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Situations manifesto

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SITUATIONS MANIFESTO

Stanley Aronowitz and Peter Bratsis for the Editorial Collective

It does not matter how long realism affords the mind the luxury of intellectual response; the striking fact is that every fruitful scientific revolution has forced a profound revision of the categories of the real. What is more, realism never precipitates such crises on its own. The revolutionary impulse comes from elsewhere, from the realm of the abstract.

Gaston Bachelard *The New Scientific Spirit*

THE CRISIS

WE ARE IN the midst of a political and conceptual crisis. Deterministic thinking on the left has converged with a general sense of powerlessness, with the view that social relations today are, largely, immutable. The conviction that society can be changed for the better, which characterized left politics in earlier decades, has greatly diminished. From today's perspective, there is little room for social agency. People participate in anti-war marches with little hope that they will actually succeed. Politics increasingly seems to be fixed and conspiracy theories flourish. The revolutionary projects of the past are seen as naïve, utopian, unrealistic. At best, progressive politics consists in defending the remnants of Keynesian policies and civil liberties in the face of the liberal-authoritarian programs of the capitalist state. In the United States - in partial contrast to Western Europe, where every step by the right to dismantle elements of the post-war compromise between labor and capital is met by mass resistance - only the anti-war movement has mounted popular protests on a large scale, and then only sporadically. Trade unions have become veritable bystanders in their own destruction; once vital social movements such as those of feminism and black freedom are in disarray.

As the right has undertaken a frontal assault on the remaining institutions of the welfare state - destroying programs of income security, threatening

to dismantle the national pension program, weakening bankruptcy laws that offered some relief to both working and middle class people who suffer from excessive debt, and undermining or flagrantly refusing to enforce environmental protections – it has displayed an alarming tendency towards barbarism in its attitude towards human rights. Abu Ghraib was by no means an aberration; as recent revelations of at least 26 civilian murders by US forces in Iraq indicate, barbarism is now part of national policy. Perhaps the term “barbarism” offends some sensibilities who persist in the view that “it can’t happen here”. Consider the government’s program of surveillance of the political opposition in the name of homeland security; the brazen regimentation of children and teachers entailed by No Child Left Behind; and the fiasco of labor law which now protects employers against workers. Is the next step the formation of a labor front in which “unions” are formed by the government or by the employers to keep workers from organizing unions of their own choosing?

The United States, the last superpower, at least in military terms, is rapidly renewing its version of militarism, extending the prevailing policies of military Keynesianism, which has marked successive rightist national governments since 1981. The difference from the U.S. militarism of the past is that while the post-war U.S. global expansion corresponded to its economic and political ascendancy – and made room for a rising standard of living, improvements in the conditions of blacks and Latinos and, during the Vietnam war, tried to win the hearts and minds by promoting a truncated version of social justice – the current situation is more dangerous because militarism is a displacement of the decline of the national economy and is accompanied by a Napoleonic mission of world domination in the name of spreading “democracy”.

As liberals and leftists scramble to put their collective fingers in the dike, but without the capacity to rethink the structure itself, the right opens up new fronts of class and social warfare. Most significant is that the right has offered a vision of a new life, one intended to capture the popular imagination. It has appropriated and transfigured the traditional radical slogans of workers’ control and participatory democracy with a populism that has confounded its opponents. The concept of the “ownership society” corresponds to the economic-liberal disdain for all forms of collective action as well as its subversion of the radical idea of individuality. By elevating individual “ownership” to the level of a cultural ideal, it has found a powerful way to justify all forms of dismantlement and suggested a return to a social atomism similar to that in classical English political philosophy. Ironically, this

turn occurs precisely at the moment when the concentration and centralization of capital, and its concomitant concentration of political power, has reached new heights. For, we live in a time when to find a small grocery store, a shoe repair shop, or pharmacy—the everyday hallmarks of community life—is as rare as an early 20th century bottle of wine. And, in place of solidarity with the working poor, even the working poor are encouraged to view themselves as consumers who shop at Walmart because their primary value is to seek and secure a bargain.

The crisis of imagination, which plagues many social movements as well as left theoretical tendencies, is both a symptom of and a contributing cause of the current political malaise. The legacies of orthodox Marxism combined with the increasingly ubiquitous belief in the naturalness of the economic has led to a turn away from the questions of politics and of culture, preferring to assert some form of economic determinism. That Capital prevails, in part, because it can capture the hearts and minds of large segments of the underlying population—and not only the middle classes—is ignored or categorically denied. At least most of the recent work on globalization presents itself in images creepily reminiscent of the formulations of the 2nd and 3rd Internationals at the turn of the 20th century. In short, it is a moment when the dialectic of defeat pervades the space of social and political thought.

THEORY AND IMAGINATION IN THE AGE OF REDUCTIONIST THOUGHT

When C. Wright Mills wrote *The Sociological Imagination*, the tenor of modern societies was such that he confidently declared the impending cultural and analytical dominance of the ‘sociological imagination.’ Just as the natural sciences had once displaced speculative philosophy and religious mysticism, so now social science was displacing a specialized, formalistic and mechanistic ‘science.’ This increasingly suspect technologized science had created the means for world destruction and was, according to Mills, alienating and incapable of addressing the fundamental concerns of human beings. Under this scenario, categories derived from the natural sciences which had been central to social analysis, the idea of ‘human nature’ for example, as well as the deterministic undertones of the natural sciences, were in the process of being overturned and replaced. More imaginative and rigorous understandings of human societies would emerge as a result of this shift in the dominant mode of inquiry.

Looking back upon Mills's arguments nearly fifty years later, one cannot but marvel at the stark reversal that has taken place. Microbiology and the genome now reign supreme as the foundation for understanding human societies. Everything from excessive credit-card debt to bulimia and suicide can presumably be reduced to genetic causes. Moreover, our lives are increasingly saturated by and dependent upon technologies in ways that even Mills could not have anticipated. The virtues of personal computers, satellites, mobile phones, CAT scan machines, and so on, have largely erased any anxieties and uncertainties that accompanied the dawn of the nuclear age. As far as science's failure to address the fundamental concerns of humans, this still may be the case but, rather than turning to socio-political thought, a resurgence of religiosity and mysticism has marked contemporary societies. This turn has manifested itself in the increasing popularity of Christian fundamentalism, astrology, Kabala, Buddhism, and a plethora of other mysticisms and new-age doctrines.

In this context, where a great host of complex social and individual realities are reduced to biochemistry on the one hand and/or the supernatural on the other, social science as a whole and radical political thought in particular has failed to provide much of an alternative. The reductionistic thinking that permeates contemporary society is more than reflected in the current state of social thought. On the one hand, theorists such as John Rawls and Michael Walzer, among many others, attempt to reduce politics to an exercise in applied philosophy. Normative questions revolving around the issues of justice and war, for example, are technicalized and presented as belonging to the realm of experts. How should resources be distributed? Should we go to war? Normative political theorists have asserted that there are right and wrong answers and that they know what the correct answers are. Fortunately or unfortunately, as these normative theorists craft and recraft their schemas and proofs, real politics continues unfazed. This elitist and futile tendency within political and social thought harkens back to the Platonic tradition and, in the last instance, posits some extra-social realm of truth, be it nature or god. For all the trees that have been sacrificed to theories of justice, they have offered no alternative to the reductionism that plagues modern thinking nor have they explained any social phenomena or recast any social category.

On the other hand, more analytically focused social scientific thought, although certainly more useful than its normative counterpart, has also been very susceptible to reductionistic thinking. Rational choice theory, structural-functionalism, behaviorism; a multitude of social and political

phenomena are reduced to a few standard causes. Even, if not especially, in left theory this is the case. In spite of the attempts within Marxist and allied thought in the 1930's and 1960's to come to a theory of politics, to an understanding of the political that did not reduce it to a simple reflection of the economy or the will of some capitalists, radical thought today has again slipped towards reductionism. The contributions of Lenin, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Mao, Sartre, Benjamin, Lefebvre, Althusser, Castoriadis, and so on, are not forgotten but their overlapping projects remain derailed. Looking to the contributions within the left today, we see that significant and popular authors such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Noam Chomsky, and Antonio Negri take politics to largely be reflections of economic processes and interests. For Wallerstein and world-systems theory, the forms of politics, political identities, and political conflicts can all be explained by way of the world-system and the workings of capitalist exploitation and its division of labor. Within world-systems theory, even hyper-deterministic and quasi-astrological concepts like Kondratieff waves retain validity. For Negri and Michael Hardt, capitalist globalization brings about the reterritorialization of political space, the political logic of empire, and creates its own gravedigger in the form of the 'multitude'. Even in the very popular and greatly respected work of Karl Polanyi, the political movements and shifts that allow for the emergence of the capitalist marketplace are often presented as little more than politics conforming to the needs of the economy. One is hard pressed to find a negative word regarding Polanyi's work and it is usually presented as a key in the shift to understanding the agency of politics within capitalism but, despite its many virtues, his argument on the political often reduces it to a reflection of the base. Politics may help constitute the economy but, as Polanyi presents it, it is responding to the functional needs of the capitalist economy as it does so. Whether discussing the enclosures or the Corn Laws, the impression given is that these were necessary and unavoidable from the point of view of the economy.

This reductionism is also characteristic of the work by Chomsky. In book after book, Chomsky presents the economic interests and interpersonal networks that underpin the actions of the state and its allied institutions. Politicians together with oil company executives and media moguls bamboozle the masses. Chomsky sees his task as uncovering this process and providing us with the 'real story'. The problem with such a project is that, even if they do not know the specifics, the dominated classes already know that they have little power. They know that wealthy corporate elites have an inordinate amount of control in politics. They know that, here and

around the world, the subaltern classes suffer at the hands of economic and political elites. As Leonard Cohen puts it, 'everybody knows that the dice are loaded'. Retired steelworkers who lose their health benefits do not need to read Chomsky in order to understand the political repercussions of economic inequality nor do displaced Chinese farmers or Brazilian housemaids.

Indeed, as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* made its way across the United States leading up to the 2004 election, we saw that 'the facts' did little to transform the realities of American society. As the epigraph from Gaston Bachelard argues, realism and 'the facts' do not in themselves bring about a transformation of the real. Although Chomsky and his 'real stories' are important and have a useful role as a kind of left *reportage*, they are insufficient as transformative knowledge. More generally, the economic reductionism of much of radical thought today corresponds very well with the type of understanding that many within the dominated classes already have of society. Economic determinism poses no challenge to the reductionistic notions of causality that dominate popular thought; there is no room for popular agency and the radical imagination.

THE PROJECT

The project of *Situations* is to address this lapse of the radical imagination in both left theory and in popular consciousness. It aims to explore the social conditions and lived experiences that have led to this malaise and to support explanations that do not reduce political phenomena to a reflection. *Situations* will examine the fields of academic and cultural production in order to identify the systemic causes of this inability to break with lived experience. *Situations* will publish critical assessments of radical political thought with an eye towards identifying that which is still useful and that which is insufficient for understanding what is new and different in politics and culture today. *Situations* will publish critical examinations of social movements and popular attempts to guide political change. *Situations* will foster modes of thinking that recognize the creative role that society plays in its own production. In opposition to simple determinisms, *Situations* will attempt to show the contingencies and peculiarities, the over/underdetermined nature, of political phenomena. This is not viewed as simply a methodological precept but as a pragmatic and political necessity in the attempt to overcome reductionist thought. Our understanding of politics is so hermetically sealed, so free of contingencies, that very few of us, if any, have any real hope for substantive change or a revolutionary

break. *Situations* will attempt to bring the theory of politics and questions of strategy back into the fore of left thinking.

Mindful of its role as a journal, *Situations* will attempt to actualize its agency through creativity in ideas and concepts. *Situations* considers the limit to agency today to be self-imposed, an outcome of our own paralysis and lack of originality in the face of a rapidly changing and seemingly automated world. We will search out the revolutionary impulse that comes from the abstract, from breaking with lived experience and seeking new ways of understanding and situating ourselves within society.

BASIC TASKS

- 1 Identifying what it is about contemporary society that leads to the perception of hopelessness and determinism.
- 2 Examining the field of academia and intellectual production and identifying the systemic causes of its inability to break with reductionism and their own scholastic tendencies.
- 3 Critiquing the dominant trends within Left theory towards economism and scholasticism.
- 4 Starting an open discussion toward building a new theory of politics to address the current situation. Actualizing a critical discussion of key concepts and precepts of Left theory, and asking what concepts are still analytically and strategically useful and what areas need new ideas and discussion.
- 5 Exploration of core questions regarding theoretical practice, political strategy and political/social movements. Specifically, an analysis of the post 9/11 practice of the anti-globalization movement. We need to ask the question about a new “historical bloc” and we need a searching discussion of the fate of the “new” social movements at the turn of the 21st century. How to address the enormous success of social conservatism in putting feminists on the defensive? What are the influences that have led to the virtual silence on the widening economic and social gap between the black middle class and the black working class?

Why has there been so little outcry against the burgeoning unemployment and unemployment afflicting wider and wider social layers?

- 6 The decline of the labor movement. Why? And is there a new labor movement in process? This question addresses the new forms of labor struggle in the United States and abroad, and the prospects for global labor solidarity to deal with capital mobility, state repression of workers' struggles and declining living standards.
- 7 Defining "Class" "the people" "multitude" how are they different? How are they similar? Here we will explore the question of the "new" anarchism.
- 8 Facing of the most severe ecological crisis in human history, why is there no serious discussion in left circles concerning its centrality? Why is the environmental movement unable to mobilize protest and resistance against the life-threatening policies of Western governments, and especially the Bush administration?
- 9 How is it that the right has effectively (in the advanced countries) been able to mobilize "the people" for its own purposes. We want to once again raise the Reichian question of libidinal economy in the current situation. Why has the right captured the politics of hope? Why is the left confined to debunking capitalist iconography?
- 10 Reading the current temper through examination of popular culture (music, film, television and literature).
- 11 Exploring the significance of the new media, e.g. the internet as a means of organizing and a means to create a new public-sphere; the question of digital technology as a new sensibility that has implications for politics.
- 12 Attempting to discover a possibility in the dynamics of international law to significantly confront the movements of empire or is this just another left/liberal fantasy.