where we are now. It starts by faulting the limits of “contemporary single-issue organizing, and the trap...of identity politics,” and the demise too of the once-promising new social movements. These tendencies which looked years ago like they would strengthen class politics by accounting for the special forms of oppression suffered by racial minorities and women have now splintered the radical project, abandoned any critique of capitalism, and produced what is often simply an upbeat version of old interest-group liberalism. The letter is absolutely right in calling for the creation of a new class-based movement.

“Left Turn” helps define the issues for that movement with its analysis not just of the restructured world of U.S. production but also of the transformations being worked in its relations of social reproduction—in its families, schools, housing, and culture. The essay is attentive to the current plight of women and children, and of the disintegrative pressures being put on the American family. Its comments about the debasement of the hegemonic American concept of freedom are accurate and discerning: today that freedom adds up to little more than consumer choice.

It is its treatment of this realm of reproduction as it buckles under the forces of commodification that to my eyes is the strongest part of “Left Turn.” The plight of people in urban areas especially, described in the document’s section on the Right to the City, epitomizes the situation as they suffer the enclosures of space and opportunity that is part of that commodification, and witness the enrichment of a few and dispossession of millions of others. “Left Turn” thus reveals the relevance of Marxism and class theory for explaining not just Americans’ situation on the job, but also why public services they never conceived as being dependent on private profit have become so, and are now often priced beyond their means. This includes medicine, hospitals, basic education, college, and soon in many places, resources like water. This commodification also explains the essence of our untenable relationship with nature and our current inability to reshape it. The current mortgage meltdown confirms the validity of this analysis. Millions of Americans are now losing the only property they ever owned, the security they thought capitalist society guaranteed them, and their place in the world which has turned out to be only another commodity the value of which is controlled by distant markets.. Everyone decries the new dispossession but they don’t have a language for understanding it. “Left Turn” provides that language. And it proposes a remedy too, a set of “non-reformist” reforms, as André Gorz might have put it: to recognize housing, health care and other social and cultural services not as salable commodities but as public rights and “non-commodifiable public utilities.”

The document is on solid footing, finally, in its call for not only new theoretical analyses but new radical practice. It is right to acknowledge the energy and promise of current environmentalist and anarchist struggles and the implicit radicalism of urban gardens and consumers’ coops, and to call for new experiments in collective ownership. In terms of the political system more broadly, its insistence on making the electoral process more responsive through reforms like proportional representation is welcome, as is its deeper call to reconsider the whole idea of representation, “the deeply

flawed basis of liberal democracy." To coordinate all these struggles and theoretical efforts, we need, yes, a new, non-Leninist, political formation.

The strength of the statement as a whole is its underlying insistence on the importance for socialists of reestablishing an independent point of view. Radicals who work with liberals and others as a matter of practical politics without first arriving at their own analysis and understanding of the society are pursuing a path not of "realism," but of marginalization and irrelevance. Without independent bearings they will lose the means for differentiating structural from merely superficial reforms.

II. YIELD LEFT.

While "Left Turn" successfully makes the case for an independent point of view it does not identify the standpoint from which that view will emerge. It extends penetrating analyses of a number of problems but does not provide for the reader a clear sense of position within the shifting forces of the times. Take its discussion of the Age of Financialization. It makes valid points about the high-handedness and irrationality of the current stage of capital, but after leading the reader through a reprise of Baran and Sweezy, indictments of fictitious capital and denunciation of the Democrats, it does not suggest where and with whom exactly the reader should stand. What's the socialist position on all this? In a period when Bernie Madoff is not the only guy who made-off with our money, what transitional demands could unite eco-activists, anarchists and former partisans of identity-politics? What analysis will lead other Americans to see that the destruction of their home equity and personal savings are not failures of the system but the way the current system works?

Manifestos are usually driven by a new insight or new line of analysis that reveals an unexpected approach or a vulnerable joint in the bone structure of the system. That special angle or revelation is what produces new activists and leads to wider mobilization because movements, as Gorz also noted, don't always arise the way we think. We often say that people first have "radical needs" and then look for the means to fulfill them. But the means may sometimes precede the problem. People may first have to see that a solution is possible before they admit to grievances they previously left unrecognized.

I looked in this essay for that insight or new line of analysis. But I did not find it. That lacuna is what partially accounts, I think, for the problems mentioned above. First, who is the audience for this letter? Its assumption of a sophistication on a wide variety of subjects and familiarity with socialist history (including terms like “totality” and “collaborationist”) suggest that it’s written for veterans of the sixties’ New Left. Call them Left-overs. No offense; I’m a card-carrying member of that cadre myself. But ours is a cohort largely retired from the trenches, whose ranks are being steadily winnowed with time. We are not the ones who will fight the new fights. The right audience for such a statement are potential activists, say ages 18 - 35. But the language and references of the Open Letter are not addressed to their concerns.

Second, what are we asking them to do? This is unfortunately the briefest part of letter. I summarized the remarks on this above, but that brevity suggests a lack of close familiarity with the actual struggles. Yes, it’s true, we need “genuine social equality, democracy, prosperity, personal renewal, ecological sustainability, and peace.” And racial equality, union strength and a new social wage too. But that’s a shopping list not a program. What’s our “Peace, Bread and Land?” If we are going to help build a new class-based movement where do we start? Which of today’s many issues will prove most compelling? And what’s the argument about race and class, and gender and class, that will wean current activists from identity politics and persuade them to adopt a race-inflected or gender-inflected class politics? What, indeed, is the class analysis of current American society and how do we translate , in Sartre’s term, its distinctive mediations?

“Left Turn” starts to do this with the analysis of commodification and the transformation of the American city. Beyond that our knowledge is necessarily limited, for “class never presents itself in pure form,” as Stanley Aronowitz has noted elsewhere. But though we can’t know for sure, we still need to make educated guesses and attempt to define a set of goals and priorities for our times, guidelines that can be corrected and refocused over time.

This is where I see the Fifteenth Street Group, thirdly, as not taking their own call seriously enough. A manifesto if nothing else is a call to action. But, and to summarize my points above, I cannot make out what this document is asking us to do. It covers so many topics that the reader cannot get a sense of What is To Be Done. And I’m not convinced a new party formation is the first place to start, nor that discussing what is alive and dead in Marx, and where the Old and New Lefts went wrong, will help to get things going.

III. IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE DEED.

What might help get it moving is more proposals like the one to establish housing and health care as non-commodifiable public utilities. What is needed, that is, are transitional or structural reform proposals the struggle for which extends our vision of democratic community and educates people about the character of the current system, goals the partial attainment of which will mobilize further support by exposing the irrationality of the system. What about a right to work? What about a public jobs program? What about the corporation? It is an institution public in its subsidies and its consequences, and social in its organizational make-up and the environmental costs it imposes. Obama's bailouts made its public character blatantly obvious. Why not demand that an essentially public institution be subject to public (local as well as federal) controls? And that corporations be barred from impairing the public interest by off-shoring jobs or lowering workers' wages to compete with those of impoverished peoples overseas? There are costs for doing business in a democracy. More proposals like these would help people understand where they stand and spark protests, preparatory to a new organization.

We are at a point when the eco-activists and anarchists who have been at the cutting edge of current radicalism may be tiring of their disdain for organization. They expected a new kind of political association to emerge naturally, but as Naomi Klein notes, "it's not happening." Struck by "how easy it was for everything to evaporate," she concludes, "we need to be more tangible, whether it's political parties" or something else. ("Outside Agitator," *New Yorker*, Dec. 8, 2008) The strength of "Left Turn" is that it has caught the moment and seems to offer something more tangible in the way of organization. It seems to propose an organization that can maintain the dialectic Rosa Luxemburg once described between people's immediate concerns and the need for social transformation, "the mass and its historic goal." The statement's weakness is that its arguments turn out to be tethered to that historic goal and relatively unmoored to the immediate, increasingly fearful outlooks of the people who we hope would be members of that new organization.