
Whither Marxism? Why the occupation movement recalls Seattle 1999

Chris Cutrone

THE PRESENT OCCUPATION MOVEMENT expresses a return to the Left of the late 1990s, specifically the 1999 anti-World Trade Organization protests in Seattle.

They both have taken place in the last year of a Democratic U.S. Presidential administration, been spearheaded by anarchism, had discontents with neoliberalism as their motivation, and been supported by the labor movement.

This configuration of politics on the Left is the “leaderless” and “horizontal” movement celebrated by such writers as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (*Empire, Multitude, Commonwealth*), John Holloway (*Change the World without Taking Power*), and others.

A dominant theme in the self-understanding of the 1990s-era Left was, as in the current occupation movement, “resistance,” rather than pressing for reforms—let alone revolution.¹

From the 1990s to the present

The collapse of Stalinism in 1989 began a period of disorientation and retreat for the avowed “Marxist” Left in the 1990s. This changed in the late 1990s, as disenchantment with Clinton grew.

Something similar has taken place ever since Obama’s election, amid the financial crisis, in 2008. The anti-war movement collapsed with the end of the Bush II administration. There is a lesson to be learned about the treacherous political effect of election cycles.

The bailout of Wall Street at first prompted a right-wing response, the “Tea Party” movement. But, after some brief rumblings in

campus occupations against austerity in 2009, ever since the Republicans captured a Congressional majority in the 2010 midterm elections, there has been a shift towards left-wing discontents, beginning with the Wisconsin State House occupation.

Looking back, the movement that emerged in the late 1990s (finding an exemplar in Hugo Chavez’s “Bolivarian Revolution” in Venezuela²), blossoming in the 1999 Seattle protests, was dealt a sharp blow, right after the Genoa G-8 protests in summer 2001 that sought to build upon Seattle, by the 9/11 attacks.

The standard narrative is that the anti-globalization movement was spiked and diverted by the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath—perhaps even intentionally so, as the left-wing 9/11 “truth” movement (indicatively prominent in the current occupation movement) was paranoid that the U.S. (or Israeli) government, and not al Qaeda, had perpetrated the attacks. Anti-globalization protest became occluded in the “War on Terror” era.

2000s anti-imperialist “Marxism”

The Left that developed in the 2000s was in contrast to the 1990s. The 2000s Left saw the return of the “Marxist” political organizations, pulling the strings of the anti-war coalitions after the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, especially in the lead-up to and after the invasion and occupation of Iraq.³

The preceding 1990s Left consciousness expressed by Hardt and Negri et al. was displaced, precisely because the apparent reassertion of traditional great-power “imperialism,” regarding the U.S. neocons as the essential political players in the post-9/11 wars, defied notions of global neoliberal “Empire.”

The anti-war movement of the 2000s meant a more traditional “Left” of political sectarian groups orchestrating a protest movement that had as its target a Republican U.S. administration. This meant that the anti-war movement inevitably became a shield for the Democrats, especially after Bush’s re-election in 2004, as most of the sentiment of “Left” opposition to the wars was taken from the so-called “realist” vs. neocon foreign policy perspectives of many Democrats, European statesmen, and even some Republicans.⁴

Post-Obama

Obama’s election dispelled the Left that yearned for a Democratic administration, revealing the bankruptcy of the “Marxist” Left

opposing Bush's wars.

But the "anti-imperialist" turn in the 2000s had been regrettable from the perspective of the 1990s Left activists who had crystallized their experience in Seattle in 1999 and Genoa in 2001, as well as in the burgeoning "World Social Forum" movement.

The younger generation of leftists who came of age around the anti-war movement was divided between those who received their political education from Marxism vs. anarchism. The young leaders in the new Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were, for example, mentored in the Chomskyan and Parecon perspective of Z-magazine writers Michael Albert, et al. The new SDS struggled to be more than an anti-war cause. Anti-Marxism informed the new SDS's "anti-ideological" bias, whose echoes return today in the occupation movement.⁵

Certainly the "Marxism" of the anti-war movement's "anti-imperialism" was deeply problematic, to say the least. The financial collapse and deepening economic crisis after 2008 is better ground for the Left than the U.S. wars of the 2000s had been. The issue of *capitalism* has re-emerged.

It is only right that such inadequate "Marxism" falters after the 2000s. Today, the "Marxist" ideological Left of sectarian organizations struggles to catch up with the occupation movement and threatens to be sidelined by it—as Marxist groups had been in Seattle in 1999.

It is a measure of the bankruptcy of the "Marxist" Left that organizations could only rejuvenate themselves around the anti-war movement, in terms of "anti-imperialism," submerging the issue of capitalism. But that moment has passed.

"Anti-capitalism"

In its place, as in Seattle in 1999, an apparently unlikely alliance of the labor movement with anarchism has characterized the occupation movement. Oppositional discontents, not with neoconservatism and imperialism as in the 2000s, but with neoliberalism and capitalism as in the 1990s, characterize the political imagination of the occupation movement. This is the present opportunity for Left renewal. But it is impaired by prior history.

The issues of how capitalism is characterized and understood take on a new importance and urgency in the present moment. Now, properly understanding capitalism and neoliberalism is essential for any relevance of a Marxist approach.⁶

The discontents with neoliberalism pose the question of capitalism more deeply and not only more directly than imperialism did. A Marxist approach is more seriously tasked to address the problem of capitalism for our time.

The need for Marxism is a task of Marxism

Anarchism and the labor movement, respectively, will only be able to address the problem of capitalism in certain and narrow terms. Marxist approaches to the labor movement and anarchism are needed.⁷

The need for Marxism becomes the task of Marxism. Marxism does not presently exist in any way that is relevant to the current crisis and the political discontents erupting in it. Marxism is disarrayed, and rightfully so.

The danger, though considerable, is not merely one of the labor movement and the broader popular milieu of the occupation movement feeding into the Democratic Party effort to re-elect Obama in 2012. Rather, the challenge is deeper, in that what is meant by *anti-capitalism*, *socialism*, and hence *Marxism* might suffer another round of superficial banalization and degradation ("We are the 99%!") in responses to the present crisis. The Left may suffer a subtle, obscure disintegration under the guise of its apparent renaissance.

Nonetheless, this is an opportunity to press the need for Marxism, to reformulate it in better terms and on a more solid basis than was possible during the anti-war movement of the 2000s.

This is the gauntlet that both anarchism and the labor movement throw down at the feet of Marxism. Can Marxist approaches rise to the challenge?⁸ **IP**

1. See Michael Albert, Chris Cutrone, Stephen Duncombe, and Brian Holmes, "The 3 Rs: Reform, Revolution, and 'Resistance': The Problematic Forms of 'Anti-Capitalism' Today," *Platypus Review* 4 (April 2008). Available online <<http://platypus1917.org/?p=318>>.
2. See Marco Torres: "The Dead Left: Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution," *Platypus Review* 25 (July 2010), available online here <<http://platypus1917.org/2010/07/09/the-dead-left-chavez-and-the-bolivarian-revolution/>>.
3. See Kevin Anderson, Chris Cutrone, Nick Kreitman, Danny Postel, and Adam Turl, "Imperialism: What is It, Why Should We be Against It?," *Platypus Review* 25 (July 2010), available online here <<http://platypus1917.org/2010/07/09/imperialism-what-is-it-why-should-we-be-against-it/>>.
4. See Cutrone, "Iraq and the Election: The Fog of 'Anti-War' Politics," *Platypus Review* 7 (October 2008), available online here <<http://platypus1917.org/2008/10/01/iraq-and-the-election-the-fog-of-anti-war-politics/>>.
5. See Laurie Rojas, "Red-Baiting and Ideology: The New SDS," *Platypus Review* 9 (December 2008), available online here <<http://platypus1917.org/2008/12/01/red-baiting-and-ideology-the-new-sds/>>.
6. See Platypus Historians Group, "Finance Capital: Why Financial Capitalism is No More 'Fictitious' than Any Other Kind," *Platypus Review* 7 (October 2008), available online here <<http://platypus1917.org/2008/10/01/finance-capital-why-financial-capitalism-is-no-more-fictitious-than-any-other-kind/>>; and "Friedrich Hayek and the Legacy of Milton Friedman: Neoliberalism and the Question of Freedom (In Part, a Response to Naomi Klein)," *Platypus Review* 8 (November 2008), available online here <<http://platypus1917.org/2008/11/01/friedrich-hayek-and-the-legacy-of-milton-friedman-neo-liberalism-and-the-question-of-freedom/>>.
7. See Cutrone, "Against Dogmatic Abstraction: A Critique of Cindy Milstein on Anarchism and Marxism," *Platypus Review* 25 (July 2010), available online here <<http://platypus1917.org/2010/07/01/against-dogmatic-abstraction/>>.
8. See Cutrone, "The Marxist Hypothesis: A Response to Alain Badiou's 'Communist Hypothesis'," *Platypus Review* 29 (November 2010), available online here <<http://platypus1917.org/2010/11/06/the-marxist-hypothesis-a-response-to-alain-badous-communist-hypothesis/>>.