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MANIFESTO FOR A LEFT TURN: AN ARISTOTELIAN-MARXIST CRITIQUE

Peter Bratsis

Pleasure is the transition of a man from a less to a greater perfection.

— Spinoza, *The Ethics*

The Fifteenth Street Manifesto Group, which is mainly composed of my fellow *Situations* editorial collective members, has issued a call to arms. Very much in the spirit of what a manifesto should be, this work is a much needed and timely challenge to take up the task of political organization. The key and clearest message of the *Manifesto* is that there is a drastic need to overcome factional politics and the politics of protest and resistance in favor of political organization in the most substantive sense. Although not coming out explicitly in favor of a new political party, it does argue for the need to organize a collective body for the purposes of radical social transformation.

As clear and direct as this central message is, however, I believe that the *Manifesto* does not go far enough as a political text. First, although it makes general references to such principles as ‘democracy’ and ‘equality’ it does not specify the political goals of the project. It does identify some possible means (workshop democracy, popular education, seminars and books, etc.) that the political project may utilize, but it fails to identify the political ends of this radical project explicitly. To the degree that one can find particular goals, these are mainly in the areas of economic life. Even then, these goals do not necessarily differ greatly from left-liberal sensibilities or, at least, it is certainly imaginable that they (decommodification of essential services, ecologically sustainable development, an end to gendered and racial oppression, universal access to health care, employment, etc.) could be accommodated within a liberal polity. Despite the overall intention of the text, there is no rising to the level of universality. In place of a universal political principle, we find an accumulation of particular social interests that, the hope is, can be united by way of political organization. Second, and related to the first point, there is a general conflation between the mere life and the good life. To the degree that the political project, and the critique of the contemporary situation, is focused on questions of human ‘needs’ and not on the creation of humans who are capable of politics (who can pursue the good life in the Aristotelian sense) the *Manifesto* remains mired in the world of vulgar self-interests. Thirdly, as a consequence of the first two failures, there is no clear sense of who the enemy is. The question of organization is only relevant in the context of a concrete struggle, in the context of a real and

substantive antagonism.¹ There should be, then, some idea of the concrete enemy, of who and what it is that the struggle is against. This is not only significant in that it is, in my opinion, a necessary element for uniting the Left (there needs to be a common enemy), but also because the identity of the enemy will have much to say about what forms and strategies may be most appropriate to the new political organization. I offer the following comments and rejoinders in the hopes of furthering the project of the Manifesto and the debates that it has initiated.

THE MERE LIFE VERSUS THE GOOD LIFE

The *Manifesto* is not intended as a finished political program, as some definitive statement on what our political goals and strategies should or should not be. The bulk of the work is dedicated to explicating strategic lessons from the history of the Left and to cataloging the dire social, economic, and ecological situation today. The choice of issues and topics discussed, however, is significant. Key sections include the discussion of work and the failures of unions, the crisis of health care access, the limits of suburbanization and mass consumption, the stagnation and decline of wages, the current economic crisis, and so on. Without doubt, all of these are important in their own right. But, what do these discussions tell us about our political standpoint? Is our critique of capitalism that it has occasional crises? That it does not provide enough development? Or, that the development it does provide is so skewed that we are now in a period where the dominated classes are going to face austerity while the capitalists have accumulated unimaginable amounts of wealth? Is struggle mainly for better and more economic development for the dominated classes, shop floor democracy and more rational forms of income distribution? Similarly, is our main concern the possibility of 'happiness' in the form of commodious living? That everyone should have health care, economic security, housing, and so on? I know comrades Stanley, Michael, and Bill too well to think that this is the limit of what they intended to say. However, the *Manifesto* may very well give this false impression.

A key problem lies in the failure to distinguish between politics and its pre-conditions. There is no doubt that questions of food, shelter and the house-

¹ Related to this, the discussion of the anti-war movement may create the impression that the project is somehow against conflict or violence as such. That the political goal is an end to war and antagonism. There is no doubt that this is not the case and likely not the idea that was intended.

hold are central. But, they are not central as political goals in the same way that simply being alive is not the goal of politics. Politics is more important than mere life and may even ask us to put our biological life at risk. That we are all animals and have certain needs is a given. In this context, our capacity for politics is, in the first place, predicated on our ability to rise beyond the question of biological needs. The traditional Aristotelian division between the *polis* and the *oikos* signifies this divide between our biological and political natures. If we are preoccupied with feeding our empty bellies or finding someplace warm to sleep, we will not have much time or appetite for political life. Therefore, if we take political life in the broad sense of the term as our goal (following Aristotle, and many others, we could define politics as the 'good life', the principled pursuit of human excellence, with what is 'good' or 'excellent' being an open question) the question of the mere life must be addressed and solved but this is only as a precondition of the good life not the attainment of it.

In this sense, the *Manifesto* is guilty of a certain economism, of putting the *oikos* above the *polis*. For example, the critique of suburbanization and the discussion of the 'right to the city' is framed by the question of survival; the patterns of consumption endemic to suburbanization are not ecologically feasible. That may be the case, but what of the kinds of human beings that suburbanization produces? If we solved the ecological question, would suburbs be acceptable? Are the kinds of people produced by suburbanization capable of politics? Are they of a type appropriate to the pursuit of human excellence? Why only focus on the impact of suburbs upon nature and not also focus on the impact of suburbs on our capacity for thought, for autonomy, for political life? Similarly, why so much emphasis on the question of income distribution and employment? Do we want more employment? What kinds of human beings are produced through working as we know it? Where is the critique of work and the call for its radical reduction, if not elimination? I am not advocating a vulgar Arendtian position here, that questions of economics or the 'mere life' should be excluded from politics. Rather, we need to be explicit that questions of the 'household' are central and fundamental as a precondition, not *telos*, of political life.

UNIVERSALITY AND PARTICULARITY

In this context, the typical Marxist discussion of exploitation and worker control should be rethought. The *Manifesto* repeats the very common line that workers, who, after all, are the creators of value, should be the ones

who control the commodities that they produce. The labor theory of value as first deployed by John Locke, let us recall, functioned to tie the question of property to the concrete body of the individual, to tie the question of property to human rights; that the right to the ownership of our own body extends to the values that our body may produce. Indeed, for Locke, property is the most basic of human rights. Marx's transformation of the labor theory of value was to detach it from concrete individuals and make it social. For Marx, exchange value was a product of abstract social labor, socially necessary labor time, not the concrete labor of any individual or group. I believe it is a regression back to the liberal version of the labor theory of value to argue that the 'workers', in the sense of the individuals who happen to share any particular workplace, should 'own' what they produce. If the origin of exchange value is social labor, society as a whole, as a complex ensemble of interdependencies and interactions, is the origin of this value. More to the point however, the question has to be addressed from the standpoint of politics, not economics. There has to be an explicit project of human excellence to ground the question of how the production of goods and services should be organized. Should we support workplace democracy because the 'workers' are the real owners of what they produce or should we support workplace democracy because this is a necessary moment in the production of more excellent individuals, individuals not alienated by the divide between intellectual and manual labor, individuals who are not made subservient to hierarchies and chains of command?

The universality of politics must be established and it is from this standpoint that any judgments regarding particularities should be made. If we confine ourselves to a laundry list of particular (self) interests, we concede politics itself and join the post-modernist and liberal tendencies that the *Manifesto* so rightly critiques. If the 'Left' is simply a collection of movements (labor, feminist, anti-war, anti-racist, etc.) all joined together under some meta-organizational umbrella, then we have not moved very far from the factional politics and politics of resistance that the *Manifesto* explicitly comes out against.

There are two dimensions to this universality of politics, one principle is in relation to the particular social group or category which functions as a concrete universal (for example, the proletariat in Marx or civil-servants for Hegel). A second dimension is the universality of the substantive principles, or goals, which are sought (for example, the liberation of the proletariat is also the liberation of the bourgeoisie and other classes from the shackles of the marketplace and bureaucracy). It is within this general Marxist dialectic-

cal form that the question of the enemy should be located. On the one hand, the universal principle is that everyone has the capacity for human excellence, that all social beings will be the benefactors of the political struggle. The 'enemy' occupies a position within only the first moment, as the antagonist of the concrete universal. That the *Manifesto* does not identify an enemy is thus not at all surprising since it does not reach the point of identifying the general universal principles that underpin the project and from which, then, we could identify the concrete universal and its enemies. What I want to contribute here is some speculation as to what these may be and how the problematic of the *Manifesto* can be extended.

THE ENEMY; OR, IN PRAISE OF SELF-MASTERY

One significant aspect of those problems we face today as outlined in the *Manifesto* is that which is common to them all. On one general level we could say that the crises of health care, education, labor, and so on, are all symptoms of capitalism, and this is certainly true. But also common to them is the peculiar truth that the agents who are responsible for defending them are, more often than not, those who have done the most to bring them to their current lows. In relation to these examples, it is more often than not that doctors, labor leaders, and academics have played an active and eager role in subverting the labor movement, education, and health care. The role of doctors in limiting the availability of health care is fundamental and this has been demonstrated very often, most recently in their opposition to current efforts to reform the health care industry in the United States. Those of us in academia are witnesses to the fact that academics themselves very cheerfully abandon any fidelity to higher learning and educating students in the name of fiscal prudence, rankings, grants, job training, market priorities and, ultimately, self-interest. Similarly, labor unions have increasingly become organizations for controlling workers and limiting their agency rather serving as the weapons of their constituents.

None of this is any news to the authors of the *Manifesto* or to most others on the left. But the question remains, how is it that there is so little capacity today for individuals to form or maintain a dedication to any principles beyond their immediate self interests? After all, if we cannot rely on doctors to defend medicine, academics to defend education, or labor leaders to defend workers, what hope is there for a principled fight against the current social order? One characteristic we see displayed in all of these examples is the propensity towards obedience, voluntary servitude even. This propensi-

ty is certainly to be understood as belonging to the register of the enemy as are the conditions, agents, and strategies that lead to this propensity. No doubt, one fundamental dimension to this problem is the degree to which liberalism has structured contemporary societies and eradicated traditional values, such as honor, to something one only finds in the mountains of Algeria or in the mafia movies of Hollywood. Possessive individualism is so pervasive today that even political leaders and other public servants are seen as utility maximizers; perversely, liberalism has become so successful that it has even eroded its own notions of public virtue. Rational choice theory has become the dominant analytical model for understanding the behavior of politicians and, in popular perceptions, politicians are often seen as self-interested hustlers while civil servants are often presented as lazy freeloaders. The perceived unavoidability of self-interest is such that when politicians flagrantly display the particularity of their interests (Berlusconi for example) people are no longer shocked or especially troubled. From the standpoint of political organization, we see that the logic is increasingly one of producing only a single type of human being, fundamentally servile and obedient. It is no longer a matter of class position or education that corresponds to the propensity for obedience or servility. The executives of banks and other financial institutions, as we have recently seen, proved themselves as servile as everyone else, unable to resist lining their own pockets even when it was clear that it was to the detriment of their own institution as well as the broader economy. In this context, Schumpeter's critique of modern capitalist bureaucracies seems especially prophetic.

A corresponding development is the desire for mastery over others. As servility and submission to organizational/market hierarchies have become more pronounced and entrenched, a displacement has occurred toward the desire for mastery over others. Just as children desire pets as a counter to their own powerlessness, as something they can exercise power over, we find a spreading of this tendency to all segments of society. The ubiquity of pet ownership itself is symptom of this, dogs have become stand-in slaves led around town in chains and completely dependent on their masters for their wellbeing. Most organizations today display similar tendencies, each managerial level completely subservient to the one above and the powerless managers focused on mastery over their immediate inferiors. The impossibility of self-mastery has greatly increased the desire for mastery over others and is the libidinal glue which holds together the bureaucratic chains of command that enslave us all, even if in different levels of comfort.

If there is a need to turn Left, then this should be a turn toward the capacity for self-mastery, self-rule, and a turn away from subservience to others. The enemy is inside us, formatted and individualized as we have been through the myriad of state apparatuses, and externalized in the form of managers, technocrats, bureaucracy, and so on. The strategic dilemma before us is to engender a greater capacity for disciplined and principled action among ourselves and to radically transform all of those material conditions that have led to the abandonment of honor and principled action in favor of servitude, self-interest, and comfort. This is obviously a difficult question and one which necessitates a discussion of much of what the *Manifesto* emphasizes: worker councils, popular education, and so on.

It is best to leave a fuller discussion of strategy to a more appropriate moment but if we take the capacity for political life to be a fundamental goal of the Left and servitude and those who desire it and impose it to be the enemy, then the strategic stakes and context should become more clear and concrete. We can imagine revolutionary schools of popular education where we not only learn Gramsci and Hegel but also self-discipline and dedication to principled action. We can imagine the overthrowing of bureaucratic hierarchies and the shaming of academics, doctors, and others who demonstrate their incapability to be faithful to their profession. Only by identifying the enemy and universal political principles of the Left can we proceed with furthering the task of political organization and action.

In this brief and schematic rejoinder to the *Manifesto* it is impossible to develop arguments in any great depth. My point has simply been to point to a key weakness in the text when it comes to political goals and principles and to suggest one way of addressing this weakness. In my opinion, the 'Left turn' as outlined in the *Manifesto* does not trace a clear and revolutionary path, it remains mired in the liberal world of self-interests and commodious living. Rather than taking the safe route of simply demanding better living conditions, we need the courage to demand human excellence and all that it presupposes.