

Marxism and intellectuals in the United States at century's end

Alan Wald

ABSTRACT

The late 1990s is without doubt a crucial transitional period in the evolution of the Marxist intellectual tradition in the United States, now expressed mainly by university scholars. Of course, anti-capitalist radicalism has continued unabated in various forms since the European invasion of the continent, and marxism is the general outlook of pre-eminent Left intellectuals and activists, growing in number, since the post-Civil War era. Yet there are clearly several key moments in the historiography of socialist intelligentsia.

Transitional periods

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One is the conjuncture of the 1930s when many mature intellectuals, born around 1905, were pushed leftward so as to blend their 1920s cultural rebellion with 1930s Communism and Trotskyism. At the same time, a younger cohort, born around 1920, grew up more directly under the influence of the Great Depression social movements that were established, emerging as lesser-known Left cultural figures in the immediate post-World War II era.

Another moment was the 1960s when a generation born around 1940, and launching careers as professionals by the mid-1960s, was swept up in the New Left Radicalism. Once again, an even larger layer of young people, distinctly post-World War II and born closer to 1950, absorbed the 1960s youth rebellion and all that followed as they finished high school and began college. These former students later on constituted themselves as the most numerous stratum of Left-wing scholars ever to have appeared in the United States.

The long-term trajectory of those stamped by the 1930s experiences is well-known by now. If they remained faithful to the Communist movement, either as Party members or fellow-travellers, or, even, simply, as non-co-operatives in the Cold War witch-hunt, they were excluded from institutional life in academe or sections of the culture industry where the witch-hunt struck. (The purge was mainly in Hollywood and television; less persecution occurred in New York theatre and middlebrow commercial publishing). If they became part of the anti-Stalinist or quasi-Trotskyist Left (popularly known as 'The New York Intellectuals') they mainly joined the Cold War liberal anti-communist alliance (Sidney Hook and Lionel Trilling typified the older, '1905', generation; Irving

Kristal and Melvin Lasky the younger, '1920', one), or, if they managed to stay somewhat independently radical in the 1950s, they later reacted negatively to the radical student and Black Power upsurge of the 1960s (as was the case with Irving Howe and Meyer Schapiro). Of course, variations and hybrids of all types occurred. Granville Hicks and Robert Gorham Davis were ex-Communists who named names in the 1950s, but remained liberal; Davis, in fact, became a harsh critic of the Vietnam War and later on a scourge of neo-conservatism. Dwight Macdonald and F.W. Dupee were veterans of the anti-Stalinist Left who responded enthusiastically to the new radicalism of the 1960s.

Still, by 1955, when an intellectual born in 1905 was fifty years old, and one born in 1920 was thirty-five, the basic pattern of deradicalisation was in evidence. Today, we have reached a parallel moment when intellectuals of the group born around 1940 have reached fifty years of age, and those born around 1955 have reached forty. The pressures of middle age, and of a demobilisation of social movements are presently taking their toll, as they did forty years earlier. The issue, of course, is not simply chronological age; it is the waxing and waning of social movements which give intellectuals an initial vision that it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

Certain generational similarities are already established. First, the world changed dramatically in international relations in both instances. For those shaped by the 1930s experience, there was the degeneration of the Russian Revolution into a brutal dictatorship, the horrific war against fascism, and the enigmatic character of the Cold War (with democratic imperialism opposed to totalitarian anti-imperialism). For those shaped by the 1960s experience, there is the disappearance of the former USSR, the demobilisation of the colonial revolution, and the onset of international trade wars and 'humanitarian interventions' (as in Somalia and Haiti).

Domestically, powerful radicalisations - in the 1930s, spearheaded by labour; in the 1960s by students, people of colour and women - have lapsed into decline. marxist intelligentsia of both moments were forced into the unanticipated situation of redefining their roles and relations to the doctrine that had explained the world to them. Both now seem to be following a similar trajectory, albeit with variations due to contextual differences. The more extreme the rightward move of each intellectual, the more extraordinary the caricature of previous radical commitment. Thus David Horowitz's 'recantations' of his 1960s radicalism follow the Whittaker Chambers pattern of vulgarisation to justify a complete apostasy. But the more common, garden-variety transit is from one-time revolutionary thinking to left-liberalism or social democracy (sometimes renamed democratic socialism to avoid the stigma of the political trend that the new adherents had once so vindictively traduced); this amounts mainly to relegating marxism from one's framework to a lesser role in the scheme of things. For the earlier generation around *Dissent*, socialism became a moral idea and marxism a dated, increasingly suspect contributor. To the present generation, deradicalising under the banner of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, marxism is depicted as a theory useful for the nineteenth century, and the industrial proletariat is regarded as just one of many constituencies that might play a role in the struggle for radical democracy.

One central difference in the 1955 versus 1995 comparison is the absence of a substantial Communist Party. Beleaguered as it was in 1955 - much of the Party leadership was in jail; within a year a crisis decimated the ranks from perhaps twenty thousand to just a few thousand - the Party nevertheless stood for something major on the Left. At one time the Party's membership broached 100,000 and perhaps millions felt sympathy with it; members played key roles in the struggle for industrial unionism, against fascism, and against anti-Black racism. Thousands of young writers, artists, intellectuals and musicians, attended Party-sponsored schools and congresses. Even at the nadir of the mid-1950s, cultural figures who had, or would soon evidence, real stature, were in the Party's environs - Howard Fast, John Howard Lawson, Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Shirley Graham, Lorraine Hansberry, John O. Killens, Thomas McGrath.

Today, no organisation holds a similar position, in regard to socialist intellectuals, activists, or workers. Resistance to the varieties of apostasies from marxism is shown mainly by a handful of small

journals -*Science and Society*, *Monthly Review*, *New Politics*, *Against the Current*, and *Crossroads*. Yet, ironically, the conservative onslaught - characterised by growing militias and fundamentalists, campaigns against 'political correctness' and affirmative action - cannot be compared to 1950s repression. The marxist intelligentsia of the 1990s does, in fact, have a real foothold in universities, and no intellectuals are going to jail for opinions, or suffering HUAC (House Committee on Un-American Activities) type harassment for their views.

Moreover, the 'cultural revolution' of the 1960s has not been washed away by anti-intellectual 'Know-nothingism', as the 1930s cultural ethos was smashed in the 1950s. Feminism, anti-racism, freedom of sexual orientation - everything but pro-unionism - are very much present in our society as cultural forces. Even anti-interventionism in foreign affairs remains a significant factor, although it was disrupted by the war on Iraq and is being put to a complicated test in Bosnia.

Still, we see that intellectuals are abandoning marxism; this is occurring less in 'The God That Failed' manner, and more along the lines of Daniel Bell's 'End of Ideology' approach. In other words, deradicalising intellectuals are redefining marxism in simplistic terms in order to replace it with pre-marxist ideas, sometimes wearing fancy linguistic garb. The appearance of Ronald Aronson's *After marxism* (1994) can probably stand for the best of the repudiations; the recent editorial in *Science and Society* ('After marxism?', 59 (2): 130-34) offers a plausible case for those who wish to remain firm.

For myself, as one who sees the *Science and Society* approach as quite reasonable, and Aronson's book as sadly banal in its predictability, marxism remains vital as an explanatory theory providing an orientation toward meaningful action. This does not require belief in every theoretical detail - the labour theory of value, dialectics of nature, and so forth - although it certainly requires a scepticism of those who fetishise their complaints about such elements of the marxist tradition as proof that all varieties of marxism are unscientific, positivist, or teleological. Indeed, it now appears that some who obsessively campaigned against the alleged 'reflection' theory of Engels and Lenin, and so forth, while raising some appropriate concerns for marxists, were also engaged in the more familiar intellectual game of making one's mark by announcing a distinctive position, which too often comes by exaggeration or caricature of someone else's. Humility was in short supply among marxist intellectuals of the 1960s moment.

Equally important is the apparent decline of militant political activism by marxist intellectuals. The original call for the New Left to acknowledge the political importance of effective scholarship - made eloquently by Eugene Genovese - was necessary in the fight against those who were urging cultural workers to abandon their scholarship to carry out proletarianisation and other tasks on behalf of the party line of some vanguard organisation.¹ But Genovese's subsequent political degeneration demonstrates that the self-serving aspect of making one's career one's contribution to the movement can evolve in ugly ways.² Indeed, it is one thing for a cultural worker to write in defence of labour, against racism, work as part of the revolutionary brain trust on behalf of unions and community groups, and so forth, which can no doubt enrich in clarity and perspective his or her scholarship in culture, philosophy, economics, history, sociology, and other fields. But it is quite another matter to embark on a trajectory where one progressively limits one's intervention to merely producing highly technical literature in the hermetically sealed jargon and publications of an academic field in order to increase one's lecture fees and the size of one's dossier for an annual merit increase.³

It is not as if the temper of the times precludes militant intervention in many crucial political arenas. On the contrary, the right-wing attack on political correctness and the new campaign against affirmative action are among the most crucial debates that ought to engage marxist intellectuals. Here I will map out my own perspectives for a socialist intervention in such areas in the 1990s.

Challenge from the right

What strategies should socialist intellectuals and academics use to counter the slanderous fabrication by conservatives who are claiming that U.S. universities are being destroyed by left-wing thought-police? According to a wide variety of national and local publications, these thought-police are supposedly enforcing repressive politically correct or PC orthodoxy in regard to one's attitudes toward racism, heterosexism, homosexuality, Western Civilisation, and multi-culturalism.

Now, obviously, by socialist strategy one does not mean a strategy based upon the repeated incantation of the words socialist, worker, marxist, revolution, and so on. What one requires is a strategy that enables people with a socialist consciousness to participate constructively, side-by-side, with others who share the same immediate concerns. One also requires a strategy that progressively empowers the disempowered, assists in their mobilisation, and facilitates the raising of political consciousness in a way that leads toward the ultimate socialist objective. By socialist objective is meant not a prefabricated utopia but the democratic control of the economy by the self-organised producers. Such a restructuring of society will also be a giant step toward the destruction of the bases of patriarchy, and racist, heterosexist privilege.

The first necessity is for socialists to recognise that the frame-up propaganda about P.C. thought-police exists in two very different arenas. The main source of the propaganda is a group of ideological hardliners linked mostly to neoconservative foundations and journals. In my judgement, these highly paid propagandists and their younger proteges must be treated pretty much the same way one would handle a rattlesnake. That is, one cannot expect that one's own good faith efforts at fair play and self-criticism will be reciprocated.

However, the situation is complicated by the fact that these viscous apologists for oppression and exploitation have already been successful in winning over a good section of the general public to believing the very worst about campus reform movements. This tragic achievement was accomplished with the complicity of the popular press, which was mainly interested in the sales potential of sensational horror stories about alleged left-wing storm-troopers at Ivy League schools.

However, we on the Left also managed to quickly lose much public support because of some inherent problems in our reform movement. These problems make certain issues harder for us to address, and they make it easier for reactionary demagogues to misrepresent us.

One of these problem areas flows from the popular association of many aspects of the university reform movement with changes in language, starting with the demand for gender-inclusive or non-sexist language. That is, as more women, people of colour, and openly gay men and lesbians have come onto the campus and legitimately sought to assert themselves, they have quite naturally attempted to change the names and ways in which they have been misrepresented by those who had been keeping them out. Moreover, theoretical discussions in the university reform movements about race and gender have also come to be expressed in more sophisticated language (or, at least, in more difficult language). This has been in accordance with anti-essentialism and the 'social construction' schools, but also due to the efforts to humanise the 'other', as in the movement by some multi-culturalists to replace the word slave by enslaved person.

Of course, since the ability to name and define is traditionally associated with power and privilege, one can understand why there has been an angry backlash against new names and terms on the part of entrenched faculty and administrators. After all, these are people who have spent their whole careers uninhibitedly correcting their students' ways of speaking and naming things, and now the tables are somewhat turned.

But we need to acknowledge that a large section of the general public, including much of the working class, can also be threatened and antagonised by our announcement that the ways in which they usually refer to people of colour, women, and others, are racist, sexist and homophobic. The situation may be different when working people themselves are the ones going into action and demanding to rename themselves and define their own experiences. At present, however, it is likely

that many working people (including women workers and workers of colour) will associate the promotion of these new terms and phrases with the efforts of their former teachers, bosses and their so-called social betters to tell them what to do in a way that makes working-class people feel ashamed of their ignorance.

While a statistical study is not yet available, it seems likely that the terms used today by many ordinary working and rural people are, according to our campus and socialist standards, far more patriarchal and ethnocentric than those of the conservative intellectuals. Of course, one can't adapt to this situation; but I don't see signs that the Left has begun to take this complication into account in our battle to win public support for campus reform.

In sum, we have to realise that we are dealing with a multiple audience when formulating socialist strategy to combat demagogic misrepresentations of the goals and methods of the campus democracy movements. On the one hand, we cannot be naive when dealing with the hardliners; on the other, we cannot underestimate the degree to which the cultural transformation under way at the university can easily be misperceived as the exercise of class privilege.

This concern about multiple audiences also relates to the second point of analysis that socialists should keep in the forefront. This is the necessity of never forgetting that the attempt by the Right and the media to focus their anti-P.C. attacks on the elite universities is largely insincere. Here, again, the hardliners seek to exploit popular prejudice against the allegedly (and actually) privileged members of our society.

In reality, the anti-P.C. offensive is an attack on every aspect of radical U.S. political culture; and the collateral damage and trickle-down effects of this attack are being felt everywhere, or will be, sooner or later. Therefore, one of our crucial strategic tasks is to de-elitise the issue, showing how campus reforms are relevant and important to all sectors of our society.

This consideration leads directly to the issue of strategic responses. I think the beginning of such a fightback is to take advantage of the fact that the Right, in its assault against alleged campus thought-police, goes after just about everyone: people of colour; women; gay men and lesbians; faculty, students and administrators; special studies institutes and mainstream departments; affirmative action programmes and organisations of law students; and so forth. Therefore, a starting point is to try to organise just about everyone who has been under attack on the campus, and, where possible, sections of the community with ties to the campus, along broad lines (employing simple and unifying demands) and in a non-elitist way. But, still, there are numerous complex issues to which socialist-activists will have to address ourselves in order to develop effective approaches.

One of these involves the complex area of rights on campus. What I mean here, first of all, is the right of people of colour, women, gay men and lesbians and others stigmatised by, and under assault from, the dominant culture, to function on the campus free of threats and insults that interfere with their education. On the other hand, rights also means the right of every single member of the university community - even white male football players from the ruling class, and professors who are the paid propagandists of the state department - to express their intellectual opinions in discussion and debate, no matter how disgusting such opinions might be.

Of course the problem in any discussion of rights is that, in the real, material world, many rights collide and it is not possible for all rights to exist at the same time. Also, equality in form does not always result in equality in content. That is, to give ten minutes equal speaking time to an authority figure trained in the art of rhetoric and who has the entire weight of the assumptions of the dominant culture on his or her side, is hardly the equivalent of giving that same ten minutes to an inexperienced spokesperson for ideas that have been systematically maligned and falsified. These sorts of complications make the formulation of policy difficult, and, in the face of difficulties, there is the temptation to fall into simplistic responses - because simplistic responses allow a kind of dogmatic, if passionate, rhetorical consistency.

One simplistic response is to see all expressions of racism and sexism, from the maliciously-intended hate epithet to the classroom lecture or discussion comment based on patriarchal European assumptions, as standing in contradiction to the right of members of oppressed groups to function in an educational environment. Thus all manifestations of what some individual or group determines to be 'racist' ideas and actions on campus must be exposed, denounced and driven out. Otherwise, students of colour are being denied their 14th amendment right to an education.

The other simplistic response is the obverse of the above - to see all expressions of speech (from the hate epithet to the lecture or classroom statement) as verbal opinions that must be protected as instances of free speech and academic freedom. The ACLU and others say that, if all language is not protected, a precedent will be set that will be used to erode further expressions and opinions, most likely those of the Left. This approach claims that efforts to create a culture where hate-speech is prohibited is in fact the same as censorship; so the Left should adopt the policy, ban nothing.

Based on my experience over the past decades with variations of these two approaches, I am certain that marxist intellectuals can only be effective by rejecting both of these simplicities. We need to develop a more sophisticated approach that refuses to acknowledge the classification of explicit hate-epithets as mere opinion or free speech; hate-speech is nothing less than the harassment of less powerful groups. But we also need a stance that, in this context, defends the toleration of all intellectual opinions. Neither part of this dialectical equation will work without the other.

The distinction here between the two categories, intellectual discussion and hate-speech, is hardly absolute or always simple. To the contrary, there are grey areas to be debated out, as there will always be if one is dealing with complex realities, not abstract rhetorical posturing. The goal must be to create a culture on the campus (and ultimately in society) where it is not acceptable to do many of the things that have been documented on campuses in recent years:

- Such as shouting 'kike, Nigger, faggot', in a threatening manner at Brown University;
- Such as passing out a flyer that says 'Open Season on Porchmonkeys' to African-American Students at the University of Michigan;
- Such as sending messages to people through the computer system that says 'Spearchuckers with AIDS Must Die', as reported in the *Guardian* newspaper.

Anybody who minimises this sort of thing as 'sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me' is simply ignorant of the wounding power of racist epithets. Personally, it would be impossible for me to teach a class, to lead a discussion or give a lecture, if there were a student present in the classroom - or even just marching around outside the window - wearing a Nazi insignia or a Ku Klux Klan hood. It is simply hard to imagine that I could function according to the class syllabus. I would feel rage, anguish, confusion, and probably an urge to act violently. The person so attired would be denying me my right to do my job, and denying the right of the class to receive the services for which they engaged me. The solution to this sort of situation is not simple - banning one kind of clothing and symbols can escalate in problematic ways - but I would resent anyone who claimed that I was merely over-reacting and that I should be more tolerant of diversity.

So I can well understand how a person of colour, suddenly faced with racial hate-epithets, could feel that he or she is harassed and prevented from functioning. Clearly such a person might feel emotion ally assaulted at least to the same degree as a person who receives an obscene phone call - an act which none of the apostles of 'censor nothing!' have ever tried to legalise, and which even the American Civil Liberties Union says should be banned on the campus.

True, I am not proposing that socialists call for university administrators to develop codes to prohibit such harassing language. As I've written in several essays in the journal *Against the Current*, I do not think that those marxist intellectuals who fight for socialism from-the-bottom up should be in the business of proposing new powers of control for those most likely to abuse them.⁴ As I have argued, there are alternative methods of empowering the targets of racism and sexism to defend

themselves, while also opening up the university to international and non-elite cultures and populations.

But what if the population of students of colour within a certain campus community feels convinced that anti-harassment language policies are required for immediate relief? Stanford University's expressly anti-harassment/anti-fighting words approach, as distinct from the University of Michigan's original code of conduct approach, may be potentially reconciled with a bottom-up empowerment strategy in certain contexts. In fact, it is possible to seriously call for 'no tolerance for harassing hate-epithets', and then to categorically, on principle, oppose the same kind of prohibitive rules for the use of explicit harassing epithets that already exist unchallenged for drunk and disorderly activity on campus, or obscene phone calls everywhere. Marxist intellectuals have to be clear about zero tolerance for racist hate-epithets. On the other hand, we have to respond to offensive intellectual discourse with a demand for more alternative discourse.

Racism recidivus in the 1990s

Socialist intellectuals of the 1990s also need to rethink, and reformulate, arguments regarding support for Affirmative Action. Historically, support for affirmative action programs on every front and in all arenas, for people of colour in the U.S. and for women, was the logic of the anti-racist and anti-patriarchal struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, in which many of today's marxist intellectuals participated.

At that time, the establishment of such programs was seen as a partial victory - at least, as much of a victory as one could get in these years, short of class-based affirmative action. Moreover, affirmative action has continued to symbolise the fact that unity and struggle can force some changes in the status quo. In addition, a large number of young people who have become radicalised since the 1960s have done so through the process of fighting to defend, implement or extend some form of affirmative action in connection with the rights of people of colour and women in the workplace, on the campuses, and in the communities.

It is true, of course, that other battles have loomed as important - for women, the right of choice; for people of colour, the bussing struggles, the fight against attempts to criminalise the poor black population, the battle to maintain welfare, the struggle for immigrants' rights. But in each case, affirmative action has had an important connection, because affirmative action means access to education and power, and hence gives a strong voice to subjects in their fight back against all these attempts to keep the subaltern groups of capitalist patriarchy in their place. But now affirmative action itself is under attack, and in a new, very direct, and dangerous way.

In particular, since mid-February 1995, there have been growing signs that the Republican Party plans a major effort to roll back, and maybe eliminate entirely, Affirmative Action. There are also signs that the response of the Clinton administration will be characteristically weak-kneed.

If this assault on affirmative action continues to snowball, and it certainly, appears to be doing so, the U.S. socialist Left must act as if an urgent warning bell has been rung. If we think straight and act with militancy, we should also recognise that an extraordinary opportunity lies ahead, an opportunity to play a constructive role in the anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, and, hence, in the long run, anti-capitalist struggle.

This warning bell should alert us to the truly grievous nature of the present political moment - grievous from the point of view of defending the rights of those suffering most in this society. This Republican announcement of 'open season' on affirmative action, although it was not featured in Newt Gingrich's 'Contract with America', is the logical outcome of the political assault steadily intensifying by the U.S. ruling elite against the politically disempowered and economically disenfranchised on a world scale.

While the International Monetary Fund and U.S. corporations continue their dirty work abroad, cutbacks are under way in many sectors of the domestic economy, and prospects for employment continue to shrink. It is precisely in this kind of deep structural crisis, where so much of the population feels threatened and insecure, that affirmative action inevitably will be the most politically vulnerable target - at the same time as it is now needed more than ever.

As we know from lots of historical experience, when opportunities for the general population begin to constrict, the most oppressed become the targets. However minimal, their accrued social gains are the first to come under attack, including welfare, prisoners' rights, and now affirmative action. But the present conjuncture has its specificities.

To some extent, the political events on the West Coast are instructive for grasping the unfolding drama of the mid-1990s. Richard Walker gives details about much of this West Coast experience in his timely and well-documented *New Left Review* essay, 'California Rages Against the Dying of the Light' (No. 209, January-February 1995). First in California came roll-backs in social services, then the tax-cuts for the rich, then the ideological campaign to criminalise the poor and foreign-born. Next came a dramatic increase in the construction of prisons, more of which will certainly be needed now that the notorious 'Three Strikes' law is in place. Then, in 1994 we witnessed the anti-immigrant backlash in California in the form of Proposition 187, the so-called 'Save Our State' initiative. Finally, in 1995, we have the Orwellian-named 'Civil Rights' initiative. This would forbid the state of California to use race or gender preferences in employment policies, admissions or awarding contracts. One can hardly find a more classic example than this sequence of events in California to show that 'An Injury to One is an Injury to All'.

Why is defence of Affirmative Action so important to us - not just as human beings who want to respond to injustice when we see it at the present moment, but also as socialists who want to reorganise society from the bottom up on the basis of egalitarian control of power? From a socialist perspective, support of Affirmative Action flows from the analysis of late capitalism as a system based on structural inequality. It should not surprise us that, despite the existence of affirmative action programmes for two decades, the Federal commission known as the 'glass ceiling panel' determined that white males, who comprise 43% of the work force, hold 95% of the senior management jobs.⁵ That shows just how deeply racism and patriarchy are entrenched in the capitalist system.

Affirmative Action, from a socialist perspective, must be understood as a tool enabling the redress of a massive grievance on grounds of principle. This is because, in the U.S. context, a non-European 'race' and female gender are markers of built-in, institutionalised, and systemic oppression.

- African Americans are by and large descended from a population of former slaves who were subsequently exploited as sharecroppers and a reserve army of the unemployed; they were the last hired during the boom periods, the first fired during economic retrenchment, and, in either case, always kept on the lowest rung of the ladder. The unemployment rate today among African-Americans is generally recognised as twice that of whites, and 'real' unemployment figures for both groups are twice that of the official statistics.
- Moreover, people of colour other than African-Americans have experienced various forms of semi-colonial exploitation within the borders of the U.S. They have been the targets of genocide, land theft, special labour battalions, internment, severe restrictions on immigration of family members and the right to own property, and the disparagement of their culture on the basis of assumptions that are both elite-biased and Eurocentrist.
- Women, who constitute the majority of these nationally and racially oppressed groups, have most often suffered a double exploitation (or triple, when one counts race as well as gender and class). Women are paid less for the same work, when they are allowed to do work traditionally limited to men, and they are under the boot of patriarchal oppression in the home.

What the principle of Affirmative Action means is institutional intervention, including state intervention, to somewhat level the playing field. Of course, the actual definition of affirmative action varies considerably from situation to situation; those hostile try to define it in the worst possible way, while those with a liberal approach try to render it almost meaningless. *Newsweek* magazine, in its April 3, 1995 feature article on affirmative action, had to have a special box with three or four contrasting definitions of this highly-loaded term. But the standard definition of Affirmative Action is that it is 'a public or private programme designed to equalise hiring and admission opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups by taking into account those very characteristics which have been used to deny them equal treatment'.⁶

What this policy usually means in practice is not only aggressive recruiting and outreach, but also preferential hiring and admissions to allow those historically at the back of the line to move a few places forward in the competition for jobs, and for admission to educational institutions. This kind of intervention is, of course, far from a panacea for racism, sexism, homophobia and economic inequalities. It is only a reform, which, like any reform winnable under capitalism, has weaknesses and limitations. This includes the fact that it does not necessarily redress inequalities resulting from class background.

Still, it is a reform that works to the benefit of the entire society - including the Euro-American or 'white' part of the U.S. working class. For one reason, Affirmative Action, by requiring a multiracial work force of whites and people of colour working side-by-side, weakens the employers' old system of divide and conquer - a system where, historically, whites have been discouraged from struggling for fear of being replaced by people of colour.

It is also a system where the delusion that whites have of feeling 'superior' to people of colour have caused white workers to focus their anger on those beneath them rather than those on top of all. If we trace back the economic elements behind the new drive to roll back Affirmative Action, we find that, most often, they are the same corporate and right-wing forces that are also out to destroy the remaining power of the labour movement.

Thus the fight for Affirmative Action is part of the fight to transform the labour movement into a social movement that will better the conditions of all. However, in the realm of culture and ideology, we should also recognise the innumerable benefits that could flow from tapping the entire range of talents and resources of all groups in society, from partaking of the vast flow of extraordinary cultures, that will generally enrich our lives and give us broader and more accurate perceptions, empowering us to fight more effectively for a better world. Euro-Americans who do not understand or who actually fear African-Americans and other people of colour, are weaker - and bound more pathetically to the hegemony of their own exploiters simply because of melanin and Eurocentric culture.

Not just in the labour movement, but when students on campuses and people in the community of all colours and both genders collaborate side by side, on an equal footing, there is a far greater chance that their common interests will move to the fore, and our common enemy will be more clearly revealed. In contrast, a rollback of Affirmative Action would be among the most devastating possible blows imaginable to the cause of social emancipation in the U.S. It would smash one of the central, and most substantive, gains of the Civil Rights and Women's movements, pitting the oppressed against each other in the struggle for survival.

Moreover, the demise of Affirmative Action and a return to the 'old way' - under the hypocritical, lying pretext that this will allow a colour-blind and gender-blind system based on merit, which exists only in the fantasy-land of Newt Gingrich and Rush Limbaugh - would symbolise in fact the full restoration of wealthy and middle-class white male privilege. The rich, even with Affirmative Action, always have the resources enabling them to redress grievances of virtually any kind. But terminating Affirmative Action means that the socially oppressed will be stripped of what little state protection they had in the past.

Perhaps many of the above observations are 'old hat' to veterans of the battles that originally instituted Affirmative Action in the mid-1960s and after. However, it is crucial to recognise that the political climate is qualitatively different today. The right-wing, racist offensive in 1995 no longer marches openly under the banner of white male supremacy, as it did during the original debates 30 years ago, with characters like Lester Maddox, Bull Connor, and George Wallace (the last of whom is singing "We Shall Overcome" these days), in the conservative spotlight. On the contrary, as indicated by the title of the California initiative, the ideology that is being reworked and perverted to reinstitute oppression is declared to be colour-blind, anti-discrimination, and against reverse racism.

Thus I think it is crucial for us, in retooling our analysis and strategy, to recognise that the ideological polarisation today - including this form of what George Orwell called 'Newspeak' - bears a troubling resemblance to the early 1950s. At that time, too, partly under the aegis of liberal ideology, a campaign was waged against the Left on the campuses, in the trade unions, and throughout society in the name of protecting civil rights and academic freedom - which had to be done by purging the totalitarian Communist Menace.

Thus, in order to defend 'Free Speech', loyalty oaths were instituted, and suspected Reds were hauled before investigating committees where they could only save themselves by naming names. Then, as now, ex-radicals played an ugly role in creating this duplicitous ideological rationale - Sidney Hook's book *Heresy, Yes, Conspiracy, No* (1953) was the counterpart in the anti-radical witch-hunt to Nathan Glazer's book *Affirmative Discrimination* (1975), which pioneered the main liberal anti-affirmative action arguments used today.

Regrettably, many on the Left in the 1950s capitulated to this strategy and became, at least, complicit in the triumph of reaction by sitting on the sidelines or finding various excuses to remain aloof from the battle to defend elementary political rights. Then, as now, it was not hard to find a secondary reason to retreat from a principled struggle.

It is true, for example, that Affirmative Action can be implemented in a variety of ways, not all of which are equally satisfactory. As Cornel West states in his book *Race Matters* (1993), a "class-based affirmative action" would have been a more desirable outcome of the political battles of the 1960s; but "an enforceable race-based - and later gender based - affirmative action policy was the best possible compromise and concession"⁷. The point is not to counterpose the former (impossible at present) to the latter (at least partially operable), but to defend what gains have been made as a stepping stone to an even more egalitarian future. For socialists, the immediate task is to advance the rights of the most oppressed without waiting. This is certainly to the benefit of all, because victory on the part of one oppressed group inspires other groups to fight harder as well. We saw this clearly in the 1960s when gains of the Civil Rights movement for African-Americans inspired and helped to spur forward struggles of Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and, eventually, after Stonewall, gays and lesbians.

Of course, we live under capitalism - a system of needless scarcity in resources, income, and employment. So it is true that in the short run, affirmative action, when it cuts into institutional racism, can mean that some white professionals, students and white workers will not advance quite as quickly or get the precise job or college admission that they would have under the status quo, they were used to, a status quo of white male privilege. (Tragically, too many white males simply believe that they deserve that institutionalised 'helping hand' over women and people of colour.)

This is one of the reasons why, even if marxists unite with liberals in common efforts such as this, marxists are not liberals but hold a revolutionary socialist approach. More specifically, to be a revolutionary socialist means that the necessary complement to a defence of affirmative action is the economic programme of the socialist movement, its publications, and its educational apparatus, which demand jobs, decent living standards, guaranteed health care, and child care for all.

Race and the white professor, continued

It should be evident from all my preceding remarks that racism remains the pivotal issue in the U.S. for the marxist Left, although certainly not apart from or in contradiction to issues of class, gender, sexual orientation, the environment, imperialist intervention, and so forth. The need to analyse, confront, and extirpate racism is largely what binds together the revolutionary intelligentsia of several generations, inside and outside academe. However, the terrain of struggle has considerably altered in the 1990s.

First, it is no longer possible to skirt the obvious complexity of the fact that we all have, not only multiple subject positions, but, also, multiple and often contradictory object positions. That is, whether or not I happen to think of myself as 'white', which I usually do not do, or male, or, unfortunately, now, 'older' or 'senior,' there is no doubt that I am perceived according to those kinds of pre-constructed categories. Thus my opinions and actions simply cannot be presented and undertaken with the naïve belief that they will be apprehended as I intend them to be.

Moreover, such categories as 'white', 'male', and so forth, undoubtedly connote different things to different people - to various students, colleagues, the public, and the university administration. Anybody who teaches in an institution where a huge number of rather simple student evaluation forms are required each term has abundant documentary evidence in his or her files that preconceptions about such categories override even the most conscious efforts on one's part to defy, deny, or subvert them.

Thus, to students and others who believe that only a person of colour would heavily emphasise literary texts by writers of colour in the classroom, I have at times been perceived as Latino, Native American, African American, and even Asian American. (In the fall of 1994 I was repeatedly addressed as 'Professor Wong' at a luncheon where I had been discussing my research on the Chinese-American Communist poet H. T. Tsiang!)

Moreover, it never fails to amaze me that my self-identification as a marxist-internationalist cultural worker never brings about the expected results. Many students think that such radical talk is some sort of trick. They tend to imagine that my 'real' job is to make them like great literature - so, the only thing they are really listening for, is for me to tell them 'what I want' in their papers so they can get an A. Then there are liberal, pluralist administrators who could not care less about what kind of marxist you are, so long as you don't do anything uncollegial. As for the Neo-Conservatives - well, at this particular moment they are so hysterical about the threat of Afro-Centrism, and about Lesbians allegedly taking over Women's Studies Programmes to indoctrinate students, that, for the time being, at least, the hard-core campus Reds can not even get a page in their organs such as *Heterodoxy*.

Thus, the perception of what one is in academe, as elsewhere, is a highly mediated affair. The consequences are rather tragic, too, because what may be intended on one's part to be a friendly suggestion to a non-tenured colleague about improving a piece of writing, might well be taken as an authoritarian threat to his or her whole career, because the perception of one's senior status overrides everything else. Or a simple query to a colleague about the inclusion of a writer in a course, might be taken as an accusation of racism or sexism, if the colleague perceives one as the Politically Correct Avenger.

Still, one has no choice but to affirm the subject position or positions that one feels most accurate, and to negotiate among the object positions thrust at one as a consequence of the preconceptions of others. Moreover, in this difficult task, one should probably more or less accept the framework offered in the Introduction to Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory* (1992).

There Ahmad argues that the knot of theoretical debates and issues that preoccupy the Left in the university today is in an important sense the after-effect of something that happened several decades earlier. To be more exact, starting in the late 1950s through events such as the Algerian Revolution, there was generated an international upsurge in radical political activity that

culminated, especially for students and young people, in the 1968 upheavals, that were quite cataclysmic in the West, the East, and the economically dependent countries.

The social movements of that era and their aftermath broke through into academe, creating new space for the kinds of work now embodied under the rubric of cultural studies. But what has been happening in the last decades has occurred during the decline- and defeat of such social struggles, and has to be assessed as part of the effort to institutionalise the tremendous energies and ideas, and even the radicalised individuals, that were unleashed.

I don't make this distinction between the extra-university international social movements that broke down the doors two decades back, and the present atmosphere of institutionalisation, to cast invidious aspersions on the motives or character of anyone more closely connected with the present phase. In fact, I think the newer generation has it much harder. But not harder in the sense of the new difficulty in finding jobs, although there is no question that the uncertainty that many new Ph.D.'s felt about finding a job in the mid 1970s has evolved to something more along the lines of unlikelihood. Rather, I mean harder in the sense that, in the 1960s and 1970s, struggles around racial identity and hiring were more straightforward than they are today for those on the Left, or so they seemed at the time and appear in retrospect. First, such struggles frequently had a simple, confrontational character, in the sense that one made demands and kept up a holler until something was done. Second, the principles of self-determination gave a clearer and less problematic role for those of us who were not of colour. That is, we felt that the selection of scholars to be hired should be the decision of the group targeted by racist oppression, not of those of us outside such groups. Therefore, a person like myself was able to stay comfortably apart from the more detailed deliberations over qualifications, which in many ways remains the site of real controversy, then and now. A book such as Robert Blauner's *Racial Oppression in America* (1972) and especially its fine final chapter, 'Race and the White Professor', seemed to have all the answers we needed.

Third, there was a sense of international unity, and, so far as I can recall, less of the competitiveness and envy than seem to predominate today. At that time, many graduate students in literature and other disciplines actually wanted to teach at community colleges, and in the less-elite, more working-class campuses. Today it seems as if everyone feels cheated unless they are at Harvard and Yale, or get six-figure salaries.

It is probably significant to note in this regard that the idea of a marxist being a superstar in academe was nowhere on the horizon until the rise of Fredric Jameson's reputation in the mid-late 1970s. Two or three decades ago one did not usually think in terms of vertical competition when it came to colour, gender and politics; most new hires of scholars of colour or women or radicals were seen as collective victories, not the usurping of a space that oneself might have obtained or of which oneself might even be more deserving.

Again, I don't mean to idealise the situation, or suggest moral superiority or greater altruism in that earlier stage; we were just as selfish as anyone else. But, career-wise, the means of fulfilling our selfishness appeared differently because of the world situation. We were in a war against the system, part of a larger international army of young guerrillas; we wanted to win, and there seemed to be many parts to play. Indeed, the kind of job-obsession that predominates among graduate students today, including very good marxist comrades is relatively new in its scope. The difference is possibly because the international political situation made it appear that there were so many additional interesting things for cultural radicals to do out there. We thought it was cool, and sexy, to be extra-institutional, on the road, a rolling stone, a travelling organiser, and so on. In contrast, it seemed so boringly straight and square to be an Ivy League professor with a nice house, car and power-suit.

Now the terrain has certainly changed. Many of the old strategies are not working any more in regard to the anti-racist aspects of educational struggles. How does one simply support the decisions of the oppressed, on grounds of self-determination, when the oppressed do not agree among themselves? And why should they? There are, and will continue to be, painful divisions between people of colour according to gender, sexual orientation, and other differences of

individual temperament. We now see situations where faculty of colour appear to disassociate themselves from the struggles of students of colour, sometimes even acting out of naked self-interest-just like white professors!

Also significant is the appearance in the last decade of a new class of superstars of the Left, of colour, and of women, that didn't exist at all before in any form. It is these individuals, in the highest ranks at the elite schools, who now play the role of judging the qualifications of all those below them in the hierarchy, rather than the traditional establishment. Moreover, these superstars set the tone for the character of scholarship in those fields, and have been opting more for French high theory and less for community-based social activism.

We did not think about these kinds of developments back in the first stage, when the social movements were still vital. Vulgar marxists that we were, we didn't foresee the continuing advance of the anti-racist struggle in the universities and in scholarship, apart from the continuing advance of social struggles in the colonies, ghettos, work-places and streets. It wasn't supposed to work that way, according to the base and superstructure diagrams we used to draw on the blackboards in our cadre schools.

Well, none of us draws those diagrams anymore. The progress of the international revolution has been halted, although hopefully not irreversibly. While many of the fundamental elements of capitalist exploitation remain in place, there are new conjunctures and unique features to confront. Critical marxism remains the most effective guide through this excruciating transitional moment of the 1990s, as it was in the past for those few who made it from the moment of the 1930s to that of the 1960s. Those who now abandon the marxist tradition without a plausible alternative - imitating, albeit with new rationales, a mistake made by earlier generations of deradicalising Left intellectuals - do so at their own peril. The lessons of the past are there in the books and journals for us to study, if only we will read and learn.

Notes

1. See Genovese, E. (1971) 'On Being a Socialist and a Historian', *In Red and Black*. New York: Vintage, 3-22.
2. For a comment on Genovese's subsequent evolution, see Phelps, C. (1994) 'What Genovese Knew, And When', *Against the Current* 9 (5) Nov.-Dec. 41-42.
3. See my essay, 'Marxism and Intellectuals: Towards a Critical Commitment', *Changes* 6 (11-12) Nov.-Dec., 14-21, for a more detailed analysis of studies of relations between U.S. intellectuals and Left politics.
4. Several of these pieces are now collected in Wald, A. (1992) *The Responsibility of Intellectuals* Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press. See 'Racism and Academe', 1 55-67, and 'Free Speech and the Campus Anti-Racist Movement', 1 81-94.
5. *New York Times*, March 16, 1 995, 1.
6. This is according to documents cited in Dunbar, L. (1984) *Minority Report*. New York: Pantheon, 60.
7. West, C. (1993) *Race Matters*, Boston: Beacon Press, 64.