

## Sure, I'm a Marxist

Rob Gregg

I don't read the *New Republic*. Honest. I'm a *Nation* reader. I have had my moments of doubt. I wanted Cockburn to keep his two pages; I may have even preferred the old format—less like the *New Republic*. The *Nation* can be dry, and sometimes I thank whomever (sure, I'm an atheist) for Katha Pollitt, whose “Subject to Debate” I find refreshing, though I have spent too many hours wondering who that “Last Marxist” might be.

I happened to be given a recent issue of the *New Republic*. Likely story, I know, but a friend (one in spite of the fact that he evidently subscribes) had received two copies and gave me one. He wasn't trying to recruit me. I don't need to reveal his name. He doesn't need to be ferreted out and chastised for his lapse (I believe he is still a radical, also, in spite of his magazine subscriptions). Perhaps, I reassure myself, he gets the journal to find out what less radical people are thinking, to fashion his own counterpoint. Perhaps I should do that—hey, take me to the shrink! He just gave it to me as I was leaving his place and I took it home. I swear.

So I read the thing. No Sean Wilentz in a starring role swearing allegiance to the Chief—that's a relief. A rather Wieseltier-like proclamation about the need for nuclear deterrence, which had been one of the things in my old CND membership days (I did pay my membership while I lived in Britain, honest) that had turned me off the glossy rag in the first place. A fairly sound piece, seemed to me at least, about the problems facing that politician (name temporarily forgotten) now stepping into the New York breach against HRH Clinton. And then a review by Alan Wolfe of the much-touted book, *Bobos in Paradise*.

OK, so there is nothing new, it seems to me, about these bourgeois bohemians. Seems they've been around as long as I've been reading (or listening on the car tape player to) Somerset Maugham. Historians, reveling in their artisanal, pre-industrial work habits and their moral economy, have been card-carrying members of Bobo-dom for a while. Was Engels proto-Bobo? I ask myself.

But Wolfe made some interesting points in linking the author of the work, David Brooks, to other neoconservatives, and in highlighting a new trend among neocons towards the humorous. This trend I've certainly missed (NRA members, welfare reform, and death penalty advocates don't make great humorists in my book, not unless I'm trying out the well-worn tool of Byrony). But, more importantly for me, Wolfe claims that leftists take themselves too seriously, and only partake in “pious sermonizing, bureaucratic obfuscation, and old-folks resignation.” He twists the knife further: “One cannot find a single interesting radical nonfiction writer in America under (or over) fifty.” Dem's fighting words, surely.

Perhaps with regard to a lack of humor, Wolfe may have a point (though Michael Moore's “vote-for-a-shrub” campaign might be worth a look). Certainly, his-

torians on the left are not known for provoking roll-in-the-aisle laughter. Shouldn't we be writing books that borrow liberally from the much-mourned Ian Dury ("Dance of the Screemers" is a must for any self-respecting social theorist) and G. V. Desani (whose *Hatterr* delineates for us a postmodern landscape), or that receive "instant karma" from the most pretentious of 1970s British rock. At this point, I might possibly mention my own book (*Inside Out, Outside In: Essays in Comparative History* from Macmillan), but that would be too crass.

Recently, one historian was seen by another in Washington, D.C., protesting against the World Bank and IMF. He had turned himself into a walking billboard advertising all the ghettos of the world. The raucous inner voice of my Quaker ancestors—pioneers in this approach to street theater, donning drab clothing and looking dour as a comedic critique of commercialism and fashion—tells me that such street history is the way to go.

Of course, I hear from the wings, who can laugh at the kinds of things that have been done unto the less fortunate people of this world—torture, rape, maiming, murder, and so on throughout the annals of modern history?<sup>9</sup> Quite simply, no one. But surely we can laugh at ourselves when we endeavor to place ourselves above and beyond these things; at the ways we immunize ourselves from complicity through our "objectivity"; at our notions of agency, that may have a stronger relationship to the concept of property than we would like to admit; at the irony of our radicalism, nurtured in jobs for life (we hope) working and consuming within the belly of the corporate beast. One of the bad guys in history, machine boss Richard Croker, once accused reformers, "who sometimes seem not to know that they live on graft," of hypocrisy. And I was just beginning to get over my military-industrial complex!

Marxism is dead, they say, killed by the fall of the Berlin Wall. *Au contraire*. Stifling, bureaucratic Marxism may well be dead. And good luck to it, as Bannerji would say. Now we can get down to the comic and liberating Marx—that theorist who could puncture the pretensions of the mighty with one flick of the quill. Marx may be "only a bloody cod," but he's one of the best we've got.

Many years ago, when Philadelphia's House of Our Own Bookstore had a "Well Red Reading Room" upstairs, I purchased a wonderful T-shirt with Karl Marx on the front saying "Sure, I'm a Marxist." On the back were to be seen those masters of subversion, Groucho, Chico, and Harpo. I gave the shirt to a brother in England—you couldn't wear that kind of thing in the United States in those days.