

Didn't See the Same Movie: Review of Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che*

Goldner, Loren
2003

A critical review of the Max Elbaum's "Revolution in the Air," a memoir by a participant in and champion of the U.S. New Left of the 60s and 70s. Taken, with some small corrections to punctuation, from <http://break-theirhaughtypower.org/review-revolution-in-the-air-by-max-elbaum/>.

Without exactly setting out to do so, Max Elbaum in his book *Revolution In The Air*, has managed to demonstrate the existence of progress in human history, namely in the decline and disappearance of the grotesque Stalinist-Maoist-"Third World Marxist" and Marxist-Leninist groups and ideologies he presents, under the rubric New Communist Movement, as the creations of pretty much the "best and the brightest" coming out of the American 1960's.

Who controls the past, Orwell said, controls the future. Read at a certain level, Elbaum's book (describing a mental universe that in many respects out-Orwells Orwell), aims, through extended self-criticism, to jettison 99% of what "Third World Marxism" stood for in its 1970's heyday, in order to salvage the 1% of further muddled "progressive politics" for the future, particularly where the Democratic Party and the unions are concerned, preparing "progressive" forces to paint a new face on the capitalist system after the neo-liberal phase has shot its bolt.

I lived through the 1960's too, in Berkeley of all places. I was in an anti-Stalinist revolutionary socialist milieu (then called Independent Socialist Clubs, which by the late 1970's had spawned eight different offshoots) a milieu the author identifies with "Eurocentric" Marxism. We argued that every state in the world from the Soviet Union to China to Cuba to North Vietnam and North Korea, by way of Albania, was a class society, and should be overthrown by working-class revolution. We said the same thing about all the Third World "national liberation movements" and states resulting from them, such as Algeria, and those in the then-Portuguese colonies (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau). We were dead right, and Elbaum's "Third World Marxists", who cheerled for most or all of them, were dead wrong. This is now clear as day for all with eyes to see. We based our perspective on realities that did and do not to this day exist for Elbaum and his friends: the question of whether the Russian Revolution died in 1921 (Kronstadt) or 1927 (defeat of the Left Opposition) (in Elbaum's milieu the choice was between 1953 (death of Stalin) and 1956 (Khrushchev's speech to the 20th Party Congress)). "Eurocentrics" that we were, we took note of Stalin's treacherous and disastrous China policy in 1927 (which Mao tse-tung at the time had criticized from the right); of Stalin's treacherous and disastrous Third Period policy and its results in Germany (above all), but also throughout the colonial world (e.g. the 1930 "Communes" in Vietnam and China). We critiqued Stalin's treacherous and disastrous Popular Front policy, which led to a mutual

defense pact with France, the reining in of the French mass strike of May–June 1936, and above all to the crushing of the anarchists and Trotskyists (and with them the Spanish Revolution as a whole) in Barcelona in May 1937 (it also led to the abandonment of anti-colonial agitation by the Vietnamese and Algerian Communist Parties in the name of “anti-fascism”). We were disturbed by the Moscow Trials, whereby 105 of 110 members of Lenin’s 1917 central committee were assassinated, and by the Stalin–Hitler pact, through which Stalin handed over to the Gestapo dissident factions of the German Communist Party who had sought refuge in the Soviet Union. We read about Elbaum’s one-time hero Ho Chi Minh, who engineered the massacre of thousands of Vietnamese Trotskyists in 1945 when they advocated (with a real working-class base) armed resistance to the return of English and French troops there after World War II (Ho received them warmly under the auspices of the Yalta agreement, wherein Uncle Joe had consented to further French rule in Indochina). Stalin had done the same for Greece, where again the Trotskyists were slaughtered while pushing for revolution, and in western Europe, where the French and Italian resistance movements were disarmed and sent home by their respective Communist Parties. We studied the workers’ uprising in East Berlin in 1953, and the Hungarian Revolution (and Polish worker unrest) of 1956; we distributed the brilliant *Open Letter to the Polish Workers’ Party* (1965) of Kuron and Modzelewski. We were heartened by the Polish worker uprising in Gdansk and Gdynia in December 1970, which arguably heralded (through its 1980–81 expansion) the end of the Soviet empire. Elbaum mentions none of these post-1945 worker revolts against Stalinism, which were undoubtedly too “Eurocentric” for him—they did after all take place in Europe—assuming he heard about them. At the time, he and his milieu would have undoubtedly described them as revolts against “revisionism.”

From 1970 onward I moved into the broader, more diffuse anti-Stalinist milieu in the Bay Area. We read Victor Serge’s *Memoirs*, and Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*; we discovered Lukacs’ *History and Class Consciousness*, and the Situationists; we saw Chile’s 1970–1973 Popular Front once again crushed by the same collaborationist policies which Elbaum’s Stalinist lineage had first perfected in France and Spain in 1936, and unlike Elbaum and his friends, we were hardly startled when the Chinese Communist Party embraced Pinochet. It had not escaped our “Eurocentric” attention that China itself had pushed the Indonesian Communist Party to adopt the same Popular Front strategy in 1965, leading to the massacre of hundreds of thousands (a success for US imperialism that more than offset the later defeat in Indochina), or that it had applauded when the Ceylonese regime (today Sri Lanka) bloodily repressed its Trotskyist student movement in 1971. We were similarly not shaken, like Elbaum and his friends, when China went on to support the South African intervention against the MPLA in Angola, or call for the strengthening of NATO against Soviet “social imperialism”, or support the right-wing regroupment against the Communist-influenced Armed Forces Movement in Portugal in 1974–1975. We “Eurocentrists” snapped up the writings of Simon Leys, the French Sinologist, documenting the crushing of the Shanghai proletariat by the People’s Liberation Army in the course of the “Cultural Revolution”, the latter lasting from 1966 to 1976. Elbaum and his friends were at the same time presenting this battle between two wings of the most elephantine bureaucracy of modern times, as a brilliant success in “putting politics in command” against the capitalist restorationists, technocrats and intellectuals, and burning Beethoven for good measure. All of these writhings of Chinese Stalinism struck us more as the second-time farce to the first time tragedy of the world-wide ravages of Soviet Stalinism from the 1920’s onward. Elbaum and his friends cheered on Pol Pot’s rustification campaign in Cambodia, in which one million people died; no sooner had they digested the post-1976 developments in China after Mao’s death (the arrest and vilification of the Gang of Four, the completion of the turn to the U.S. in an anti-Soviet

alliance) when, in 1979, after Vietnam occupied Cambodia to depose the Khmer Rouge, China attacked Vietnam, and the Soviet Union prepared to attack China. How difficult, in those days, to be a “Third World Marxist”!

We had been shaped by the worldwide renaissance of Marxism set in motion by the serious diffusion of the “early Marx” and the growing awareness of the Hegelian dimension of the “late Marx” in the *Grundrisse*, *Capital* and *Theories of Surplus Value*. We leapt upon the “Unpublished Sixth Chapter” of vol. I of *Capital* as demonstrating the essential continuity of the “early” and “late” Marx (though we did not yet know Marx’s writings on the Russian mir and the ethnographic notebooks, which drew an even sharper line between a truly “late Marx” and all the bowdlerized productivist versions coming from the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Internationals). A familiarity with any of these currents put paid to the “diamat” world view and texts which were the standard fare of Elbaum’s world. It was of course “Eurocentric” to rethink Marx and official Marxism through this new, unexplored continent, “not Eurocentric” to absorb Marx through the luminosity of Stalin, Beria, and Hoxha. The Marx who had written extensive journalism on India and China from the 1840’s onward may have been “Eurocentric” but the brain-dead articles emanating from the Peking Review about the “three goods” and the “four bads” were, for these people, decidedly not.

Rosa Luxemburg and everything she stood for (including her memorable writings—no doubt Eurocentric—in primitive accumulation in the colonial world and her rich material on pre-capitalist societies everywhere in *Einführung in die Nationalökonomie*) meant nothing to these people. Her critiques of Lenin, in the earliest months of the Russian Revolution (not to mention before 1914), and of the right to national self-determination, did not exist. Elbaum and his friends were not interested in the revolutionaries who had criticized Lenin during the latter’s lifetime (or at any point), and they remained blissfully unaware of Bordiga, Gorter, and Pannekoek. The philosophical critiques of Korsch and Lukacs similarly meant nothing to them. They never heard of the 1940’s and 1950’s CLR James, Raya Dunayevskaya, the early Max Shachtman, Hal Draper, the French group Socialism or Barbarism, Paul Mattick Sr., Maximilien Rubel, the Italian workerists, Ernst Bloch, or Walter Benjamin. They seriously argued for the aesthetics of China’s four “revolutionary operas” and songs such as “The Mountain Brigade Hails The Arrival of the Night Soil Carriers” while the serious Marxist world was discovering the Frankfurt School (whatever the latter’s limitations) and Guy Debord.

Then there was the influence of *Monthly Review* magazine and publishers. Baran and Sweezy had migrated from the Soviet Union to various Third World “anti-imperialists” to China; they were infused with the “Bandung” climate of 1955 and the brief moment of the Soviet-Chinese-neutralist “anti-imperialist” bloc. Names such as Sukarno, Nasser, Nkrumah loomed large in this mind-set, as did the later “Tri-Continental” (Latin America-Africa-Asia) consciousness promoted by Cuba and Algeria. The 1966 book of Baran and Sweezy, *Monopoly Capital* (which, years into the crisis of the Bretton Woods system, did not even mention credit), became a major theoretical reference for this crowd. This was supplemented by international names such as Samir Amin, Charles Bettelheim, Arrighi Immanuel, and the South American “dependency school” (Cardoso, Prebisch, et al.). But the lynchpin was Lenin’s theory of imperialism, with its idea of “imperialist super-profits” making possible the support of a “labor aristocracy” and thereby the reformism of the Western working class, against which this whole world view was ultimately aimed. Even today, after everything that has discredited Sweezy’s economics, Elbaum still uses “monopoly capital” as one of his many unexamined concepts.

Because in the world of Elbaum and his friends, while the reading of *Capital* may have been on the agenda of many study groups (in reality, in most cases, the study of

vol. I, which is tantamount to reading Hegel's *Phenomenology* only on the initial phase of "sense certainty" of English empiricism and skepticism), it was far more (as he says) the pamphlets of Lenin, or if the truth be known, of Stalin, Beria, Mao, Ho and Hoxha which were the main fare. (My favorite was Beria's "On The History of Bolshevik Organization in the Transcaucasia", reprinted ca. 1975 by some long-defunct Marxist-Leninist publisher.) Elbaum is honest, in retrospect: "the publishing houses of the main New Communist organizations issued almost nothing that remains of value to serious left researchers and scholars." He might have added that it wasn't worth reading at the time, either, except to (briefly) experience ideology run amok. Whereas for the political world I inhabited, the question was the recovery of soviets and workers' councils for direct democratic worker control of the entirety of production (a perspective having its own limits, but far more interesting ones), by Elbaum's own account the vision of the socialist society in Marxist-Leninist circles was rarely discussed beyond ritual bows to the various Third World models, today utterly discredited, or the invocation of the "socialism in one rural commune" of William Hinton's *Fanshen*, or the writings on Viet Cong "democracy" by the indefatigable Wilfred Burchett (who had also written lyrically about Stalin's Russia 30 years earlier). The real Marxian project of the abolition of the law of value (i.e. the regimentation of social life by the socially necessary time of reproduction), existed for virtually no one in the 1960's, not for Elbaum, nor for me. But the *Monthly Review*/monopoly capital world view, in which capitalism was understood not as a valorization process but as a quasi-Dühringian system ultimately of power and domination, meshed perfectly with the (in reality) populist world view of Elbaum et al. Through Baran and Sweezy a kind of left-wing Keynesianism pervaded this part of the left, relegating the law of value to the capitalism of Marx's time and (following Lenin) seeing everything since the 1890's as power-political "monopoly capital." This "anti-imperialism" was and is in reality an ideology of Third World elites, in or out of power, and is fundamentally anti-working class, like all the "progressive" regimes they have ever established. It did not trouble Elbaum and his milieu that the role of the Third World in international trade had been declining through from 1900 to the 1960's, or that 80% of all direct foreign investment takes places between the three major capitalist centers of the U.S., Europe and East Asia (so much for Lenin's theory of imperialism); the illusory prosperity of the West, in their view, was paid for by the looting of the Third World (and, make no mistake, the Third World was and is being looted). The ultimate implication of this outlook was, once again, to implicate the "white" (e.g. Eurocentric) working class of the West in the world imperialist system, in the name of illusory bureaucratic-peasant utopias of labor-intensive agriculture. This working class in the advanced capitalist countries had meanwhile, from 1955 to 1973, carried out the mounting wildcat insurgency in the U.S. and Britain, May 1968 in France and the "creeping May" of 1969-1977 in Italy, apparently not having been informed by Elbaum's "Third World Marxists" that they were bought off by imperialism.

A number of unexamined concepts run through Elbaum's book from beginning to end: revisionism, antirevisionism, Leninism, Marxism-Leninism, ultra-leftism. Elbaum never explains that "revisionism" meant to this milieu above all the ideological demotion of Stalin after 1953, and that therefore those who called themselves "antirevisionists" were identifying, implicitly or explicitly (and usually explicitly) Stalin's Russia with some betrayed "Marxist orthodoxy." In his counterposition of "revisionism/antirevisionism" Elbaum does not devote one line to the consolidation, in 1924, of the grotesque concept of "socialism in one country", a concept that would have made Lenin (whatever his other problems) wretch. (Not for nothing had Lenin's *Testament* called for Stalin's removal as General Secretary, another "fact" that counted for nothing in the mental universe of "Third World Marxism.") For someone who is writing about it on every page, Elbaum has, in fact, no real theory of Stalinism whatsoever. Whereas the milieu I frequented stayed up late

trying to determine if the seeds of Stalinism were in Leninism, Elbaum and his friends saw mainly or entirely an unproblematic continuity between Lenin and Stalin, and affirmed it. As for “Marxism–Leninism”, Elbaum does admit that it was a concoction of Stalin. In its subsequent career “Marxism–Leninism” could mean anything to anyone, anything of course except the power of soviets and workers’ councils which in every failed proletarian revolution of the 20th century (Russia 1905 and 1917–21, Germany 1918–1921, Spain 1936–67, Hungary 1956, France 1968) had more genuine communist elements than all the large and small totalitarians in Elbaum’s “Third World Marxist” pantheon put together.

“Ultra–leftism” for Elbaum means little self–appointed vanguards running amok and demarcating themselves from real movements. Elbaum seems quite unaware of the true historic ultra–left. One can agree or disagree with Pannekoek (whose mass strike writings influenced Lenin’s *State and Revolution*), Gorter (who told Lenin in 1921 that the Russian revolutionary model did not could not be mechanically transposed onto western Europe) or Bordiga, who called Stalin the gravedigger of the revolution to his face in 1926 and lived to tell the tale. But such people and the genuine mass movements (in Germany, Holland and Italy) that produced them are a noble tradition which hardly deserves to be confused rhetorically with the thuggish antics of the (happily defunct) League for Proletarian Socialism (the latter name being a true *contradictio in adjecto*, inadvertently revealing bureaucratic dreams: Marxian socialism means the abolition of wage–labor and hence of the “proletariat” as the commodity form of human labor power). As indicated above, figures such as Korsch, Mattick, Castoriadis, and the early CLR James (whatever their problems) can similarly be considered part of an ultra–left, and unlike the productions of Elbaum’s milieu, their writings are eminently worth reading today. One Dutch Marxist organizing in Indonesia in 1908 had already grasped the basically bourgeois nature of nationalism in the then–colonial world, an idea Elbaum was still catching up with in 2002.

“Internationalism” for Elbaum means mainly cheerleading for the latest “Third World Marxist” movement or regime, but in reality his vision of the world is laughably America–centered. He refers on occasion (as a source of inspiration for his milieu) to the French mass strike of 1968, which swept aside all self–appointed vanguards, “Marxist–Leninists” first of all. This is lost on Elbaum. By the early 1970’s, Trotskyist groups had clearly out–organized the Marxist–Leninists, and for what it’s worth, today the two largest Trotskyist groups, Lutte Ouvrière and Ligue Communiste, together account for 10% of the vote in French elections and are now larger than the Communist Party, without a Marxist–Leninist in sight. In Britain, similarly, Trotskyist groups out–organized the Marxist–Leninists hands down, played an important role in the 1972 strike wave (never mentioned by Elbaum) and today the British Socialist Workers’ Party (not to be confused with the American rump of the same name) is the largest group to the left of the Labour Party. Elbaum refers in passing to the Japanese far left of the 60’s as an influence on some Japanese–Americans, but he seems blissfully unaware that the Zengakuren was overwhelmingly anti–Stalinist and mainly viewed Russia and China as state–capitalist. The most creative and internationally influential currents of the Italian 1970’s, the so–called operaisti or workerists, were breaking with Leninism from the early 1970’s at the latest. (To be fair, in Italy and in Germany large Maoist and Marxist–Leninist groups did exist, and the Trotskyists were basically marginal).

On the subject of Trotsky: I am not a Trotskyist, and have basically (as previously indicated) since my callow youth viewed all so–called socialist societies as class societies, and not (as Trotskyists do) as “workers’ states.” But I have more respect for Trotsky (who should be distinguished from the Trotskyists) than I ever had or will have for Stalin, Mao, Ho, Kim il–Sung, Castro, Guevara, or Cabral.

Wearing the blinders of his milieu, Elbaum shows real ignorance of Trotskyism. (“Third World Marxism’s” philistine hatred for Trotsky, while generally not stooping to 1930’s “Trotsky the agent of the Mikado”-type slanders, was exceeded only by such ignorance.) Blinded by his milieu’s acceptance of complete and positive continuity between Lenin and Stalin, the world events of the early 1920’s, which decisively shaped both Trotskyism and the above-mentioned ultra-left (and the last 80 years of human history) have no importance for him. Hence (as indicated earlier), the triumph of “socialism in one country” after 1924 and the total subordination of all Communist Parties to Soviet foreign policy are totally unproblematic for these people, as were all the debacles of the Comintern mentioned earlier. Similarly, the question of the relationship of the Bolshevik party and Soviet state to the soviets and workers’ councils, i.e. the question of the actual working-class management of society, which was settled (in the negative) by 1921, is of no consequence either. It’s Eurocentric to be concerned about Soviet history before the rise of Stalin, not Eurocentric to admire Stalin’s Russia with its 10 million peasants killed in the 1930’s collectivizations, its massacre of the Bolshevik Old Guard in the Moscow Trials, its factories operating with killing speed-up under direct GPU control or its 20 million people in slave labor camps at the time of Stalin’s death. For such a view, “revisionism” must therefore be Khrushchev’s (equally top-down) attempt to decompress (a bit) this nightmare. The memory of Stalinist Russia still weighs on the consciousness of masses of people around the world as the seemingly inevitable outcome of trying to do away with capitalism, and reinforces the still potent neo-liberal mantra “there is no alternative”, but why the people Elbaum describes as the “most dynamic” part of the American left in the 1970’s were so taken with the Stalinist legacy never seems to strike him as a major problem to be addressed.

Elbaum might also inform himself about Trotsky’s (and Marx’s) theory of permanent revolution, which was the centerpiece of the Bolshevik internationalist strategy in 1917, and its repudiation by Stalin the key to all the post-1924 politics swallowed whole forty-five years later by Elbaum’s “Third World Marxists.” Permanent revolution—rightly or wrongly—meant the possibility that a revolution in a backward country like Russia could link up with (or even inspire; cf. Marx’s preface to the 1882 Russian edition of the *Manifesto*) revolution in the developed European heartland, and in that way be spared the bloody primitive accumulation process which every capitalist country from Britain to Russia to contemporary China has necessarily undergone. It is this theory, and not some “Eurocentrism”, that made (the small minority of) honest Trotskyists keep their distances from regimes using “Third World Marxism” as a figleaf for capitalist primitive accumulation. Most Trotskyists were howling with the wolves that “Vietnam Will Win!” Well, we have seen what Vietnam (and even more Cambodia) won.

This is hardly the place to describe the devolution of Trotskyism since Trotsky, but honesty and courage of convictions were not the strong suit of the Mandels and Barneses and Pablos who shaped it after 1940. Elbaum sees the American SWP as the main face of Trotskyism for 1960’s and 1970’s leftists in the U.S. (and he’s right about that), and claims that Trotskyism’s involvement with “old 1930’s issues” and “European questions” was the main hindrance to a larger impact of Trotskyism when the Third World, from China to Vietnam to Cuba was supposedly sizzling with revolution and the building of socialism.

In point of fact, watching the SWP (like their French counterparts Ligue Communiste) in the 1960’s and 1970’s, I could only laugh up my sleeve watching the way they buried their critique of Stalinism (as in the case of the Vietnamese NLF) in the fine print of their theoretical journals while rushing after popularity, waving NLF flags, in exactly the milieu influenced by Elbaum’s “Third World Marxism.” To take only one anecdotal example: In a 1969 debate in Berkeley between the ISC and the SWP, we put SWP spokesperson Pete

Camejo up against the wall about the 1945 massacre of the Vietnamese Trotskyists in front of a large New Left audience, and Camejo conceded that, yes, Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh had, in fact, well, oppressed the Vietnamese comrades of the Fourth International. I'm sure most of the New Leftist cheerleaders present considered our point to be "ancient history"—24 years earlier!—; today, as they watch Vietnam rush into "market socialism" with investment capital from Toyota and Mitsubishi, I'm sure they don't think about it at all. I remember Camejo's brother Tony telling a similar audience that we couldn't be too critical of black and Latino nationalism in the U.S. because blacks and Latinos had not yet passed through their "bourgeois revolution", as if American blacks and Latinos did not also live in the most advanced capitalist society in the world. But he had put his finger on a certain reality, since many of the black and Latino nationalists of the 1960's and 1970's were in fact on their way to middle-class careers, once the shouting died down, as uninterested in genuine proletarian revolution (and the true 20th century examples of it) today as they were then. (They were and are in this way no different from the great majority of the white New Left.) Elbaum approvingly quotes Tariq Ali attacking those who (such as myself and the ISC to which I belonged) saw no difference between "Mao tse-tung and Chiang kai-shek, or Castro and Batista", whereas all of world history since Ali uttered that remark has demonstrated nothing except that the main difference made between old-style U.S.-backed dictators and "Third World Marxist" dictators with state power is that the latter better prepare their countries for full-blown capitalism, with Mao's China exhibit A for the prosecution, and Vietnam following close behind.

Further, Elbaum, never seems to notice that many of the 20th century Marxists still worth reading today (and he apparently has not read them), such as the early Shachtman, James, Draper, and Castoriadis, made their most important contributions in a break to the left of Trotskyism. In 35 years in leftist politics, I have met many ex-Stalinists and Maoists who became Trotskyists and council communists; I have never met anyone who went in the opposite direction. Once you have played grand master chess, you rarely go back to checkers.

Finally, while Elbaum rightly says that the turn ca. 1969 of thousands of New Leftists to the American working class was largely fruitless, he does neglect one important counter-example, namely the success of the International Socialists (the renamed ISC after 1970) in building the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and through it being the sparkplugs for the election of Ron Carey as President of the Teamsters in 1991. There is no question that this development, however much it turned into a fiasco, was the most important left-wing intervention in the American labor movement since the 1940's. I no more wish to go off on a long tangent about that terribly-botched episode than I wish to expound on the history of Trotskyism; I left the IS milieu in 1969. It is rather, again, to show Elbaum's blind spot to the real flaws of his own tradition. The IS's success with TDU came at the price of burying (at least for the purposes of Teamster politics) the fact that they were socialists, not merely honest trade-unionists (it turned out that Carey wasn't even that). Anyone educated in a Trotskyist group (and the IS, despite its rejection of the socialist character of the so-called "workers' states" was Trotskyist on every other question), in contrast to most Stalinist and Maoist groups, develops a healthy aversion to the trade-union bureaucracy and to the Democratic Party. Elbaum provides a long history of how Maoism evolved out of the wreckage of the old CPUSA after the 1960 Sino-Soviet split. Some of these groups looked back to the CP under Browder; others preferred William Z. Foster. But almost all of them saw something positive in the CP's role during the Roosevelt era, both in the Democratic Party and in the CIO. The problem of those working off of Trotskyism was, on the contrary, the "bureaucracy" that developed in exactly the era of CP influence; the problem of those working off of Marxism-Leninism was "revisionism" (Stalinists and Maoists for some reason don't have too much to say

about bureaucracy, except as in the “Cultural Revolution”, when they are supporting one bureaucratic faction against another). And the concept of “revisionism” rarely inoculated these people against seeking influence in high places, either with Democratic politicians or with trade-union bureaucrats, as the CP had done so successfully in its heyday. It is certainly true that many of Elbaum’s Marxist–Leninists did neither. But he seems to ignore the fact that the ability of a group like the IS to intersect the Teamster rank-and-file rebellion of the 1970’s and thereafter had something to do with the fact that they, in contrast to every Marxist–Leninist around, were not approaching the American working class with tall tales about socialism in Cuba or Albania or Cambodia or North Korea. The oh-so-radical defenders of Beijing’s line, whether for or against the “Gang of Four”, turned out to be defending a considerable part of the global status quo.

Finally, if Elbaum would lift his head from the rubble of “Third World Marxism”, he might notice that, in Britain and France, Trotskyist groups have a solid mass base (whatever one thinks of the politics involved), whereas Marxist–Leninists are almost nowhere to be seen; and even in the politically-backward U.S., groups such as the ineffable ISO, not to mention the youthful anarchist scene, are attracting more young people interested in revolution than any Marxist–Leninists. Being for the overthrow of every government in the world lets you see and do things that the baggage of Pol Pot or Shining Path or Kim Jong-il conceals.

It is now time to turn to the merits of Elbaum’s book, which, contrary to what the reader may conclude from the above, it indeed has. First—and with this I have no quarrel—Elbaum attacks the “good sixties/bad sixties” vision of figures such as Todd Gitlin, for whom the late-sixties turn to revolution was the “bad sixties”, compared to the early sixties Port Huron vision of participatory democracy. Revolution was necessary then, and is necessary today, whatever the current ideological climate might favor. Elbaum is also right in critiquing Gitlin’s (and many others) almost exclusive focus on the white New Left, seeing the movement essentially collapse with SDS in 1969–70, and not recognizing its extension, particularly among blacks and Latinos (not to mention the thousands of white New Leftists who went into the factories, and the wildcat strike wave which lasted until 1973).

But Elbaum does put his finger on the fact that the Third World Marxist–Stalinist–Marxist–Leninist and Maoist milieu was much more successful, in the 1960’s and 1970’s, in attracting and influencing militants of color. And he is equally right in saying that most of the Trotskyist currents, not to mention the “post-Trotskyists” to whom I was closest, were partially blind to America’s “blind spot”, the centrality of race, in the American class equation. The ISC, when I was in it in Berkeley in the late 1960’s, was all for black power, and (like many other groups) worked with the Black Panthers, but itself had virtually no black members. Trotskyist groups such as the SWP did have some, as did all the others. But there is no question that Elbaum’s milieu was far more successful with blacks, Latinos, and Asians (as was the CPUSA). To cut to the quick, I think that the answer to this difference was relatively straightforward. As Elbaum himself points out, many people of color who threw themselves into the ferment of the 1960’s and 1970’s and joined revolutionary groups were the first generation of their families to attend college, and were—whether they knew it or not—on their way into the middle class. Thus it is hardly surprising, when one thinks about it, that they would be attracted to the regimes and movements of “progressive” middle-class elites in the Third World. This was just as true, in a different way, for many transient militants of the white New Left, similarly bound (after 1973) for the professional classes, not to mention the actually ruling class offspring one found in groups such as the Weathermen. Elbaum does point out that the white memberships of many Third World Marxist groups were from working-class families and were similarly the first generation of their families to attend college. He also shows a

preponderant origin of such people in the “prairie radicalism” (i.e. populism) of the Midwest, in contrast to the more “European” left of the two coasts, one important clue to their essentially populist politics. These are important social–historical–cultural insights, which could be developed much further. Charles Denby’s *Black Worker’s Notebook* (Denby was a member of Raya Dunayevskaya’s New and Letters group) effectively identifies the middle–class character of the Black Power milieu around Stokely Carmichael et al., as well as black workers’ distance from it; the Detroit–based League of Revolutionary Black Workers similarly critiqued the black nationalist middle class, though it was hardly anti–nationalist itself.

It is undeniable that the 1960’s movements of peoples of color in the U.S. were influenced by the global climate of the de–colonization of most of Africa, the Middle East and Asia following World War II, and the “de–centering” of actually Eurocentric views of Western and world history, following the 1914–1945 “de–centering” of Europe in the new lines drawn by the Cold War. They were similarly influenced by–and themselves were the main force enacting–the shattering of centuries of white supremacy in American society. It would be idealistic and moralistic to explain their attraction to “Third World Marxism”, Maoism and Marxism–Leninism by the meaningless assertion that “they had the wrong ideas.” One important part of the answer is definitely the weight of arriving middle–class elements in these political groups, who are today to be found in the black and Latino professional classes. But the typical black, Latino or Asian militant in the U.S. waving Mao’s little red book or chanting “We want a pork chop/Off the pig” was not signing on for Stalin’s gulag, or the millions who died in Mao’s “great leap forward” in 1957, or mass murder in Pol Pot’s Cambodia, or the ghoulish torture of untold numbers of political prisoners in Sekou Toure’s Guinea (where the black nationalist Stokely Carmichael spent his last days with no dissent anyone ever heard about), any more than the working–class militant in the CPUSA in 1935 was signing on for the Moscow Trials or the massacre of the Spanish anarchists and Trotskyists. All the above real history and theory blotted out or falsified by “Third World Marxism” was available and known in the 1960’s and thereafter to those who sought it. The question is precisely one of exactly when groups of people in motion are ready to seek or hear certain truths. What Elbaum can’t face is that the entirety of “Third World Marxism” was and is anti–working class, whether in Saigon in 1945 or in Budapest and Poznan in 1956 or in Jakarta in 1965 or in case of the Shanghai workers slaughtered in the midst of the “Cultural Revolution” in 1966–69. Workers, white and non–white, in the American sixties sensed this more clearly than did Elbaum’s minions, blinded by ideology. As Marx said, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, speaking of the English Revolution of the 1640’s:

...in the same way but at a different stage of development, Cromwell and the English people had borrowed for their bourgeois revolution the language, passions and illusions of the *Old Testament*. When the actual goal had been reached, when the bourgeois transformation of English society had been accomplished, Locke drove out Habbakuk.

When the upwardly mobile middle class elements of the 1960’s and 1970’s New Left and Third World Marxism, both white but also important numbers of blacks and Latinos, had established themselves in their professional and civil service jobs and academic tenure, suburban life and VCRs drove out Ho, Che, and Mao. Things went quite differently, above all for blacks without a ticket to the middle class, as one can see in the difference between the ultimate fates of even the Weather Underground after years on the run, and black political prisoners such as Geronimo Pratt.

But, to conclude, if Elbaum has offered us hundreds of pages on the wars of sects and ideologies that no one–himself included–misses, it is not from an antiquarian

impulse. The real agenda is spelled out in one of the effusive blurbs on the dust cover: "Finally, we have one book that can successfully connect the dots between the battles of the 1960's and the emerging challenges and struggles of the new century." The giveaway is Elbaum's treatment of the Jesse Jackson presidential campaigns of 1984 and 1988, which are presented as something almost as momentous as the 1960's, and which offered the few Marxist-Leninist groups ("Marxist-Leninists for Mondale" as someone once called them) still around their last chance at mass influence. In contrast to the 1960's, the Jackson campaigns came and went with no lasting impact except to further illustrate the dead end of the old Rooseveltian New Deal coalition and the Keynesian welfare-statism that was the bread and butter of the old Democratic Party and of the CPUSA's strategy within the Democratic Party. And when all is said and done, this fatal legacy of the CP's role at the height of Stalinism in the mid-1930's is Elbaum's legacy as well. Just as he tells us nothing about the true origins of Marxism-Leninism and Third World Marxism, Elbaum tells us nothing about the CPUSA coming off its 1930's "heroic" phase, herding the American working class off to World War II through the enforcement of the no-strike pledge, the calumny of any critic of U.S. imperialism's moment of arrival at world power as a Hitlero-fascist, and applause in the *Daily Worker* for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So it is necessary to connect some further dots: this book aims at being a contribution to some new "progressive coalition" wedding the American working class to some revamping of the capitalist state in an all-out drive to "Beat Bush" around a Dean campaign (or something like it) in 2004. It joins the groundswell of dissent among capitalist forces themselves, currently being articulated by the likes of George Soros, Jeffrey Sachs, Joseph Stiglitz and Paul Krugman as the still-dominant neo-liberal paradigm of the past 25 years begins to seriously fray. While Elbaum's book makes occasional passing reference to economic hard times times the 1970's, he doesn't see the extent to which American decline has circumscribed any possible agenda of "reform", which can only be some kind of "Tax The Rich", share-the-declining-wealth kind of left populism, with suitably "diverse" forces that will probably be the final fruit of the "progressive" middle classes, white and people of color, that evolved out of Elbaum's "Third World Marxism."

Despite what Elbaum thinks and what he and his milieu thought 30 years ago, the fate of the world is in the hands of the world working class. In contrast to 30 years ago, however, this working class is no longer limited to North America, Europe and Japan, but is now spread through many parts of the "anti-imperialist" Third World, led by China. The East will be red again, not as the bureaucratic-peasant hallucination of the "Third World Marxists" of the 1960's and 1970's, but as a genuine working-class revolt against precisely the forces that used "Third World Marxism", in the Third World as in the U.S. and Europe, to muddle every social question and advance their social stratum. The remnants of these forces are positioned today in and around the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy, as well as in the anti-globalization movement, readying themselves to again revamp the capitalist system with torrents of "progressive" rhetoric, as they did in the 1930's and 1940's.

The only thing that is "progressive" in today's world is working-class revolution.

Table of Contents