

H I P H O P R E N A I S S A N C E

# political **A**ffairs

Journal of Marxist Thought

August 2003

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# LIFT EVERY VOICE

## THE CULTURE ISSUE

STAYING HUMAN WITH MICHAEL FRANTI

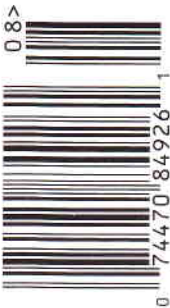
WRITING CLASS: RUSSELL BANKS

THE ORIGINS OF MARXIST CULTURE



DIXIE CHICKS AND CHICKENHAWKS • SEE NO EVIL?  
• HOLLYWOOD RED

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# political **A**ffairs

Ideology, Politics and Culture

Volume 82, No. 8

## 2003

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Political Affairs is a publication of  
the Communist Party USA.

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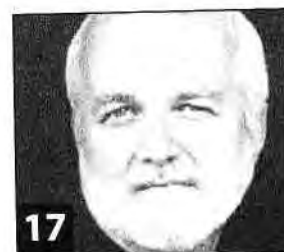
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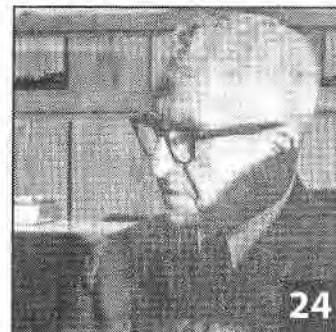
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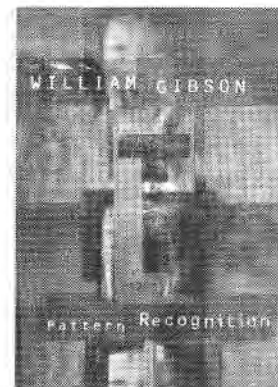
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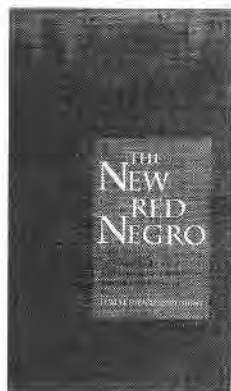
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Political Affairs (ISSN 0032 3128) is published monthly except for combined September/October, by Political Affairs Publishers, Inc. 235 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10011. [This address is for all correspondence.] Phone: 212-989-4994, ext. 222. Subscription Rate: \$22 for one year (individuals) \$44 for one year (institutions); foreign subscriptions: Canada and Mexico add \$7.00 to domestic rates; foreign sea add \$10.00 per year to domestic rates; foreign airmail rate on request.

Periodical postage paid at New York, NY and additional mailing offices.

Postmaster: Send changes of address to: Political Affairs, 235 W. 23rd St, NY, NY 10011



### **Keep Up the Work Cleveland, Ohio**

Great job on the magazine! It is extremely important to keep such work going. I am with PeaceJam, a non-violent peace organization based out of Cleveland. Thank you.

– Natasha N.

We must begin to expose the fascist character of what is happening to our own country



### **Corporate Fascism New York, New York**

We recently had an exchange on the Internet among philosophers on a new book, *Made in Texas*, by Michael Lind. We highly recommend it for a deeper understanding of the nature of the extreme conservatism of the Bush Administration. We were particularly impressed with the revelation of the ideological, political and class line of George W., who is very much the leader rather than one who is being influenced by the corporate cabal. The combination of Southern slave owner mentality with corporate control of government is an ideological marriage much more threatening than had been expressed in a paper on the fascist-like development coming to a head in unsanctioned war and the squeeze of civil rights and liberties – a danger posed by a “reelection” in 2004.

In the last few days, new thoughts have been gushing. Why have decent-minded Republicans been

leaving the administration like ambassadors or CIA and FBI leaders, Senators who switch parties, groups of Republican leaders who express differences with Bush on domestic economic policy, as well as taking a more moderate position on working with the UN rather than following a unilateral course towards war with Iraq; or the incarceration of thousands of Muslims without legal aid or failure to deliver on commitments to Mexico to ease relations with immigrants; or extreme penalties for minor theft while the Enronizers go scott free having robbed the workers and middle class of their savings? The drive to war smacks very much of Germany’s Third Reich, even as Bush sacrifices Blair, his only major ally.

Someone wrote recently that there are in fact two superpowers: the USA and the mass movements around the world. The mass movements are developing in our own country. That is the only hope of maintaining our sanity and democracy. As we join in mass protests, respecting particular interests among the groupings that are coalescing, we must begin to expose the fascist character of what is happening to our own country. Our manner should not isolate us but raise this as a serious question, making comparisons between a Hitler and a Bush who were both appointed and hand picked by the far right in their respective countries.

It is our hope in bringing this thought to the mass movement to reveal the face of the real enemy – “incipient corporate fascism – and to sharpen the struggle to end the war and take back our traditional democratic rights.

– Sidney J. Gluck

If anti-Sovietism is an impenetrable barrier to an effective anti-war movement, then American peace forces could be in deep trouble.



### **Criticism of Zinn Is Too Much Amherst, Massachusetts**

I found Ken Knies’ review of *Terrorism and War* to be insightful and thought provoking. At the same time, I thought some of his criticisms of Howard Zinn were excessive and slightly sectarian.

Knies draws attention to Zinn’s “anti-Sovietism” and argues this weakens his ability to make cogent arguments against the war aims of the US moneyed elite. While it is important to combat left anti-Communism, if anti-Sovietism is an impenetrable barrier to an effective anti-war movement, American peace forces could be in deep trouble.

The overwhelming majority of those involved in anti-war activity could be considered “anti-Soviet” on two counts. The first is that they (correctly) believe that the bureaucratic, one party, siege socialism of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, does not serve as a useful model for an alternative to capitalism in the US. The second is that they (incorrectly) feel that nothing of particular value was lost in the 1989-91 period.

While Zinn does present certain issues in moral terms, he also draws a clear connection between capitalism and war: “Capitalism feeds

upon war and war feeds upon capitalism... being based upon profit, capitalism certainly makes wars between nations, wars over resources... inevitable." (p. 97) It could be argued that the more influence Zinn exerts within anti-war ranks, the greater possibility the peace movement will move in an openly anti-capitalist direction.

Communists and progressives should also bear in mind that Zinn has had many a kind word for Karl Marx over the decades. Zinn's play, *Marx in Soho*, which has been performed across the country, presents both Marx the man and Marx the thinker in a very sympathetic light. The play skillfully and passionately argues for the relevance of Marx's ideas to current conditions.

Zinn is not perfect, alas none of us are. He has, however, done more to popularize both people's history and radical, including Marxist, ideas than possibly anyone else on the American left. Alice Walker's contention that the man is a national treasure was more than mere rhetoric.

— Adam Minsky



### Marxist IQ Could Be Improved Seattle, Washington

Thanks for your work on *PA* – it is looking better, snappier, more interesting. Weighing in on the "Marxist IQ" question, there are four issues which I want to comment on.

One, in general, I like having a feature like this – it is another way of presenting material, it involves some interaction which is healthy, and it poses a challenge for the readers, which is also good.

Two, changing the name to Marxist Quiz instead of IQ makes sense and is a simple fix.

Three, changing the scoring to eliminate "send to re-education camp" also make sense and is a simple fix.

# Dear Readers,

Thank you for continuing to support *Political Affairs*. We are pleased to be able to provide a quality magazine for you. Improvements in the design and content of *PA* have put us on the road to a larger circulation. *PA* is reaching more readers through new subscriptions, the internet and the newsstands than it has in many years. Yet our growth cannot be sustained without your financial support. We are close to achieving our annual goal. But we still need a few contributors to help put us over the top.

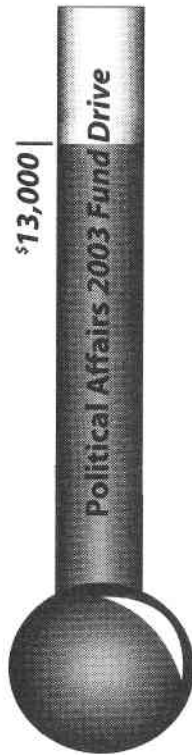
*PA* is unique because we consistently lead the fight against Bush and his co-conspirators, who have hijacked our democracy. In the midst of a monolithic war-driven corporate media, we provide a sustained critique of the ultra-right's attacks on working America and the world. As long as we have your support, we can be the voice of our class and our people against the racist hysteria and insane war dogma of the Bush administration and the extremists of the Republican Party.

We are currently working on stories in celebration of Labor Day for the September/October issue. These will include analysis of the decline of manufacturing, which, regardless of what the Bush people believe, remains the backbone of the economy. We also plan to bring you important interviews with labor activists and to focus on the role labor can and will play in replacing Bush and the right-wing Congress in the 2004 elections.

Please remember to be generous as you give to *PA* this year. Thank you for supporting us, and we look forward to hearing from you.

In solidarity,  
PA Editors

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Four, and more substantive, if there is a way to shift from a format that so closely depends on a careful reading of a specific text to one that makes more clear and maybe even topical political points. That would be a significant improvement. In other words, not so much right answers depending on whether someone just read that particular passage and how exactly did Marx or Lenin phrase it in one specific paragraph, but more towards what is the meaning of Marxism and how it is relevant to today. I know this would be a more difficult job to set up, and requires more thought rather than just thinking up alternative multiple choice answers. But I think it would make the feature more meaningful and more encouraging of Marxist thought as opposed to more encouraging of reading one specific text and treating it like a memorization exercise.

Lastly, I do enjoy the feature and I do take the tests. Sometimes I come out with a good score and sometimes with a lousy score.

— Marc Brodine



### Latino Issue: Breakthrough, but Incomplete Los Angeles, California

I got the magazine today and read through some of the articles (*PA*, April 2003). I found them informative and thought provoking. *En ensemble* they gave me a lot to think about. It is an historic event to have a *PA* issue devoted to Latino issues.

I have to say I think there is a lot of room for improvement. Much is made in the monopoly media of the Latino market. We should better indicate the Latino role in production of value, of the super-exploitation and super-profits along with benefits and working condition differentials. The latest data possible is needed. From this would follow the importance of Latinos to and in the labor movement including in leadership where breakthroughs are being made but more is needed.

I would like to make a constructive criticism of the José Soler article on Latinos in the labor movement. Reading the paragraph that “within the ranks of labor Latinos have not progressed much” and that

many Latinos who were “elevated” to leading positions “were promoted not because they were leaders of struggles, but because they represented no threat to the status quo” was a shock to me.. I’m sure it will go over even worse with LCLAA.

A related point about Soler’s article is the limited treatment of the historical struggles to overcome racism and national chauvinism in the labor movement, and the role of the left and progressives in winning the labor movement to the fight for equality.

One other point that could have been helpful is to indicate how the struggles of the different sectors of Latino workers have their own life and relevance. When we too easily go over from Mexican American, Puerto Rican and other Latino groups to Latinos much can be lost of the historical landmarks, alliances, breakthroughs that underpin the higher level of struggle today.

I do want to mention that I agree with Art Perlo about the IQ thing; it’s like trivial pursuit; there is something demeaning, patronizing, anti-worker, anti-practice about it.

Comradely,  
— Rosalio Muñoz

### Have you done any good Reading lately?

Share it with PA readers in a book review.  
Write us at 235 W 23rd St. New York, NY 10011  
or pabooks@politicalaffairs.net.

Or write to find out what books we have received.

## TWO LITTLE GIRLS *by Julie Bohm*

Two little girls, just as scared, just as lost  
To find one, you searched out, expended all cost.  
The other is silent, no whistles, alarms  
You’ve just turned your back, disregarded the harms  
Two little girls, both missing, one back  
Do you think it would help if they both weren’t black.  
The fair missing child caused nationwide stir  
But the other was black, so what happened to her?  
Two little girls who were scared and alone.  
One of them’s missing, one is back home.

She’s small and she’s dark but she won’t disappear  
Will she just go unnoticed, month into year?  
They both have two parents and family and friends.  
One is recovered, the other depends  
On just what you see when you look at a child.  
Are they innocent, sweet, supersensitive, wild?  
Or are the family with which they have grown?  
Or their color, their hair or the life they have known?  
Two little girls, both have been through such pains.  
Now I think you should search for the one that remains.

## Of Dixie Chicks and Chickenhawks

Let's get a couple of things straight: burning books and sheet music, and banning musicians and other artists, is the sort of thing fascists enjoyed doing in Nazi Germany. Burning cd's, running them over with tractors, or encouraging children to stomp them into little pieces is not much different. Today, right-wing politicians getting mileage by bashing the country music trio the Dixie Chicks is not much different in kind from what the fascists in Germany and Italy did. That is the basic truth.

I've never been a fan of the Dixie Chicks, but I've always supported people courageous enough to stand for peace – even in saying that one is ashamed of the president. In this case, being ashamed of an almost elected, bumbling, lying, super-privileged, sexist, racist, fundamentalist, with pretensions to global domination, is no crime. It's only human.

Those who have attacked the Dixie Chicks are part of the crowd that prefers uniformity to plurality. They want to erase all difference to preserve the façade of religious and racial purity and the reality of the overwhelming power of the rich. They don't like to be confronted with the brutality of the deeds they support.

They burn crosses and wield batons and pepper spray against civilians. They would fire 41 shots into an innocent in a heartbeat. They steal pensions to line their pockets. They destroy thousands of lives in distant countries for black gold. They'll secretly fund a thug like Saddam Hussein and then later send someone else's children to try to kill him. They poison your water, the air and your food to fatten the bottom line.

They'll kill an innocent person "legally" to get re-elected. They'll get off scot-free on a DUI charge or cocaine abuse (because of their race and riches), but they'll demand that the poor and people of color get locked up for life.

They'll give you the finger for saying, "Stop bombing innocents over there," but laugh as another thug bombs a woman's health clinic. They also think it's funny to

use phrases like, "Nuke 'em all," or "It's war, civilians are bound to get killed," or "put a single bullet in his head."

They are the ones who, when asked if they plan to join the service to fight for their country, say, "I have a cyst on my butt," or "I prefer making millions in the corporate world," or "Don't they already have enough poor people doing that?" They'd turn in their family and friends to the authorities for having different opinions.

They are afraid when "those" people move into the neighborhood. They say that white people shouldn't have to compete against people of color (in a culture of competition) for jobs, government contracts and university admissions. "Those jobs, contracts and admissions slots belong to us!" they say.

They try to destroy unions by pitting Black and Brown against white, Americans against anyone else. They are the ones who move jobs overseas and pressure economically strangled governments to stop unions from organizing with lethal force. They sit idly by as their employees kill working-class leaders – "Just for the Taste of It."

They are the ones who say the sick and the poor and the unemployed are to blame. "Let's give more tax cuts to the rich." They are the ones who demand billions for armaments and nothing for more fair housing, for education, for health care, for jobs, for clean air, for simple justice.

There's a lot of talk about traitors and the enemies of the American people. If the choice is between the Dixie Chicks and the Chickenhawks, thinking people will take a closer look.

From their recent album, *Home*, the Dixie Chicks sing:

*I believe in love  
Love that's real, love that's strong  
Love that lives on and on  
Yes I believe in love*

Not treasonous. Not heroic. Just human. ■



*Being ashamed of an almost elected, bumbling, lying, super-privileged, sexist, racist, fundamentalist with pretensions to global domination is no crime.*

*It's only human.*

BY JOEL WENDLAND  
MANAGING EDITOR OF PA

# Staying Human on

Michael Franti and Spearhead have become  
a musical and political force

*By Roberta Jones*



*Illustration by John Kim*



# the Left Coast

*"You can bomb the world to pieces, but you can't bomb it into peace."*

Bay-area hip-hop artist and political activist Michael Franti (of Spearhead) recently put out an anti-war single titled "Bomb Da World." In this song, Franti calls on the people to rise up against the insanity of Bush's perpetual war. "Power to the peaceful people," he intones. The song is an excellent example of both the beauty and the social and humanistic significance of his music.

Franti has worked closely with many political projects including the prison reform organization Critical Resistance (led by Angela Davis), the defense of political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal and the Music Bridges project in Cuba, which brings American musicians to Cuba to build international friendship. Franti speaks out frequently on the need to create jobs, education and health care, not more prisons. He stands against racism and national chauvinism. He consistently links these issues with war and violent US foreign policy. He calls for the unity of America's peoples and working class to unite against oppression and for peace and equality.

Along with his band Spearhead, Franti released his critically acclaimed album, *Stay Human* (Six Degrees records) in 2001. This album uniquely blends hip-hop, jazz, R&B, with reggae and smooth soulful sounds reminiscent of the early 1970s music scene. The political and social subjects of many of these songs draw the listener into another time – but not the past. It is a post-war, post-oppression future of peace and justice. This particular album, distinct from the previous Spearhead releases, combines dramatic scenarios (represented as brief radio segments) with the music to create a multi-dimensional reality for the listener. It enlists the listener in an active participation in the democratic movements and in the musical movements of the album. This album inspires and cultivates what is best about humanity as the most basic of forces against the anti-humanism of wars and warmongers.

On the racist violence and the injustices of the criminal justice system:

*Oh-my, oh-my God,  
Out here mama they got us livin' genocide  
(Oh My God)*

On one of the meanings of voice and musical expression:

*I speak low but I'm like a lion roaring  
Baritone like a Robeson recordin'  
I'm givin' thanks for bein' human every morning...  
(Stay Human)*

On the current times:

*We livin' in a mean time and an aggressive time  
A painful time, a time where cynicism rots the vine...  
(Rock the Nation)*

Spearhead's musical and poetic talents and social message have gotten them a lot of attention from tens of thousands of fans around the country. But that's not all who are interested. Recently government agents harassed a relative of one of the band members, trying to discern the level of the threat to Bush's war drive Spearhead posed. This particular incident, along with other attacks on the rights of poets, musicians, artists and actors to speak out against an illegal and unnecessary war has many Americans questioning the state of democracy – a major irony, given the Bush administration's claim to be fighting in Iraq for democracy and freedom.

Franti's latest album, an acoustic recording, *Songs from the Porch*, can be purchased, along with the other recordings, on the Michael Franti and Spearhead website ([www.spearheadvibrations.com](http://www.spearheadvibrations.com)). Franti has also been featured on various albums and collections of songs, including *Gascd* (2002 Ram Recordings). All of these beautiful recordings are a must buy. (Editor's Note: An interview with Michael Franti will appear in the next issue of PA.) ■

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Roberta Jones is a contributor to PA.

# See No Evil?

By Ken Knies

The Bush administration has declared war on evil. Osama Bin Laden, Al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, North Korea, Iran and Iraq: all are merely agents of that ultimate demonic power against which we are forever readying our weapons. Bush has been quite explicit about this. In his first State of the Union address, we learned that evil had become a formidable world-historical force. No longer was the United States pestered by the mischievous criminality of "rogue states." Things had become far more grave. The new millennium had spawned a devilish alliance intent upon destroying everything good, God-fearing and American. A decade after the collapse of the USSR (Reagan's "Evil Empire"), evil was back on the agenda as America's enemy number one.

In the wake of 9/11, this focus on evil excused the government from the difficult work of historical explanation. That jetliners plowed into the two tallest symbols of international finance, vaporizing, burning and crushing thousands inside was not an historical event whose meaning could be deciphered through a reasonable appraisal of the past. No one was to question the motives of the hijackers, nor the geo-political context, nor the long saga of alliance and betrayal underlying the atrocities. No one was to question because the answer was easy: these "folks" were evil. The appeal to malevolence acted like a roadblock against critical thought. One does not stare evil in the face in order to understand it. One merely hopes to defeat it, and, if possible, survive.

*The Exorcist* (1973), a brilliant cinematic depiction of evil, illustrates this idea quite well. Father Merrin, an experienced exorcist, warns his pupil, Father Karras, that he must not allow himself to listen to the words of the demon that has possessed a young girl. He explains that it "only speaks in order to deceive." Father Merrin's point is that evil does not speak a language that aims at communicating something meaningful. And if one makes the mistake of approaching evil with the hope



Credit: Department of Defense

that it can tell us something significant, he is likely to fall under its spell. Earlier in the film, Merrin teaches his protégé a similar lesson. Karras, who has studied in the latest doctrines of psychology and psychoanalysis, begins to analyze the nature of the evil spirit, explaining to Merrin that it exhibits "three distinct personalities." Father Merrin interrupts his student, quickly correcting him: "there is only one." Again, the effort to analyze evil, far from bringing us to a deeper understanding of its nature or character, seems to betray a misunderstanding of its very evilness, which, by definition, is simple, pure and unadulterated.

So it was that the attempt to make sense of the attacks was equated with an effort to justify them. Evil has no explanation. Its appearance teaches us nothing about the circumstances in which it rears its ugly head. It does not result from some worldly cause that brings it about, nor does it emerge as the outgrowth of events that precede it. Instead, evil enters the world as inexplicable excess, something that rises from the depths, or, as the case may be, swoops down out of the sky. To ask about the "why" of the attacks was to suppose that they, in a broad sense, "deserved" to happen, that they were perfectly reasonable within the logical unfolding of an unreasonable his-

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Ken Knies is a contributing editor of PA.



Credit: Department of Justice

The Bush administration uses the label “evil” to describe who it says are America’s enemies. Is there a Marxist perspective on identifying the “evil” enemies of the working class?

tory. To try to make sense of what had happened, to let the events speak to us in the language of history, would be like listening to a demon that we were trying to exorcise. Why ask about the difference between Osama Bin Laden and Yasser Arafat, or about the histories specific to Iraq, Iran and North Korea? There may be three prongs to the “Axis of Evil,” but, as Father Merrim reminds us, there is only one enemy, and we should not be seduced by our desire to understand it. So Bush and the corporate media didn’t bother the American people with unnecessary attempts at analysis. To bless these events with historical intelligibility would be to deny their status as evil-incarnate, and to deny the presence of evil once it has become manifest is already to fall under its sway. Thus, intelligence quickly became equated with sacrilege, which made Bush something of a high priest.

Sensing that the evil mongering of pro-war forces was designed as an ideological ploy to disarm historical understanding, commentators on the Left struggled to encourage a spirit of rationality. Critical thinking set about demonstrating that it was in the face of history, not evil, that we experienced terror. The attack of September 11th was a mere event, a horrific one to be sure, but no different in its essence than any other occurrence. We could understand its significance by asking about the world in which it took place, and could form sound judgments on the basis of emerging evidence. Likewise, critics trenchantly insisted that Bush’s war was no holy crusade against some underworldly enemy. It too drew its motivation from material interests, and represented a

conflict between mundane, rather than supernatural, powers. In an increasingly totalitarian environment, the task of the critic was to construe the 9/11 attacks, and the subsequent mobilization for war, as things that one was permitted to question, interrogate and understand.

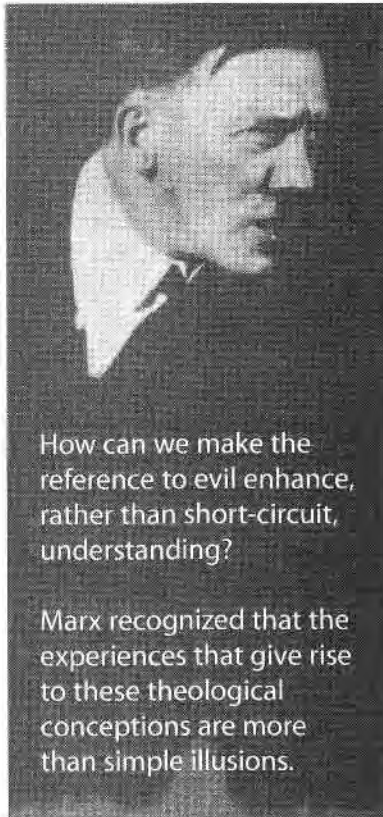
There is little question that anti-war intellectuals were correct in adopting this position. In doing so, they prepared the groundwork for a reasoned investigation into the meaning and context of events that people were right to characterize as “shocking,” no matter how easily retrospection determined them as having been secretly prepared. Undoing Bush’s appeal to evil set the stage for an anti-war movement ready to call the government to account for undertaking a dangerous, costly war waged in the interests of a handful of businessmen and government officials. Combating the effort to sanctify Bush’s war-without-end, the left encouraged people to see that it was no holy thing to which one should sacrifice one’s job, civil liberties and even life.

But was all this talk of evil really just a lot of hot air, a way of diverting attention away from the “real” forces involved in the situation? Did those who identified with Bush’s characterization of Osama Bin Laden as evil fall prey to a “misunderstanding” that critical reflection should aim to disabuse? In short, is “evil” a meaningless, empty concept? Or, on the other hand, does the current political environment, shot through with ideological appeals to evil, necessitate a genuine engagement with the problem of evil, one that goes beyond its offhand dismissal as an unscientific, theological mystification? Does

our stance on evil, or the manner in which we define it, bear upon the reasons we oppose Bush's war? Can the Left simply concur with the liberal intelligentsia's refusal to believe in evil, which stems from a secular rationalism and ends in an anti-war position premised upon pacifism? If not, then how can we articulate a revolutionary, non-theological, conception of evil, and how would such a conception affect our understanding of the present? How can we make the reference to "evil" enhance, rather than short-circuit, understanding?

Before posing these questions more sharply, I want to sound five notes of caution, the first three having to do with the meaning and scope of our inquiry, the second two concerning its relation to Marxist theory. First, the line of thinking I have been advancing argues that contemporary events have forced the question of evil upon us as a question worth asking. So the immediate aim here is not to answer the question "What is evil?" but to let us ask it in a way that does not presume that we already have all the answers. Second, neither is the aim to answer the question "Who is evil?" whether it be Bush, Bin Laden, Sharon, etc., since this question, too, depends upon whether it is legitimate to ask about evil at all. Third, asking our question means more than asking whether it is a good idea to "use the language of evil" by turning it against Bush and his war machine, against imperialism, against exploitation or against capitalism generally. This is certainly an important question, and such a reversal may indeed be a good idea. But we cannot be clear about what the language of evil means without first deciding whether it is empty or full, whether it refers to something evidenced by experience, or rather to a mere ideological myth.

Fourth, we should make an honest effort not to assume that Marxism has already told us everything we need to know about "opiates" such as evil. Or, to put it differently, we should recall that Marx said much more about religious conceptions besides calling them opiates [see box, p. 13]. Marx vigilantly opposed all use of theology that would explain the condition of society by appeal to supernatural beings. But he also recognized that the experiences that give rise to these theological conceptions are more than simple illusions, and represent a genuine encounter with an actually inverted world. So it is well within the realm of Marxist understanding, for instance, to conceive a mundane theory of



How can we make the reference to evil enhance, rather than short-circuit, understanding?

Marx recognized that the experiences that give rise to these theological conceptions are more than simple illusions.

evil while simultaneously rejecting the idea of the Satanic. After all, *The Exorcist* is a poignant treatment of evil, not so much because of its focus on the demonic, but because it depicts everyday scenes in an eerie light that shows us evil as a mundane power that permeates the impoverished neighborhoods of Washington, DC as well as the insipid social lives of its wealthy suburbanites.

Finally, here as in all cases, we should resist the notion that focusing on the meaning of evil or art or love or death somehow "threatens" the validity and priority of dialectical and historical materialism. Asking about the emotional, expressive, moral or poetic aspects of life does not mean denying that life is led by men and women whose material conditions of existence are deter-

mined by the relations and forces of production. If we decide that the decision of Bin Laden to carry out the 9/11 attacks or the decision of Bush to bomb Iraq can appropriately be characterized as evil, this does not disturb an analysis of these events that situates them in their politico-economic and historical context. In fact, it enhances these analyses by telling us just what it is that they place in context.

Neither should we suppose that questions about such topics are politically irrelevant. Historical events often create situations in which our interpretation of these phenomena becomes of great political importance. In the post 9/11 environment, with Bush popularizing his foreign policy through the notion of evil as a world-historical force, I believe that we encounter just such a situation. Indeed, one senses a failure to tackle the issue on the part of liberal intellectuals, who cite Bush's reference to evil as obvious evidence of his stupidity. They make the assumption that evil can be reduced to a force that only appears within a mythological worldview, forgetting that it is not necessary to believe in ghouls, goblins or anything supernatural in order to shudder before evil as it appears in the face of the world.

Having taken these precautions, we are in a position to begin asking about the encounter with evil as a legitimate experience and how Marxist understanding might approach this experience without dismissing it as illusion. The actual work of this questioning entails a concerted intellectual effort that cannot be carried out here. For now, we can only establish some general guidelines and suggest directions for future inquiry. First, we will need to accept certain conditions without

which the concept of mundane evil would be impossible. For instance, we would need to agree that although human beings exist in a natural world governed by a network of causes and effects, we always face the possibility of accounting for our actions by appeal to reasons rather than causes. Think of the absurdity of answering the question "Why did you hit me?" by referencing the laws of thermodynamics or physiology. We would also have to admit that occasionally it makes sense to answer the question "Why did you do that?" simply by saying, "Because it was right." In other words, we would have to agree that the possibility of acting morally means something to human beings.

Once we have agreed to these conditions, then we would have to clarify a working definition of evil as involving the decision to do something, not because it is right, but precisely because it is wrong. Then, in addition to pursuing the traditional questions associated with evil (can one knowingly do evil?), we would have to ask some questions motivated by Marxist knowledge, all the while remembering that asking them does not contradict Marx's insistence that the matter of revolution is not primarily a moral problem. For instance, given that people find themselves in positions where they are expected to maintain exploitative or oppressive social relations, can the notion of evil help us understand why some individuals choose to exacerbate these relations while others simply assume their role in a somewhat passive manner? Given undemocratic and unjust social contexts, it nonetheless remains the case that in our everyday experience we encounter excesses of cruelty. What are we to make of them? Or consider the question of whether evil can come to reside in social structures rather than in individuals, and whether such "structural evil" exempts individuals from responsibility. Do certain social arrangements encourage evildoings? Is the reign of evil synonymous with that era that Marx referred to as "pre-history"? These are only a few of the questions that we can ask along these lines.

W.E.B. Du Bois, after his wholehearted embrace of Marxism-Leninism, Communism and the CPUSA, penned the following words near the conclusion of his 1961 autobiography. These are some of the last words that Du Bois left us. In them we can see how the everyday experience of life under capitalism can lead to an understanding of evil that approaches its subject matter via a route other than theology.

Hell lies about us in our age: blithely we push into its stench and flame. Suffer us not, Eternal Dead, to stew in this Evil—the Evil of South Africa, the Evil of Mississippi; the Evil of Evils which is what we hope to hold in Asia and Africa... For this is a beautiful world; this is a beautiful America, which the founding fathers dreamed until their sons drowned it in the blood of slavery and devoured it in greed.

Perhaps he was being more than metaphorical. ■

## L I S T E N

to the words that directly precede Marx's famous slogan

"Man makes religion, religion does not make man... Man is the world of man, state and society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium... its enthusiasm, its moral sanction... It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion. Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."

from *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1844



# HOLLYWOOD RED



## The Life of Abraham POLONSKY

By Michael Shepler

I was introduced to Abraham Polonsky through two films on late-night television that aired around 1957. The films were *Body and Soul* and *Force of Evil*. Both starred John Garfield at the peak of his powers, both were written by Polonsky, and he directed the second, darker film as well. Abraham Polonsky was a filmmaker and novelist whose work consistently critiqued the violence and corruption of capitalism.

Made soon after World War II by the independent Enterprise Studios, the films hearkened back to the Depression. Both are rich in imagery and language. *Body and Soul* follows the career of middleweight boxer Charlie Davis. Attempting to slug his way out of the slums, he finds himself turned into a money machine by the gamblers controlling the fight game.

*Force of Evil* charts the course of mob lawyer Joe Morse as he tries to force his older brother into the corporation controlling the numbers racket. Polonsky's Marxist critique was organic to the film's structure, making this the most truly radical film to come out of Hollywood. The haunting final sequence, shot at dawn, shows Joe descending an endless staircase to find his brother's body on the rocks below the span of

the George Washington Bridge.

As a middle-class teenager growing up in the post-war boom years, I had no idea who had made these amazing films and no clear picture of the Great Depression. All I saw was Garfield. After that, I looked for anything he appeared in, and while some of the other films were good, it was the two by Polonsky that made the deepest impression. Later, I would read William Pechter's interview with Polonsky in *Film Quarterly* and begin to know the man behind the movies. Later still, I would meet him and have the privilege of becoming his friend.

Polonsky was born in New York City in 1910. He attended the City College of New York (CCNY) and later taught literature there until the Second World War. He also worked his way through Columbia

University law school. Briefly employed with a law firm, he found the work unexciting and was happy to meet Molly Goldberg, the author and star of the long-running radio show, *The Goldbergs*. She was hoping to find someone who could help her with a story that involved legal matters. Goldberg was so impressed with the young attorney that in 1937 she asked him to accompany her to Hollywood to help her write a film for the popular boy-singer, Bobby Breen. Some of Polonsky's CCNY friends were there working in the film industry and involved in the causes of the day – helping to build the union movement, anti-fascism and support for Republican Spain.

On his return to the East Coast, he and his wife Sylvia moved to upstate New York. At this time he was writing for a number of radio shows and commuting to New York City to teach at CCNY. He became involved in efforts to organize autoworkers at a GM plant near his home in Briarcliff, and in 1939 he began working as educational director of the CIO in upstate New York.

It was during this period that he wrote his first novel, *The Discoverers*.

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Michael Shepler is a poet living in California.

Peopled with a disparate cast of radicals, frustrated intellectuals and bohemians, the book was announced for publication by Modern Age, but the publisher went out of business. Considered by many who've read it to be his best book, it remains unpublished.

Two books followed, *The Goose Is Cooked*, published in 1942 by Simon and Schuster, and *The Enemy Sea*, an adventure story, originally serialized in *Colliers Magazine* and published in hardback by Little Brown. Polonsky had briefly gone to sea after college and brought that experience to the novel, which he dedicated to the National Maritime Union. *Enemy Sea* caught the attention of Paramount Pictures, and they offered Polonsky a screenwriting contract.

By this time America was in the war. Turned down for active service because of poor eyesight, he managed to get into the OSS which, at the time, welcomed radicals into its ranks. Prior to going overseas, he signed a contract with Paramount that guaranteed him a job on his return.

Polonsky's first assignment was in London where he was put to work interrogating high level German officers who'd been taken prisoner (he chatted with Rudolf Hess about the future of computers!) and working

in what was called Black Radio, broadcasting false information into Germany. Later he was part of the Normandy invasion and spent the concluding year of the war with French partisans. He left the OSS (soon to be transformed into the CIA) when he was asked to take part in an operation designed to prop up the corrupt regime and derail the coming revolution in China. He moved his family (there were now three children) to Hollywood and went to work at Paramount.

He got an official screen credit as co-author on *Golden Earrings*. Polonsky's draft was a depiction of Hungarian Jews as Holocaust victims, but by the time it reached the screen it was transformed into a fanciful tale involving a British Intelligence operator and his love affair with beautiful gypsy. Polonsky claimed that despite the credit, not one word he'd written made it to the screen.

He was happier writing for the radio program, *Reunion USA*, sponsored by Hollywood Writer's Mobilization and broadcast over ABC in Los Angeles throughout 1945.

One of his scripts, *The Case of David Smith* dealt with an officer who had fought with native partisans in the South Pacific and had suffered a complete mental breakdown

on his return from the war. During the course of his analysis, his doctor realizes Smith's breakdown was not related to combat but to the betrayal that followed. Smith had told the partisans that winning the war would also bring an end to colonialist oppression. Seeing his promise broken with reinstatement of the colonialist regime had been the true cause of Smith's breakdown.

Unhappy at Paramount, Polonsky had a visit from an East-Coast friend, Arnold Manoff. Manoff, who had been working on a script about middleweight champ Barney Ross for John Garfield at Enterprise Studios, had just learned that Ross had been arrested on narcotics charges (he'd become addicted as a result of painful war wounds). Narcotics addiction was still a movie taboo and Manoff found himself out of a job. He suggested that he and Polonsky walk over to Enterprise and talk to Garfield. Polonsky composed the story of *Body and Soul* on the two-block walk from Paramount to Enterprise, and that afternoon he found himself on loan from his studio to write the script.

*Body and Soul* turned out to be the only hit Enterprise ever had. Both a financial and critical success, it earned Garfield a Best Actor nomination and

Aside from the Hollywood Ten, 320 filmmakers, including Abraham Polonsky were blacklisted for their political opinions.



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Polonsky's gift was his passion. He may have preferred to be remembered as a novelist, but it is the stirring cinematic images that flash forever through our dreams.

cleared the way for Polonsky's complete artistic control on *Force of Evil*. Unfortunately, the studio took enormous losses on what was to be their blockbuster, *Arch of Triumph*, forcing them to sell distributing rights to MGM. Because of their losses, MGM released Polonsky's film with little publicity, and it was years before it would be recognized for the great work that it is.

Polonsky then wrote a screenplay for Fox based on Jerome Weidman's *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*. The 1937 novel about the garment industry was riddled with anti-union and anti-Semitic passages. Changing the protagonist from Harry to Harriet and adding a major character, a Jewish tailor, to serve as conscience and narrator, Polonsky was able to deliver a progressive film with something to say about equal rights for women. Polonsky then moved his family to France and worked on a new novel, *The World Above*. He also hoped to write and direct a film version of Thomas Mann's parable about the rise of fascism, *Mario and the Magician*.

There were growing rumors of a second round of HUAC hearings. Stars like John Garfield felt their careers threatened and saw offers vanish. Yet Darryl Zanuck had been pleased with Polonsky's work on *Wholesale* and offered him an opportunity to write and direct for Fox. Fully expecting a subpoena and welcoming an opportunity to stand up to HUAC, Polonsky accepted and returned to Hollywood. Called to testify in April 1951, he refused to cooperate and was blacklisted. During the course of his testimony Congressman Velde demanded the names of Polonsky's associates in the OSS. At that point, an unidentified man (presumably CIA) appeared at Velde's side and after a brief whis-

pered conversation, the line of questioning was dropped. The thwarted interrogator then accused Polonsky of being "the most dangerous man in America." "Only to yourself," his wife retorted on his return home.

*The World Above* was published to generally good reviews. The novel's protagonist, a scientist/psychologist who, after dedicating his life to pure science and avoiding social engagement, concludes that the injustices of capitalist society represent a major contributor to mental illness, and that the sickness of the society must be eradicated. Brought before a committee that mirrored HUAC and asked to recant, the scientist refuses.

His next novel, *A Season of Fear*, published in 1956 by Cameron and Associates, portrayed the witch-hunt through the eyes of an engineer for the Department of Water and Power in Southern California. This neglected work, a classic in the tradition of Raymond Chandler and Horace McCoy, brilliantly captured the terror of the McCarthy era.

By then Polonsky had moved his family back to New York where, writing under the disguise of various "fronts" and in collaboration with fellow blacklistees Walter Bernstein and Arnold Manoff, he wrote for the hit television series *You Are There*. From 1953 to 1955, when the show moved to the West Coast, he wrote scripts championing free thought and speech, grassroots democracy and justifiable revolution. He also worked uncredited on a number of films, the most famous being *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), one of the last and best of the classic film noirs, starring Harry Belafonte.

As the 1960s drew to a close, Polonsky made his way back into movies under his own name. First, he wrote the screenplay for *Madigan* (1968) and then scripted and direct-

ed *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* (1969), a Western with things to say about the treatment of American Indians and, obliquely, anti-war and youth movements. He completed one more film, *Romance of a Horsethief* (1970), before a heart attack ended his directorial career. The film was a sunny parable involving Jews, Cossacks and the Russo-Japanese war, ending happily with boy and girl escaping to the new world.

Continuing to work as a highly paid script doctor, he began teaching again at the University of Southern California. He was a frequent lecturer on panels about the blacklist. Both Garfield films, now recognized as classics, were screened and introduced by Polonsky at film festivals all over the world. Critical editions of his scripts were published.

He published one more novel, *Zenia's Way* (1980), and directed a production of his play *Piece de Resistance* in Los Angeles in 1981. He was working on another novel at the time of his death in 1999. *The World Above* was reissued in 1999 by the University of Illinois Press as part of its "Radical Novel Revisited" series. One would hope for a second printing of *A Season of Fear* and that perhaps *The Discoverers* might finally be made available to readers.

Polonsky's gift was his passion. He may have preferred to be remembered as a novelist, and his books are vivid and unforgettable, yet it is the always restless, ever stirring cinematic images that flash forever through our waking and sleeping dreams: Charley Davis coming back in the final round like Blake's Tyger, hitting out at the system that betrayed him; Joe Morse, having lost everything, going "down and down and down...to the bottom of the world" to find his brother and regeneration. ■





# WRITING CLASS

## An Interview with Russell Banks



*Editor's Note:* Russell Banks is the widely acclaimed author of over a dozen novels and collections of short stories, including *Affliction*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Continental Drift*, *Rule of the Bone*, and *Success Stories*. He helped organize a chapter of Students for a Democratic Society at the University of North Carolina in the 1960s. He recently retired from teaching creative writing at Princeton University. Two of his novels, *Affliction* and *The Sweet Hereafter*, have been made into acclaimed films. A third, *Cloudsplitter*, is in the works with HBO. Banks was interviewed by Joel Wendland.

*PA: How did you get into writing?*

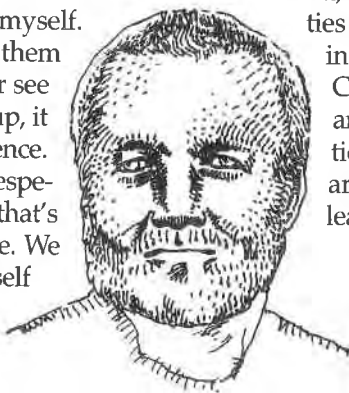
**RB:** I grew up in New Hampshire and eastern Massachusetts in a working-class family and not consciously setting out to be a writer until my early 20's. At first I thought I wanted to be a visual artist, a painter, since that was the only talent I had that seemed observable. But somewhere along the line in my late teens and early twenties I started reading literature and fiction and before long, by the time I was 22 or so, I had begun to think of myself as a writer.

*PA: I read that you returned from a trip to Cuba. I'm wondering if you'd talk a little bit about that, why you were there, what you were doing.*

**RB:** I went with William Kennedy at the invitation of the Havana Book Fair. The occasion was that both Bill and I had allowed the Cubans to publish a novel of ours: *Roscoe*, his most recent novel, and *Affliction* by myself. I was eager and happy, and so was he, to have them do that partly because, even though we'll never see a penny of it, at least as long as the embargo is up, it makes the book available to a very large audience. What better way to get to know another culture, especially one that may have been demonized? So that's what took us there. And we had a fabulous time. We were there for eight days, and the book fair itself was just an extraordinary event. We were the only US authors. It was a fabulous event.

*PA: Do you think it means that there's more openness between Cuba and the United States?*

**RB:** Well, there's no problem at the Cuban end. I mean they are eager for any kind of contact, cultural or economic, that's available to them. The difficulty is keeping it open and opening it up further on this end. It's possible for writers, artists and intellectuals to go back and forth down there, but it's difficult. You have to get a license from the Treasury Department. You have to go through an organization; usually you have to be representing an organization. Also, now, since 9/11 particularly, but in the most recent months especially, the INS' security has made it increasingly more difficult for Cuban intellectuals, writers, artists and so forth to get visas. In fact, I think it's in some ways closing and becoming increasingly difficult. We were hoping to bring a few Cuban filmmakers to the Lake Placid Film Forum, which I'm involved with. The difficulties are at the US end more than it has been in the past, despite the fact that the Cubans are really very eager for contact and despite the increase in communication between writers, intellectuals and artists in the United States and their colleagues in Cuba.



*Russell Banks*

"I have a problem with representations of working people as a sentimentalization, a softening and sweetening of their lives, or as strictly victims."

PA: You mention that they're re-publishing *Affliction*. That book was made into a pretty successful, at least critically, film.

RB: Actually made some money, too [laughs].

PA: Two of your books have been made into films. How close were you to the filmmaking process? And were you pleased with the result?

RB: I was very pleased with the result in both cases, even though the films were quite different. *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Affliction* are very different, but they reflect the differences of the directors. Paul Schrader did *Affliction*, and Atom Egoyan did *The Sweet Hereafter*. But I thought they captured brilliantly the basic themes, the atmosphere, mood of the novels, and were, in their own right and on their own terms, really good and interesting movies regardless of whatever sources they had. I felt great about it, and I was very involved as a consultant from the beginning in both cases. So I got drawn into it, and now I am very involved in the making of several other adaptations from my books and screenwriting and working with HBO to produce *Cloudsplitter*. I'm up to my knees at least and probably up to my hips and the water may be rising.

We're making *Cloudsplitter* with HBO. Scorsese is producing it, and Raoul Peck, the Haitian French director, whose last film was *Lumumba*, is directing.

PA: Speaking of *Cloudsplitter*, there are a couple of fascinating things that stand out for me. It addresses the pervasiveness of violence, the relationship between an apparently loving father and son where violence determines so much of how their relationship works. And that seems to be a theme that you focus on a lot.

RB: Well the relationship between fathers and sons has always fascinated me. I've been both [laughs], a father and a son, for all my life. So they're central identities. They're ancient archetypes really. And in my own personal life it's been a central drama as well. My father was a very important figure to me – both threatening and someone who I felt close to. I know it grows out of my relation to my own father. And then my own reflective

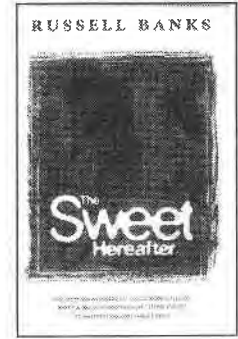
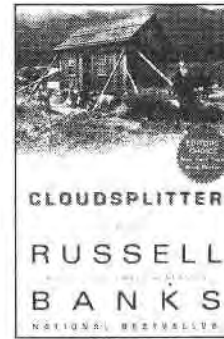
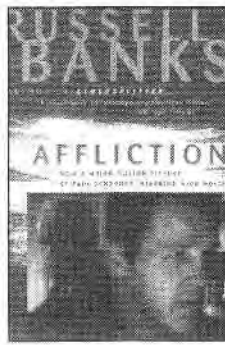
years thinking about myself as a father as well. I have four daughters. I have to work hard to avoid that theme.

It's not just Freudian or Greek, it's Biblical as well. That too is personal. My father was a violent man and an alcoholic, and the book grows out of that as well. As someone once said, violence is as American as apple pie. It pervades our society in so many ways – relations between men and women, parents and children and neighbors. If you are writing about the world that surrounds you, you're going to end up writing about violence.

PA: Another violent character is Wade Whitehouse in *Affliction*. I like him, and I despise him. I want him to succeed, but I know that he seems like a bad person. I don't want to be his friend, but I want him to uncover those secrets he's encountering.

RB: He's struggling. I think he is a sympathetic character and most people [sympathize with him] when they read it. In fact, most women do. When the book was first published, I didn't expect it to be able to touch women very much, but, in fact, my best readers have been women. Whenever I do a book signing or a tour more often than not, women come up with that book. They want me to sign and say they are gonna give it to their brother, or father or son. They feel it's a sympathetic portrait of a man who's struggling to be good but can't, because he is carrying with him a burden that's passed down from generations of males and the role seems inescapable to him in a way. And yet he is struggling to be a decent and





good man. I think Wade is that kind of man. For that reason, we sympathize with him. And yet he fails. He's doomed. I mean he's not a conscious man. He isn't consciously aware of the forces that are beating down on him; they're like Greek gods standing behind the clouds watching him.

PA: Related to that is the question of a white working-class character in similar kinds of positions as Wade. These characters have ideas about how they are going to get ahead, how they are going to succeed. I'm thinking of a particular story in your collection called *Success Stories*, called "Adultery." There is a young man who imagines a relationship between his sexuality, his celibacy, his white racial identity, his working-class status and his ability to get ahead. Those are some themes that seem to be on the edges of just about everything you work on.

RB: The old American dream as it's perceived by, not an immigrant class, but by the old white Anglo-Saxon working stiff. And then the feeling of frustration and disappointment and inadequacy finally in the face of it. It's a recurring theme in that story and in *Success Stories*. The title story of *Success Stories* is about that dream, too. The whole of *Continental Drift* really is about that, at least the story of the protagonist Bob Du Bois is about that American dream, and attempting, and failing, to achieve it.

It's a bitter theme for me. One that I lived with growing up and saw in my father's life and the lives of my uncles and cousins and so many of the men whose lives I knew intimately. So it was irresistible to try to dramatize it, because I feel a heart-breaking sympathy for those men and their dreams and their frustrations.

PA: And perhaps some of the reasons for the kinds of violence...

RB: Oh yeah, the frustration and disappointment and feelings of inadequacy often do end up getting expressed in violence. Certainly in *Cloudsplitter*, John Brown's struggle is an example. It was boom time, he looked around and everybody else was making money on speculation real estate, and trading on the market, and somehow he couldn't seem to do it [laughs].

PA: You've expressed in other interviews a criticism of representations of working-class life in popular culture.

RB: I have a problem with representations of working people as either sentimentalization, softening and sweetening of their lives, or as strictly victims, as people whose lives are not as complex or as subtle or as rich as the upper-middle class or the more empowered people of the United States. I tend to be a little critical of that point of view, whether it is film or TV or advertising, or fiction.

PA: I was thinking specifically of TV, the representation of working people as not very bright...

RB: Yeah, boobs, doofuses, *Beverly Hillbillies*, that sort of thing. Yeah, it's depressing in a number of ways. First of all, it's not realistic. It's a pipe dream of what working people are really like. And secondly it's condescending, dismissive and, therefore, exploitative.

PA: What are some of the struggles and problems young or new writers face when they are trying to enter this big vast world of publishing?

RB: It is a struggle, too. I've known it firsthand for

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"I feel a heart-breaking sympathy for the men of my family and their dreams and their frustrations."

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“It’s very important for young writers to remember that the only thing you can control is your work... You can’t control your career.”

many years in my own life. There are two things that I find young writers struggling with as they pass through their apprenticeship into a full-blown committed and irreversible life as a writer. The first thing is the temptation to confuse your career with your work. I think it is very important for a young writer to keep the two completely separate. And to remember the only thing you can control is your work and that you can’t control your career. You should let it go on its own and concentrate on your work. When they get confused with one another, you tend to try to control the work and control the career, and pretty soon the career starts shaping the work, and that’s always detrimental to the work.

The other thing that’s hardest for a young writer is when they reach a certain point, beyond the apprenticeship years, and you know you’re competent – you may not be an earth-shaking, world-class genius, you may not be a Faulkner or a Hemingway yet – but you know you’re writing competently, and you’re writing well, and you’re a mature human being, and you can read what’s published daily and what’s praised weekly in the *Times*, and you say, “You know, I’m as good as that, why can’t my work find its audience?” That’s frustrating and can be a demoralizing period and can often last for a decade or more. For a young writer, it can happen from the late 20s to late 30s or so. Getting through that period is to me the greatest test for any young writer. Enduring the rejection and the inability to find an audience that goes on after you’ve reached a level of obvious and recognizable competence. That’s very hard and lonely. You aren’t any longer in college. You aren’t in graduate school. You’re out here trying to live a life as a writer now, and nobody else seems to want to help you. That can be very, very lonely. I think more writers of talent and gift quit during that period than any other period.

*PA: Who do you think are new writers saying something fresh and saying something competently and need more of an audience?*

*RB: Well, you know, it’s funny... I’ll be 63 years old this month. When Tennessee Williams was around my age,*



**Left:** Filmmaker Martin Scorsese is slated to produce the HBO version of *Cloudsplitter*. **Right:** Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck.

he was asked who the really good young playwrights were out there, he said, “Honey, I’m too old to cover the waterfront.” [laughs] Sort of like that, I stopped teaching some years ago, so I’m somewhat disengaged from writers of a really young age, and I don’t have a lot of young kids telling me who they’re reading so much as I used to. But I’ve read a couple of young writers that I think are coming up fast and are doing awfully good work lately. One is a kid named Whitney Terrell who lives out in St. Louis, Kansas. He’s a really terrific and a very bold and brave writer. Another young guy named Stona Fitch up in Massachusetts. Each has just published a book or two, well just one in the case of Whitney. And there are a whole bunch of writers in their late ‘30s or early ‘40s. Who else? There’s a big slew of them out there. Cristina Garcia and Stewart O’Nan: they are doing very interesting work. There seems to be a wave of very strong fiction writers, novelists and storywriters who are ambitious. ■



# Plekhanov and the Origins of Marxist Cultural Criticism

By Thomas Riggins

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party. This was the famous Congress where the split between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks took place. Lenin's ideas, of course, won out at this Congress, and he was supported by a man who was considered the "Father of Russian Marxism" and the founder of the first Russian Marxist group, The Liberation of Labor (1883). This was Georgii Valentinovich Plekhanov (1856-1918).

Although Plekhanov later switched to the Mensheviks, Lenin still found him to be an ally on many issues – at least until 1914 when, like so many others, he ended up supporting the war. The passionate politics of those years now adorn the pages of history books and live on in the unending debates and fulminations of the ultra-left "Marxist" sects, which dot the university campuses of Western Europe and the United States.

We have little interest in Plekhanov as a political leader today,

but his theoretical grasp of Marxism as a philosophy of liberation is practically unequalled. Along with Marx, Engels and Lenin, Plekhanov stands as one of the greatest teachers of Marxist theory produced by the working-class movement. The very term often used to characterize Marxism as a philosophy – *Dialectical Materialism* – was coined by Plekhanov. And Lenin said of his works: "You cannot hope to become a real, intelligent Communist without making a study – and I mean study – of all of Plekhanov's philosophical writings because nothing better has been written on Marxism anywhere in the world."

Almost a century later this judgment can still stand. Or can it? Readers should write to *PA* if they wish to nominate other works they think should be right up there with the "classics." Plekhanov's works stand, along with the great classics of Marx and Engels, as some of the clearest, most popular and easiest to read introductions to the philosophy of human liberation.

Some of Plekhanov's most important and accessible works are

*Essays in the History of Materialism, The Monist View of History, Fundamental Problems of Marxism, The Materialist Conception of History, Art and Social Life* and the essays "The Role of the Individual in History" and "For the Sixtieth Anniversary of Hegel's Death." (The Hegel article is short and an excellent introduction.)

Here are a few of Plekhanov's formulations of Marxism that have become well known even if their origin in his works is not. He wrote, "the appearance of Marx's materialist philosophy was a genuine revolution, the greatest revolution known in the history of human thought." This shows great party spirit, but Darwinists might want to at least claim equal status.

Marxism is a unified worldview. Can we graft other notions onto it? Can we have "Christian Marxism" or "Existential Marxism" and so forth? Plekhanov thinks not. He maintained that "all aspects of the Marxist world view are linked together in the closest way...and therefore one cannot arbitrarily eliminate one of them and replace it with a set of ideas equally arbitrarily drawn from a completely different world view."

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Thomas Riggins is book review editor of *PA*.



Plekhanov also characterized Marxist dialectics as the “algebra of revolution” and held that “dialectical materialism is a philosophy of action.” This became the basis of the notion of “the unity of theory and practice” in later Marxist thought. “After all,” Plekhanov wrote, “without revolutionary theory there is no revolutionary movement in the true sense of the word.... An idea that is revolutionary in its internal content is a kind of dynamite for which no other explosive in the world may be substituted.”

Among the many contributions made to Marxist theory by Plekhanov was his application of Marxism to a theory of art. Neither Marx nor Engels ever devised a theory of art. Nevertheless, it is possible to deduce an art theory from the scattered references to art and comments about art and society found through their works. Plekhanov was one of the first to come up with a Marxist theory of the origin and function of art. Three of his works are especially important in this regard: *Fundamental Problems of Marxism, Art and Social Life* and his essay “The Role of the Individual in History.”

Plekhanov sees nothing individualistic in the origin of art. Art arises from the historical development of a people or nation. In class-based societies no school or trend of art can become popular or successful without representing the interests of some class or stratum of society.

## The term ‘Dialectical Materialism’

Plekhanov writes:

The depth of any given trend in literature or art is determined by its importance for the class or stratum whose tastes it expresses, and by the social role of this class or stratum.... in the final analysis everything depends upon the course of social development and the relations of social forces.

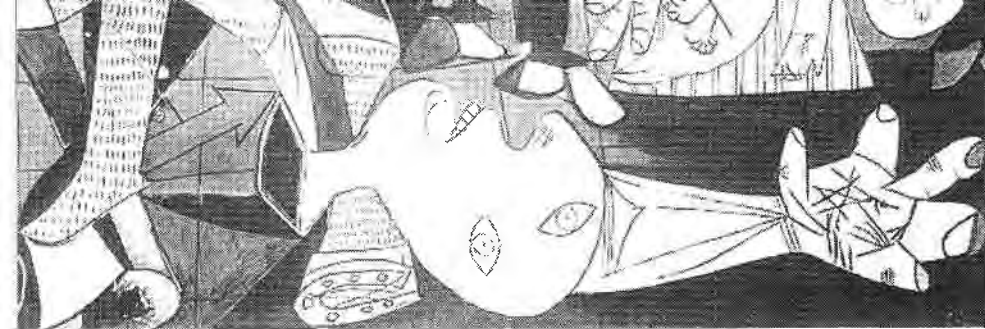
It is Plekhanov’s view that art is part of the superstructure of society that is reared upon the social base, namely the mode of production. The production mode gives rise to production relations which in capitalism leads to two great classes, the owners and workers, and the history of the society is propelled along by the struggle between them. This struggle, in turn, gives rise to social antagonisms, contradictions, alienation and a host of vexing and unsettling events that disrupt the smooth functioning of the social whole – so desirable to the capitalists. The function of art is to address these problems and present “solutions” – that is, to emotionally affect people to struggle or accept-

ance of reality, depending on which class the art is representative of.

Another important aspect of Plekhanov’s philosophy of art is his view that since history and society create the problems that art attempts to resolve, art is consequently itself a social phenomenon that can be scientifically studied. In this view, artists should not be told what to create and how to create but be left to their own devices to reflect the reality they confront.

This view was in conflict with the historical practice of some socialist states in which independent or individualistic artistic endeavors were discouraged and artists were expected to support the policies and viewpoints of the political leadership. Nothing in the works of Marx and Engels gives warrant for such practices in relation to artistic creation.

In *Art and Social Life* Plekhanov does not take sides between the two opposite views on the nature of art – the art for art’s sake view and the “utilitarian” view – i.e., the view that art must serve some socially useful purpose. Instead, Plekhanov describes



**check out  
your**

## was coined by Plekhanov.

the type of social environment, historically produced, which gives rise to one or the other view. Plekhanov has no interest in telling artists what they should do – he is only interested in delineating the types of societies in which these two outlooks occur and predominate. This is what Plekhanov concludes:

The tendency of artists and of those who have a lively interest in art, toward art for art's sake, arises when they are in hopeless disaccord with the social environment in which they live.

The so-called utilitarian view of art, that is to say, the inclination to attribute works of art the significance of judgment on the phenomena of life, and its constant accompaniment of glad readiness to participate in social struggles, arises and becomes stronger wherever a mutual sympathy exists between the individuals more or less actively interested in artistic creation and some considerable part of society.

The proper role of the socialist state, I suggest, on the Plekhanov

model, is to allow the maximum possible artistic freedom, seeing the products of artistic creation as reflections of the true feelings and beliefs of various segments of society. In this sense, art works can be seen as "alienation detectors," on the one hand, or "support detectors" on the other. To censor artistic creation and prevent its expression simply covers over, without solving, the problems in social reality that art works bring to light.

In a socialist state this creates needless alienation between the political and cultural needs of the people and can lead to the isolation and estrangement of the political leadership from its roots in the masses. One of the advantages of the concept of "Bill of Rights Socialism" is that it provides the foundations to guarantee the artistic integrity and freedom of expression for cultural workers in any future socialist reorganization of society.

Plekhanov's contribution to the establishment of a Marxist aesthetic is only one of the many reasons the reading and continuing study of his works is still relevant and important. ■

### 1. To Marxists, culture broadly defined is part of:

- (a) the material/economic base of society
- (b) the social/cultural superstructure interacting with the material/economic base
- (c) the social/cultural superstructure
- (d) a business like any other

### 2. In the Soviet Union and other socialist countries Marxists sought to encourage art and culture based on principles known as

- (a) modernism
- (b) social realism
- (c) magical realism
- (d) postmodernism

### 3. In the 1930s, Communists and others on the left in the United States established a cultural journal called

- (a) *The New Republic*
- (b) *The New Criterion*
- (c) *The New York Review of Books*
- (d) *The New Masses*

### 4. Prominent figures associated with great achievements in 20th century culture have been members of and/or closely associated with Communist parties. Which one of these figures was not part of the Communist movement?

- (a) Austrian social theorist Friedrich von Hayek
- (b) Spanish abstract artist Pablo Picasso
- (c) German playwright Bertolt Brecht
- (d) American actor-singer-ethnomusicologist Paul Robeson

### 5. For Marxists and Communists, the ideal of a "peoples' democratic culture" means:

- (a) culture that reflects the political positions of Communists
- (b) culture that working people create, participate in, and have free access to
- (c) culture where the value of work is determined by sales and ratings
- (d) culture that is radical and "far out."

See answers on page 25



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By Political Affairs Editorial Board

Herbert Aptheker died on March 17 at the age of 87. He was editor of *Political Affairs* for 11 years, from 1952 to 1963, throughout the McCarthyite years. He also served as associate editor of *Masses & Mainstream* from its beginning in 1948 to 1952. During those years, he produced numerous books on American history, as well as on vital issues of the day, ranging from the war in Korea to the war in Vietnam. For many years Aptheker headed the American Institute for Marxist Studies. Aptheker was an exemplary Marxist intellectual, combining scrupulous scholarship with unflinching class partisanship.

Aptheker fought every manifestation of McCarthyism, including appearing at trials of Communists where he often confounded his prosecutors with his knowledge and learning, which most of them sorely lacked. He not only defended Communism in his writing, he also ran for office on the CP ticket. W.E.B. Du Bois chose him as his literary executor, which meant the editing of Du Bois' voluminous correspondence, as well as his numerous books and articles spread over many decades, amounting to some 50 volumes all told.

Aptheker was born in Brooklyn on July 31, 1915. His father was a manufacturer in the garment industry. As a young man he became an organizer for the Food

# Herbert APTHEKER

## A Life in the Struggle



*"Those who want to understand how the United States became the nation it is should by all means read Herbert Aptheker's interpretation."*

*— W.E.B. Du Bois*



and Tobacco Workers Union in the late 1930s. And in 1939 the logic of his activity led him to join the Communist Party, a step which thousands of others, similarly motivated, were taking at that time.

Aptheker first aroused academic attention with the publication of his doctoral thesis, which became *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943). Controversy greeted the publication of this book, which attacked the prevailing historical notion that the slaves had passively accepted slavery. From this beginning in 1943 through all the ensuing decades there was hardly an issue concerning life in the USA – and the world – that he did not comment on, chiefly through his column "Ideas in Our Time" for *Political Affairs*.

But he did not confine his writings to a monthly comment. He continued to produce pamphlets and books, which covered a wide variety of political and cultural subjects. Altogether he published some 50 books and pamphlets, which played a significant role in shaping and promoting Marxism. In this he very much resembled the editor of the *British Labour Monthly*, R. Palme Dutt, whom he greatly admired.

As a committed Marxist, Aptheker chose the field of history on which to do battle. He critiqued the then current historical scholarship and prejudices of historians, particularly those who denied that such a thing as history could really objectively and scientifically exist. "The

dominant historical profession of the 1930s through the 1950s," he wrote in a paper delivered at a national history conference held at Minnesota's Moorehead State College in November 1971, "was a closed, intensely conservative, lily-white, anti-Semitic bulwark and reflection of the ruling class." He went on to say:

When in the 1930s a handful of mavericks called attention to the fact that only white people (and almost always white) delivered papers or held office, or conducted key journals or held professorships, we were treated as pariahs.

Spurred by the dramatic collapse of capitalism in 1929 and the rise of the fascist menace in Europe and the US, scholars of conscience felt impelled to re-examine every assumption hitherto made about our own history. So thoroughgoing was this reexamination that it was possible to say in the middle 1930s that the Marxist approach to history had gained the upper hand scholastically speaking. Much of this was due to historians like Aptheker who solved one of the key accusations launched against the Marxist approach – partisanship:

[Marxist historians] have decided, rightly I think, that this is the meaning and purpose of scholarship – that partisanship on the side of the oppressed and exploited is the

way to overcome the apparent dilemma of objectivity. That the degree to which one identifies with the oppressed, to that degree he has identified with the forces of justice, and such identity is the way toward objectivity.

All the more so, as Aptheker saw it, institutions of higher learning have been exclusionary, have been bastions of the status quo and have been permeated by ugly class, religious, and above all, racial prejudices. And they have permitted themselves to become servants of the rich and bulwarks of the military-industrial complex.

In the early 1990s after the collapse of European socialism, Aptheker left the Communist Party. Towards the end of his life, he enjoyed friendly relations with the Communist Party and its leadership. He was a reader of *Political Affairs* and contributed to its fund drives. His rigorous scholarship and fighting spirit serve as an inspiration, and will be missed. ■

## check out your Marxist IQ

Answers to questions  
on page 5:

- 1) b
- 2) b
- 3) d
- 4) a
- 5) b

HOW TO SCORE YOURSELF:  
Each question is worth 20 points.

0-40: You need to go to a re-education camp.

50-60: You are unprepared to withstand

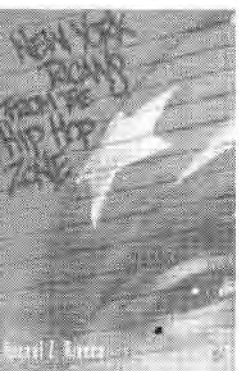
70-80: You qualify for a medal.

90-100: You should be writing articles for *EA*.

— 'You are what you read'



# HIP HOP RENAISSANCE



By Melissa Chadburn

The morning of March 5th, I threw on my big cammy fatigues that I used to wear for bombing\* because of all the hidden pockets.<sup>1</sup> Walking out the door, I grabbed a large papier mâché book, the title reading, "Books Not Bombs," and headed toward Manhattan's Hunter College for an interview with *Good Day New York*. The sky slowly took on an ambrosia haze as the rain beat down. On the corners and streets, people began to converge everywhere. Through the halls, kids in oversized pants swished and hollered, "Yo ma, Good Day New York, 'Books Not Bombs!'" I smiled and looked on as a young African woman declared, fist in air, "It's time for a revolution!" She had not worked so long and hard to go to school just to get her tuition raised!

In her pause, I felt the thumping of a familiar beat and saw a small

crowd collecting around the corner. There it was, the ghetto-blaster and young men in velour "breaking." I couldn't believe it. I felt so nostalgic. (Breaking is a style of dance made popular in the 1980s.) I thought I had gone through a time warp. But then again I had that same feeling about going to war with Iraq. I had that same feeling when a Bush came into the presidency. I got that same feeling when I looked out at my students and saw that same sense of disparity as they were newly required to say the pledge of allegiance.

Listening to people accuse today's generation of being devoid of culture or out of touch with today's politics, I can't help but immediately think of hip hop culture and question how they missed it. Today's political and economic climate is so similar to that of the height of hip hop, I've been kind of bracing myself to see what working-class subculture will grow from it. Now I realize it's actually hip hop reborn.

In her newly released book, *New York Ricans From the Hip Hop Zone*,

Raquel Z. Rivera points out the economic conditions that caused hip hop to arise. She writes:

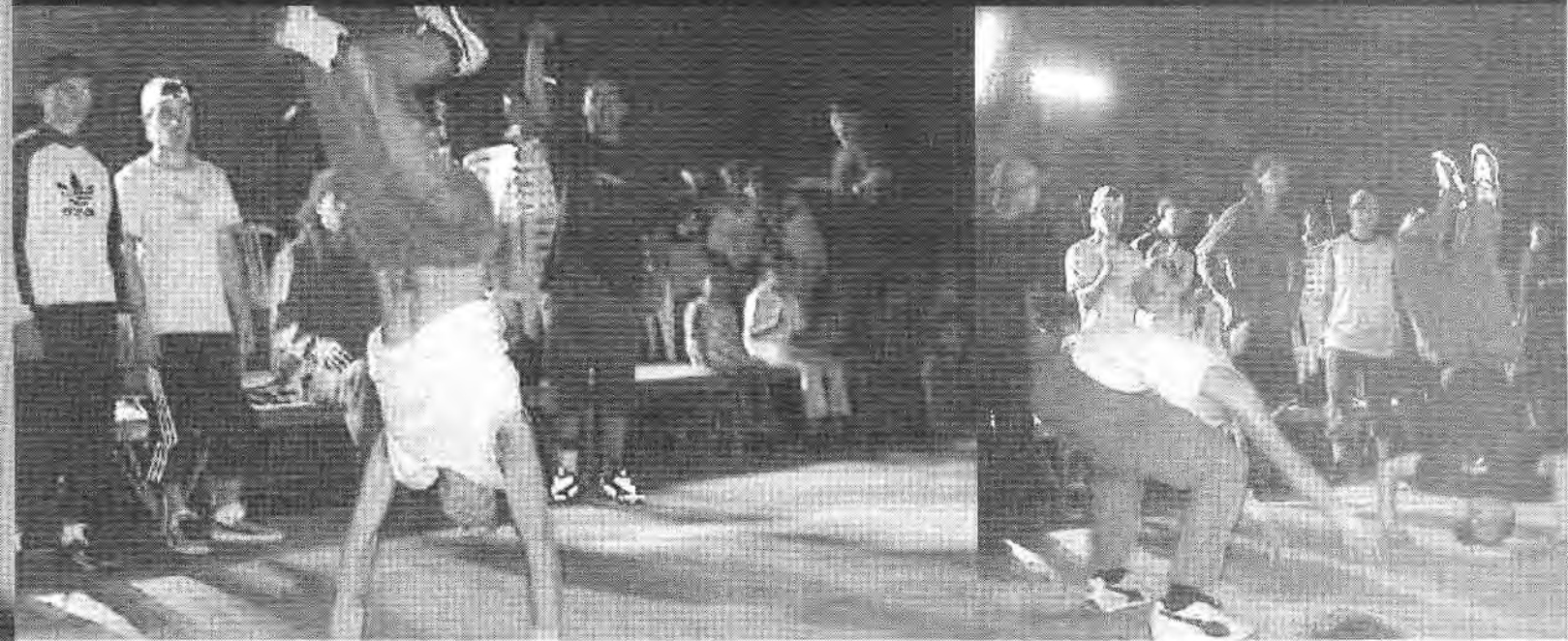
Early Puerto Rican and Afro-Caribbean and Black American hip hop artists transformed obsolete vocational skills from marginal occupations into raw materials for creativity and resistance.... Hip hop culture was born out of material deprivation, in the midst of dwindling income, educational access and job opportunities.

Rivera discusses not only the Puerto Rican presence in hip hop but also touches upon its power to get young working-class people to unite. One reason I am so nostalgic about hip hop is because it caused a sense of awareness among African Americans, preaching educational and nationalistic rhymes. I also saw another way to fight or settle disputes through "battling" – what better way to take out your aggressions than dance or graffiti art?

*New York Ricans From the Hip Hop Zone* primarily focuses on the Puerto Rican presence in hip hop since its inception. Often hip hop is associated strictly with African Americans and ignores the African diaspora in its entirety. Rivera points out the socio-economic com-

\* bombing refers to graffiti painting

Melissa Chadburn is a YCL member and law student.



*"Yeah there were turf battles, bloodshed even, but the stronger move was unity. We dated each other, ate in each other's kitchens, wore the same gear, had the same local hero, spoke the same hip language of the barrio in the neighborhood, understood in diverse flavors the philosophy of the cool and what it had to do with survival." -- Sekou Sundiata*

monalities among African Americans and darker-skinned Puerto Ricans especially in the South Bronx (the birthplace of American hip hop). Not only did they speak the same slang, live in the same neighborhood, undergo the same discrimination from the cops, but their roots reflect the same rhythms in their music and dance. However, it was Puerto Ricans that often got charged with "trying to be Black."

Even the music was characterized by the features that both Puerto Ricans and Black Americans are often charged with. The mass marketing of hip hop has had much to do with the exoticization of dark ghetto "virility" as a temporary distraction from "white" suburban monotony. The ways in which breaking tended to be described ("natural," "instinctive," "vibrant," "gritty," "dynamic" and "exciting") bring to mind cliché exoticizations of the ghetto, particularly Black ghetto as primeval, exciting, dangerous, mysterious and cool. Break-

ing's magic resided in its purported primitive simplicity.

Aside from addressing obvious class and economic issues that are/were prevalent in society, one of the most important features of this book is that it was initially written as a thesis and discusses hip hop from an educational perspective, legitimizing hip hop as an academic subject. As an educator and a student, I find this a significant step toward advancement for struggling students. One of the most renowned educational philosophers, Paulo Freire, explains the importance of teaching in terms that others can grasp or relate to. Freire articulates that "the raising of critical consciousness in people who have been oppressed is a first step in helping them to obtain critical literacy and, ultimately, liberation from oppressive ideologies." I myself have had 14 to 17-year-old students who performed at or below a second-grade level, never read a book in their lives, but witnessed their capacity to read

*Vibe* magazine from cover to cover.

I'll never forget walking into a classroom of 20 or so juvenile offenders in Van Nuys, California. They were screaming, throwing paper, laughing, intimidating each other and trying to intimidate me, but waiting to see what I was going to do. I took a deep breath, turned to the chalkboard and wrote "Hip Hop," then I asked, "Who can tell me what the nine elements of hip hop are?" Suddenly a dozen kids who usually used school as an excuse to fight, sleep or otherwise cause trouble because they were either overwhelmed or patronized by the curriculum, were vying for a chance to be called upon.

Today several post-secondary schools across the nation do teach hip hop as a subject. Now, Rivera proceeds to advance this trend by introducing it as more formal academia among university students and professors, making her book an invaluable contribution both to the Puerto Rican community as well as the academic community. ■

### ***Israel/Palestine: How to End the War of 1948***

Tanya Reinhart, New York, Seven Stories, 2002.

Reviewed by Peggy Powell Dobbins

Tanya Reinhart begins *Israel/Palestine: How to End the War of 1948* with a forthright revelation of her own moral ambiguity. She is willing to label the foundation of Israel by driving half the Palestinian population from their homeland as ethnic cleansing, which she is also willing to admit she "could probably live with...had Israel stopped there, in 1948. As an Israeli, I grew up believing that this primal sin our state was founded on may be forgiven one day because the founders' generation was driven by the faith that this was the only way to save the Jewish people from the danger of another holocaust."

Thus the reader who grew up believing the same welcomes Reinhart's chronology of events – surrounding and since the Oslo agreements of 1994 – that brought her to the conviction that "there can be no question as to the legitimacy of the Palestinian armed struggle." Reinhart continues:

In the present uprising – unlike the first Intifada – the Palestinians have resorted to using arms. But during its first days, shooting was only sporadic, and most of Israel's military arsenal was used against civilian demonstrators, funeral goers and stone-throwing crowds... Palestinian use of arms escalated gradually in response to Israel's escalation of armed oppression. By moving tanks and forces into densely populated areas, Israel provoked armed exchanges and pushed more desperate people into a suicidal clash between unequal sides.

It is the sentence that follows this

description, "The easy way to exterminate a weak nation has always been to drag it into a hopeless war," and her systematic documentation of it, that makes Reinhart's book so terrifyingly timely. For example, she quotes a March 1982 memo from then Major General Ehud Barak, head of Israel Defense Forces Planning Division, to then Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon. Leaked to the newspaper, Barak's memo proposed to Sharon:

At the moment there is no national consensus for an operation against the Syrians, except where the terrorists are concerned – which under certain circumstances, such as a multi-casualty terrorist strike ... might lead to consensus. [Toward this end] the necessary infrastructure and plans be prepared for a swift operation, 1967 style, against Syria, that will develop through a rapid chain of events – a terrorist attack, a strike on terrorists... and a quick escalation, surprising the Syrians and the Americans, but not ourselves, into a comprehensive strike against the Syrians.

The title of Reinhart's book, *Israel/Palestine: How to End the War of 1948*, is misleading. She did not sit down to pen a how-to-end-war primer. She wanted to sound an alarm by revealing – to those of us not embedded in Israeli society – that completing the "unfinished business of the 1948 war" has become the dominant theme in Israeli discourse since Sharon forcibly entered the Al



Marwani Mosque September 28, 2000. "How to end the war of 1948" is thus a code for a strategy to provoke suicidal resistance in order to legitimize extreme reactions, ending with "mass evacuation of the Palestinian residents as happened in 1948."

This "may seem far-fetched," Reinhart wrote a year ago. "A full-scale evacuation with masses of refugees would not be simple to carry out, even in the current climate of the US global war on terrorism. The only way it could become feasible is under the umbrella of an extensive regional war. However," she noted then, "some evidence actually suggests Israel has been preparing for such a war and is awaiting US approval." She cites a *Ha'aretz* report that Major General Uzi Dayan, an Israeli delegate to the UN, "identified what he called the appropriate targets for the next stage of the global campaign: 'The Iran, Iraq and Syria triangle, all veteran supporters of terror developing weapons of mass destruction.' [Dayan] said that 'they must be confronted as soon as possible and that is also understood in the United States.'" The contingency repeatedly specified was US approval in the context of a region-wide war.

This review originally dealt only with Reinhart's documentation of the existence of Israeli contingency plans to legitimize invading Syria and what, with all its unspeakable implications, would have to be labeled "a final solution to the Jewish state's Palestinian problem." With

the US invading Iraq and threatening Syria, it did not seem so important to cover Reinhart's analysis of the Oslo agreement of 1994 and the collapse of the Camp David Summit of July 2000.

The appearance of an April 16, 2003 letter to the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, however, mandated the following addendum.

The letter, signed Shelly Rose, associate director of the Anti-Defamation League, objected to columnist Jay Bookman's examination of US financial support for Israeli expansions of settlements on the West Bank in violation of UN resolutions. "Bookman is off target," wrote Rose. "It is ongoing Palestinian violence, not Israeli settlement activity that remains the primary obstacle to the resumption of peace negotiations. Indeed, at Camp David in July 2000, the Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered to re-deploy and uproot settlements from up to 95 percent of the West Bank and 100 percent of the Gaza Strip. Settlements in the remaining 5 percent of the West Bank – where the majority of the settler population lives – would be annexed to Israel. The Palestinians refused to even discuss this offer and turned to violence."

"This version of history, the constant repetition [of which] has given it the status of objective truth in many people's minds" Reinhart painstakingly unravels in her second chapter. She notes Israeli press complaints at the time that there was no official documentation that Barak had in fact offered what officials leaked to the press that he had offered.

Reinhart then examines what

Barak was willing to offer, based on a document known as the Beilin-Abu Mazen understanding. This understanding was presumably completed after extensive negotiations and approved by Arafat in the last week of October 1995, days before Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated. The map describing the Beilin-Abu Mazen understanding, which Barak took to Camp David, is the only map from Camp David. From the map, the Beilin plan and the Barak leaks to the Israeli press, Reinhart concludes that the Beilin-Abu Mazen and Barak proposals intended to keep the situation as is. The Palestinian Authority could make a declaration of sovereignty as a victory, even be allowed to "declare a state." Israel would annex 10 percent of the West Bank, leaving the Palestinian state with 90 percent of the land. Of that 90 percent, 40 percent is a) land where Jews who choose to remain under Palestinian sovereignty remain with the roads connecting them to each other and Israel secured by the Israeli army (with the West Bank now in three

cantons, further divided into smaller enclaves); or b) the Jordan valley and its Israeli settlements. The region would remain under Israeli security for 10-25 years. In other words, Barak offered what he knew the Palestinian Authority could only refuse and continue the Intifada, providing the excuse for continued Israeli occupation.

Reinhart is a linguist who does not pretend to be a Marxist. Readers who are not Marxists may be misled by the title. Reinhart doesn't address issues such as the economic interests pitting Arab and Jewish guerillas against each other in 1948 when the British occupation of Palestine officially ended and Israel was born; the ensuing international class struggle, or the scramble for oil and profits. These are issues that must be addressed if humans are to parry and block the march already underway by the US and British militarists up the path of war and fascism to protect the value of certain capital accumulations. ■

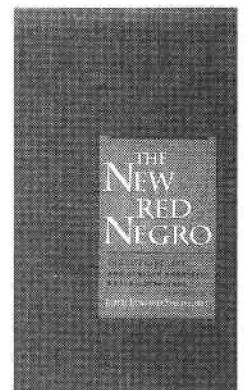
### ***The New Red Negro:***

#### ***The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946***

James Edward Smethurst, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Reviewed by Joel Wendland

A study of the diversity and complexity of African American poetry during the 1930s and 1940s, Smethurst's *The New Red Negro* compellingly and subtly articulates a new view of this long-neglected period and genre of American letters. His particular, though not exclusive, focus is on the African American poets closely associated with or members of the Communist Party during its "Popular Front" period. Smethurst addresses the relationship to the Communist left of African American poets such as Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucy Mae Turner,



Ida Gerding Athens, Waring Cuney, Countee Cullen, Frank Marshall Davis and Margaret Walker. These poets attempted to blend "a revolutionary black nationalism with a sort of working-class integrationism within an internationalist framework." This movement produced a uniquely authentic and working-class body of poetry, often with an internal dialogue reflecting the ideological, geographic and class diversity of its creators, that transformed African American letters, as well as US literature more generally.

Smethurst's ability to illuminate the internal messages, dialogic conflicts and choruses, measures and aesthetics of African American working-class poetry establishes the quality of this book. Thoughtful and complex, though carefully argued so as not to test a reader's patience, this book demonstrates the poetic forging of community, resistance to exploitation and a folk aesthetic that invoked and reflected Black lifestyles, thought patterns and cultural habits. Smethurst shows that despite disagreements over specific forms and subject matter, the poets of this period agreed on the necessity "of the survival of African Americans as a community being the main form of resistance to racial oppression."

Part of this representation of community included critiques of mass commercial culture and the cooptation of Black culture as a commodity, as well as the social alienation and institutional and systematic oppression of African Americans. As a whole, these poets-as-critics sought to represent the possibility of community participation in the making of a vital culture, as well as reflect, their own authentic originality in

that culture.

There are two poets that stand out in this excellent study. Sterling Brown and Gwendolyn Brooks rarely receive the attention in the academy they deserve except by those few scholars who study poets on the left and those who focus specifically on 20th century Black poets. And when these poets are studied, their relationships to the Communist Party (as activists, members and supporters) are usually ignored. Smethurst's point isn't just to demonstrate that these poets were Communists and produced quality poetry, but that the specific political formation of the Left in this period had a profound affect on the way they wrote, the subject matter they chose and how they viewed the process of writing. Working-class ideology, internationalism, resistance to conformity, celebrations of folk culture and collective struggle infused African American poetry in this period with brilliant new discourses, images, ironies, voices and characters.

Brown, most well-known for his volume of poems titled *Southern Road* (1932), began his career in the early 1930s and challenged what he saw as the high-brow culture usually intoned by the leading intellectuals associated with the Harlem Renaissance. He accused them of ignoring the "Negro masses" in favor of what another African American writer and activist, William Patterson, would call the "aspirations of the rising petty bourgeoisie." Brown's own view of poetry's special role was to record, reflect and reimagine the fragmentation of social life (especially intensified for African Amer-

icans) under capitalism into a new broad unity of humanity. Even more specifically, this anti-capitalist and internationalist vision was punctuated by the specific vision of a unity based in an authentic African American national identity and culture. His vision of community came at the especially difficult times marked by the economic crisis of the Great Depression and the geographical dislocation of the Great Migration.

Coming at the close of the period in Smethurst's study, Brooks' collection of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), documents the results of the Great Migration, focusing on the segregated Black community in Chicago's historic South Side. Simultaneously intensely personal, floridly descriptive and fundamentally political, Brooks' poetry conversed with, echoed and spoke back to other poets, African Americans, workers and women, and successfully invented and managed complex representations of a diverse social geography. Smethurst states that Brooks' work, sometimes Whitmanesque, sometimes Shakespearean and usually quite original, challenged African American subjectivity, as well as community, in the search for space free of total colonization by the commodity fetishism of capitalism and the enticing "beauty" of oppressive whiteness.

This book also contains a chapter-length account of the development and complexity of the Communist Party's positions on the national question that is well worth scrutiny and discussion. ■

**Pattern Recognition**

William Gibson, New York: Putnam Publishing, 2003.

Reviewed by Simone Silas

William Gibson, best known for the sci-fi thriller *Necromancer*, in *Pattern Recognition* spins a post-9/11 tale of espionage and mystery set in the world of high-finance advertising.

Casey Pollard, the heroine of Gibson's most recent work, is the daughter of an ex-CIA spook once deployed in the former USSR, who goes missing the morning of September 11th, 2001, (a bit of useless information curiously dropped and dangled, but by book's end never resolved). The younger Pollard, a presumably highly paid contingent worker in the advertising industry has a remarkable nose for sniffing out whether corporate logos and advertising ploys will work and hires herself out to the highest bidder. She is employed by a transnational based in Britain to uncover the source of mysterious film footage that appears on the Internet, creating a worldwide stir. Ad execs are duly impressed by the finesse of not only the footage, but also the methods utilized by the distributors and seek to learn the maker's identity.

Pollard's quest to uncover the source of the frenzy leads her to London, Tokyo and Moscow, where she is pursued by a motley crew of corporate spies, Italian and Russian mafiosos.

As events unfold, Gibson provides a sharp critique of corporate culture and the devices and ploys of marketing. The story, however, while fast-moving, is clumsily wrought and the writing at times is

awkward in its effort to appear "cool."

While searing in its display of the barrenness of corporate culture, *Pattern Recognition* reserves its sharpest barbs for gratuitous attacks on the former Soviet Union and socialism. Here the reader is treated to the usual clichés about the gray drabness of Soviet life and the clumsiness of its efforts at art and architecture. The socialist experiment, a decade after its collapse and in the middle of the ravages of Russian gangster capitalism, is treated as an aberration and affront. In one telling phrase, Lenin is said to have told the absolute truth about capitalism and an absolute lie about Communism.

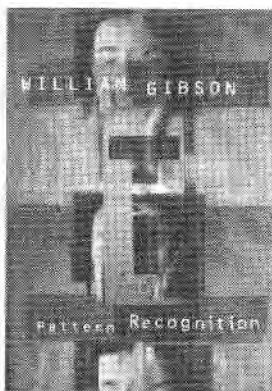
Thus, unfortunately one sees in *Pattern Recognition's* crude, stereotypical and unnuanced portrayals of socialist life and in its plague-on-both-your-houses condemnations, the same old bourgeois pattern. ■

**The Bondwoman's Narrative: A Novel**

Hannah Crafts, New York: Warner Books, 2002  
Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Reviewed by Diane Mahney

One can't help but be truly awed and inspired by *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. This book gives an unusual and

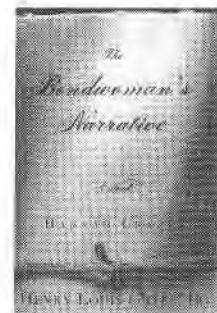


gripping view of an aspect of our country's history.

The handwritten, previously unpublished original manuscript was purchased at auction by Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., chair of Harvard's Afro-American Studies Department. Evidence points to its being the first novel ever written by an African American. It relates the life in bondage of one Hanna Crafts and her harrowing escape from slavery and is believed to be autobiographical. Gates has attempted to verify Crafts in public records, but to date, no definitive individual has been found. It is possible that the book was written under a pseudonym. However, Gates writes:

While we may not be certain of her name, we do know who Hannah Crafts is, that is, we know the central and defining facts about her life: that she was female, mulatto, a slave of John Hill Wheeler's, an autodidact and a keen observer of the dynamics of slave life. Hannah Crafts has given us a black sentimental manner. We have then, in this book, the unique observances and commentary of a slave and the rare opportunity to see into her soul.

Gates supplies ample notes in his introduction, and in various appendices chronicles the authentication process the manuscript was subjected to. These additions are as interesting and as engaging as the novel itself. Evidence points to the



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Have I succeeded in portraying any of the particular features of that institution whose curse rests over the fairest land the sun shines upon?

– Hannah Crafts

time period it was written as 1853-1861. Appendix A is an authentication report by Joe Nickell, investigator and historic document examiner which includes results of his scientific analysis of the paper, pen and ink used in writing, as well as an analysis of the handwriting and details of the provenance. Regarding the text, Nickell states that “the narrative is not that of an unread person.... The admixture of good vocabulary skills and occasional poor spelling would seem consistent with someone who had struggled to learn.”

In the novel, Crafts, as a young slave, is befriended by a white Christian couple who, seeing her struggle to make sense of the written word, teach her to read, and allow her, during surreptitious visits to their home, the use of their library. This relationship with the couple is probably autobiographical and would account for the author’s literacy.

Gates points to the author’s relating of historic events, portrayal of individuals and geographic references that indicate further the autobiographical nature of the novel, and its basis in events of the 1850s. This introduction also points out that several novels were written about slavery by whites in the same period, in which they attempted to portray themselves as slaves and were later found out. An important difference in Crafts’ novel is that she does not immediately identify the characters she writes about by race, which separates her from whites trying to write as if they had been or were slaves. This characteristic of her writing gives further evi-

dence to her identity as truly a slave, truly African American. According to the introduction, her narrative of the escape route she took to freedom would have been one that only escaping slaves would have been familiar with. Gates writes further in the introduction, one thing seems certain: the person who wrote this book knew John Hill Wheeler and his wife personally, hated them both for their pro-slavery feelings and their racism, and wanted to leave a record of their hatred for posterity. Gates also comments on the brutality of slavery conveyed by Crafts’ narrative, further authenticating the author’s familiarity with that institution.

Replete with pathos, intrigue and excitement, the narrative itself relates the horrors of slavery. Hanna Crafts starts with the very essence of slavery’s destruction of family ties and the ties between child and parent:

I was not brought up by anybody in particular that I know of... No one seemed to care for me till I was able to work... Of my relatives I knew nothing. No one ever spoke of my father or mother...

Of her elderly master and his cruelty, Crafts writes:

The servants all knew the history of that tree. It had not been concealed from them that a wild and weird influence was supposed to belong to it. Planted by Sir Clifford, it had grown and flourished

exceedingly under his management. But the stern old man was a hard master to his slaves and few in our days could be so cruel, while the linden was chosen as the scene where the tortures and punishments were inflicted, many a time had its roots been manured with human blood.

She continues with graphic descriptions of torture. Her final owner, Henry Hill Wheeler, from whom she finally makes her escape to freedom in the North, attempts to pair her with a male slave for whom she has no love or affection. It is the prospect of this forced marriage that is the catalyst for her escape.

Crafts’ style of writing is that of a nineteenth century romantic. One can sense a comfort with the style, even if she had not entirely mastered it. It indicates a familiarity with novels of the era and inspiration from them. One can therefore understand any shortcomings in literary style and execution, given the circumstances of the author.

The text is replete with biblical references and the character of Hannah Crafts exhibits a strong faith in Christianity. Each chapter begins with a quote from the Bible, and it is referred to and quoted several places in the text. A highly moral and upstanding person, Crafts often analyzes her actions and their effect on others. Early in her life, she came to the conscious decision to live as moral and righteous a life as possible.

Gates presents the text as written, with words, phrases and sentences





crossed out, just as the author did. Thus, the reader has some idea of the writing process of *Crafts*. The original spelling has been retained. Gates indicates that some punctuation has been added to make it more readable.

In her preface, *Crafts* writes:

I ask myself for the hundredth time How will such a literary venture, coming from a sphere so humble be received? Have I succeeded in portraying any of the peculiar features of that institution whose curse rests over the fairest land the sun shines upon?

Indeed, this book is of monumental importance to the United States and the world. It is more than fortunate that Gates has brought this book to the fore, both for its historic and literary value and for the insights it gives into slave life in 19th century United States. It opens intriguing possibilities for further research, not the least of which might be finding some authentic record of the author. ■

## Collectivos Chat: A Local View of Globalization

by Haily Zaki

"Globalization is an exceptionally abstract concept to convey to the general public," said Alan Greenspan to *The Globalist* in 2001. "Most of those who protest against globalization, though presumably driven by a desire to foster a better global society ... hold misperceptions about how markets work – and how to interpret market outcomes."

Fernando García Valdes and Eugenio Cordero Flores are both *collectivo* drivers in Olmué, a small village one hour northeast of the port city of Valparaíso, Chile. *Collectivos* are set-fare taxis that travel along set routes. Faster than buses and cheaper than taxis, they have become an integral part of the Chilean transportation system. Although García and Cordero are not officially trained to analyze and interpret market outcomes, they are on the forefront of globalization in Chile and among the very first to experience its real effects.

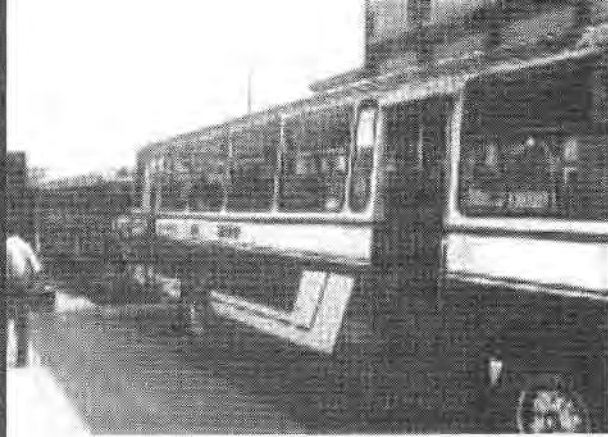
García is in his late thirties. He studied agriculture in university and worked in tourism until five months ago when he was laid off. To make ends meet, he took a job as a *collectivo* driver. "It is not my dream job," he explains, "but I earn enough to support my wife and two children. I make 200,000 pesos (\$300) per month. I do this only as an alternative until I find something better."

Cordero is roughly the same age and the two men are friends. "I have worked all my life," he says proudly. He explains that he enjoys driving a *collectivo* in comparison to his first job, loading and unloading stones from the riverbed for road building. "I don't get blisters on my hands anymore," he jokes.

Both men are worried. In the days leading up to the "Showdown in Iraq" (as CNN dubbed it), gas prices rose exponentially, exceeding 500 pesos per liter for the first time in Chilean history. "I am very concerned," says Cordero. "This is the worst I have ever seen it. Gas has never been this expensive. The people who are most affected by this are the middle class."

As gas prices rose, so did bus fares and the price of such food staples as bread and potatoes. Many Chileans were forced to change their daily lifestyle. "We are already working as much as we can," says Cordero. "We

Haily Zaki is a contributor to PA.



LEFT: Chilean railroad workers. Credit: Lois Real  
 ABOVE: *Collectivo* waiting to pick up passengers.

cannot work more. With gas so high, we just earn less, so my wife does not drive the car anymore and my brother does not drive to work anymore. We pay more for bread and they ride the bus."

In the past, such spikes in the price of gas were softened by government subsidies, but the cumulative effect of the global economic slump has drained the government coffers. "The government used to subsidize the cost of petrol," explains García, "but now there is no more money left."

García believes that President Lagos has honestly tried to improve the economic situation but is not certain that a free trade agreement with the United States is necessarily the solution. "Already Lagos must deal with problems from the right. People who have money in Chile are right-wing and they do not like Lagos because he is a socialist. Instead of investing in their country now, they are waiting for a right-wing government."

Since the highest 20 percent of the population in Chile hold over 61 percent of national income, whereas the lowest 20 percent of the population hold only 3.5 percent, García's analysis may not be too far from the truth. "If this continues and these businessmen make deals with Americans, I don't know that the government will be able to control anything anymore. Who will protect us – the people who don't have money?" asks García.



García vocalizes the same concerns as many globalization critics. They fear that the predominance of market forces will cause a general weakening of the state, as governments all over the developing world are exhorted to become more flexible and more competitive.

By definition, globalization involves the increasing interaction of the world's peoples through their national economic systems. In theory, the trend of increasing integration of economies, in terms of not only goods and services but ideas, information and technology – has tremendous potential benefits for developing countries. Simply stated, open and free trade between countries breathes new life into stagnant economies, provides new markets for already developed

economies and promises individuals in developing nations higher standards of living and more opportunities.

The reality of globalization is quite different, however. As markets are captured by multinational corporations, governments become spokesmen of economic forces, rather than protecting their population against these forces. The fact that 500 corporations control 70 percent of total world trade and six of these control 100 percent of world trade in the staple grains of rice, wheat and maize only goes to reinforce critics' concerns.

The direct result of this lack of governance is a general lack of confidence in government policies and a sense of disempowerment among those whom the global system fails to protect, people like García and Cordero. Their sense of disempowerment is likely to increase once the free trade agreement is signed.

Despite its geographic isolation, as the sole remaining member of the South American ABC grouping (with Argentina and Brazil plagued by economic and political instability), Chile is on the brink of signing a free trade agreement with the United States after two long years and 14 rounds of bilateral negotiations.

Free trade agreements however, do not ensure free trade. With one side levying all the restriction, and the other making all the adjustments, free trade is hardly fair trade.

Once they enter into the agreement, Chile, like many other countries, will be engaged in a race to the bottom as it is forced to shoulder the costs in order to attract the foreign investment it so desperately needs. But even increased foreign investment does not promise to provide steady employment for Chileans.

"Even if you have a job, you can never be secure. Things are different now. Even though the unions used to be so strong and they improved the conditions for the worker, now they have no power," explains García. "Companies can just close down from one day to the next. Many people must do odd jobs to survive, like selling sandwiches or driving *collectivos*," says Cordero, glancing at his friend.

Economies are now based on smaller and more flexible



Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan says that people who aren't qualified economists have nothing to say about globalization.

production systems and workers are more likely to be in the service sector or engaged in the burgeoning informal sector in order to ensure their livelihood. Increasing informalization of labor renders it virtually impossible to protect workers effectively.

The US-Chile trade agreement promises to be another asymmetric deal where the North insists on the South opening markets and eliminating subsidies, while it continues subsidizing its own farmers and protects itself from competition. Special interests in industrial countries will take precedence over all else and Chile could risk its political autonomy.

Even though Greenspan himself admits that "the best single action that the industrial countries could actually take to alleviate the terrible problem of poverty in many developing countries would be to open, unilaterally, markets to imports from these countries," there is no possibility of that ever happening. In the same interview with *The Globalist*, Greenspan also admitted that "American trade laws and negotiating practices are essentially adversarial... We would never put ourselves in a position where we envision the actions we would take to be of assistance to the rest of the world but to the detriment of the US."

With this "US first" mentality, it is no wonder that globalization is not universally recognized as successfully enhancing standards of living and promoting civil values worldwide. On the contrary, it will only serve to aggravate inequality.

García and Cordero may not be tainted economists, but they do understand something that Greenspan and other "globalists" may not fully comprehend: the reality of life in Chile today. "I don't know if this globalization is a good idea or not. But I do not see what the point of putting more things on the shelves is if we have less and less money to buy them. What does it matter that my son can buy computer games, if making a simple living is more and more impossible?" says García. ■

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Edited by David Laibman

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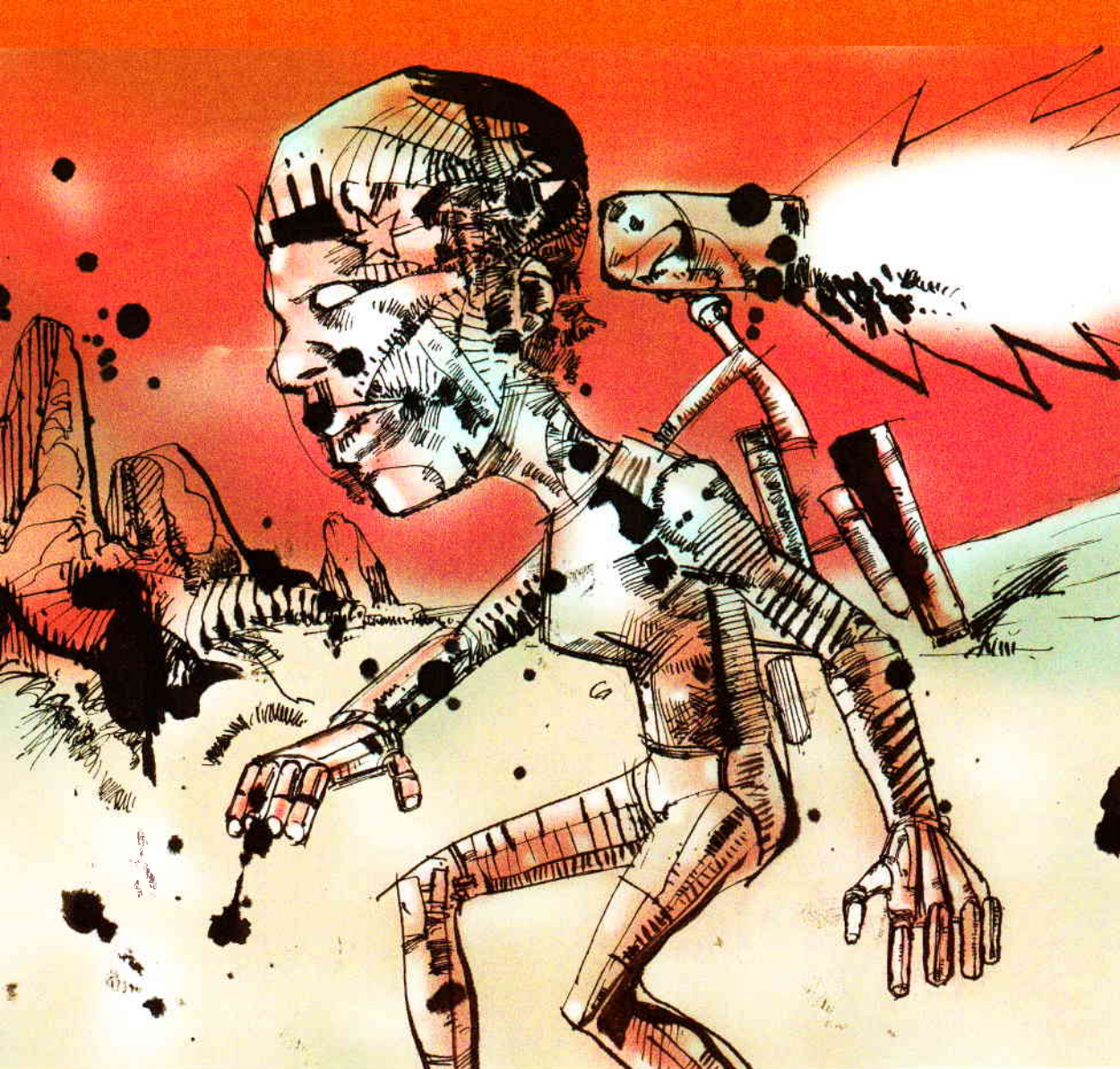
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Artwork by John Kim

## THE PATHFINDER MISSION

By Mary Franke

To Mars  
in the United States  
space program  
has a little exploring car  
called a rover  
called Sojourner  
after Sojourner Truth

I see her face in my mind,  
brown and unsentimentally female  
I see her with Harriet Tubman, pistol gleaming  
this woman who sided with those who  
stole property  
from honest families  
this later-day her, a kali  
this terrorist of another time  
who if she lived in Somalia or  
Afghanistan or a Thai brothel  
would not be so honored

who if she sought  
to liberate Arab-Americans  
or African-Americans  
from "detention" or poverty  
would be shot on sight,  
you hear that.  
shot on sight just like her sisters  
Angela Davis or Winnie Mandela or Andrea Reedy  
in their haydays, hey  
you with your heroes of space,  
her, who if she sought subversively  
to directly end enslaved labor  
or nuclear obliteration on this planet  
given the 60% conviction  
rate for women in federal court  
compared to 20% for men  
her name would be cut off after the first note  
and never be heard again  
on Mars

