

Damage

Menu

The New Social Movements Against the Old Left

James Heartfield

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Reproduced below, with slight amendments, is Chapter 8 of James Heartfield's The 'Death of the Subject' Explained, originally entitled "The Agency Debate."

It is hard to remember today that for sixty years radical thinking was dominated by the influence of a conservative, bureaucratic elite in the Soviet Union. The great movement of social change in the early twentieth century embraced a combative European labor movement, the intransigent women's suffrage campaign, and an anti-colonial revolt that stretched from Ireland to India and from Indo-China to the Caribbean. The containment of the Russian revolution in the years following 1917, though, had a profoundly limiting effect upon the prospects of social revolution. The defensiveness of the new caste of military-political officers in the Soviet Union led them to consolidate their regime with a policy of 'peaceful coexistence'. Between Stalin's seizure of power in 1921 and his death in 1954, the Soviet Union's influence reached its apogee as a consequence of the defeat of the Nazi empire in Eastern Europe and the alliance with Mao-Tse Tung's national revolution in China. Despite the appearance of dynamism within the Soviet bloc, it is now clear that Stalinism was a conservative social system, which simply expanded to fill the vacuum caused by the internal collapse of the European empires.

Appearances though, were decisive. The geographical existence of the Soviet bloc, and more, its expansion, seemed to indicate the negation of the capitalist system. Radical opponents of capitalism within the Western world allied themselves to the Soviet Union, with profoundly demoralizing consequences. Though the public face of official communism was combative, the opportunist strategy of the Soviet leadership was to compromise with the West wherever possible. In practice that meant that the communist parties in Western Europe and the nationalists in the developing world were subordinated to the Soviet Union's strategic defense. Time and again, the Soviet leadership used its radical credentials to counsel compromise. The conservatism of the Communist Parties also led to a resurgence of reformist parties. Reformism as a labor-movement strategy had been briefly eclipsed by the revolutionary wave of 1916-23. But once the Soviet Union sought peaceful coexistence with the capitalist world, it was predictable that the reformist parties of the Socialist International would consolidate their influence within Western Europe. By the time of the Sino-Soviet split in 1963, however, the high tide of Stalinism was beginning to ebb. The disintegration of the Soviet bloc was gradual, as first economic sclerosis in the seventies, and then the burden of a renewed Cold War in the eighties took their toll. It was this internal collapse of Stalinism that gave rise to a debate over who was to be the agent of change.

The debate over agency is often loosely described as the emergence of the New Left, a loose association of disparate groups and individuals, largely centered on the student activism of the sixties, in many different countries. These student radicals went on to be active in anti-war campaigns, especially over Vietnam, campaigning for civil rights for black Americans (as well as for Northern Ireland's oppressed Catholic minority), on the fringes of the Black Power movement, in the foundation of the women's liberation movement, and also of Gay Liberation. Later, such activists were to be found in the emerging environmentalist campaigns in Germany and California in the seventies, the squatters movement in northern Europe, as well as the clandestine terrorist groups, the Red Army Faction in Germany and Italy, and the Weather Underground in America. The defining characteristic of all of these movements, however, was that they were *outside* the official Communist Parties, and as a consequence, largely peripheral to the Communist- and Socialist-dominated official labor movements. The New

Left was self-consciously opposed to the ‘old left’, meaning the Communist Parties, the reformist parties and, largely, the trade unions. The paralysis, and eventual disintegration, of the Soviet bloc and the official communist parties that were tied to it, forced the pace of the New Left. Important figures on the New Left were often dissident intellectuals who had broken with Stalinism in disgust at such events as the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, or the Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 and of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Figures like Herbert Marcuse, author of the critical *Soviet Marxism* (1958), labor historian EP Thompson who founded the *Universities and Left Review*, and the Hungarian dissident Marxist Georg Lukacs, who put his own prolific output down to ‘house arrest’, were the adopted stars of the new radical students’ movements. Later, they developed their own stars, like student radical Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael, radical feminist Sheila Rowbotham, and Green Petra Kelly.

The Stalinist and reformist leaders of the official labor movement in Europe were pointedly hostile to any challenge to their authority. Anyone who wanted to influence working-class politics in a new direction had to run the gauntlet of rulebook obfuscation and straightforward physical intimidation. The norm was that trade unions discussed only economic issues, while political matters were referred to the party affiliate, Socialist or Communist. Where rules and regulations were not enough to dissuade dissident opinion, violence would do. Delegates to the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions, who disagreed with the Communist Party of Great Britain’s strategy for fighting the Industrial Relations Act, were beaten up. In Japan, Trotskyist candidates for the National Students’ Union were assassinated, as were anti-Stalinists in Turkey. In America, the problem was somewhat different. There the leadership of the CIO was fiercely anti-Communist and patriotic. The prospects for a radical intervention into the American labor movement were equally testing. The new generation of radicals did not, as a rule, challenge the official leadership of the trade unions, but side-stepped the organized working class altogether, to find new constituencies and fields of activism. Taking the path of least resistance, these radicals took their struggle elsewhere.

It was, perhaps, predictable that the activists and intellectuals loosely called the New Left would begin to develop a theoretical justification for their non-labor orientation. There were two components to this theory: first came the identification of new agents of social change; and then, after the event,

theories were developed to justify the circumvention of the working class, namely that the working class was in fact a conservative force. Ultimately these were two sides of the same coin. But the order they came in was important. In the flush of the *événements* of May '68 the sober conclusion that the working class was a reactionary force was not made explicitly; rather the more positive embrace of what came to be known as the new social movements characterized the New Left's appeal. It was only later, when the radicalism of the sixties gave way to a more somber era of the late seventies and eighties, that the labor movement was declared dead—by which time the prophecy had realized itself. This order of events meant that the debate over agency was disguised. It appeared to be an optimistic embrace of new sources of change. In content, though, it was the opposite. The search for new sources of agency was merely symptomatic of the new radicals' narrow social base. Though this New Left was very self-consciously opposed to the old Stalinist movement, it did continue certain established features of the old radical intelligentsia. Most characteristically, it shared the wish that change would come about through the *deus ex machina* of some external agent. Where the old radicals looked to Moscow for deliverance from the capitalist yoke, the New Left was excited by events in China, the Third World, and amongst the wretched of the earth. The question of agency was posed in terms that were at odds with any real sense of responsibility. Instead the quest was on to find a ready-made vanguard, whether amongst the peasantry of the Third World, or in black ghettos. The difficult task of convincing other people of the need for change was imaginatively circumvented in the identification of sections of society who were already revolutionary, without any need of political persuasion. It was the desire for a magical solution that drove the debate over agency, not a realistic strategy to take control of events.

As with the paradigmatic case of Algeria, the attraction of Third World conflicts was that they seemed to break out of the framework of the old left. While the first world had stabilized after the war, the putsches and coups of third world revolutionaries were often more dramatic. Radicals in the West embraced a variety of nationalist revolutions. The conflict between Stalin and Yugoslavia's Marshall Tito seemed to offer new possibilities in the non-aligned movement, while the Sino-Soviet split invigorated student radicals with its more militant, peasant-led version of Maoist communism. The somewhat isolated **revolutionaries of the Trotskyist Fourth International** dreamed of “the fundamental dynamics of the Latin American revolution...

developing into a socialist revolution without intermediary stages.” This was essentially a dream that a Latin American Santa Claus would deliver socialism under the Christmas tree without any need to work to achieve it. These same revolutionaries could not help but be impressed by the events of May ’68, and promptly set about developing a theory of a ‘New Youth Vanguard’. **“All these student movements, despite their social composition and their political and theoretical contradictions, have developed an anti-capitalist and revolutionary consciousness on a broad scale,”** they wrote. The wish was father to the thought. If only we could find ready-made revolutionaries, there would be no need to do the dull business of winning people to the cause. And the advantage of the presumed ‘New Youth Vanguard’ was that it was outside of the influence of the traditional labor movement, avoiding the need to challenge the old left. **“The revolutionary upsurge of May 1968 confirmed both the qualitative change in the relationships between the new vanguard and the traditional organizations as well as the considerably expanded opportunities for work by the revolutionary Marxists within this vanguard.”** It was clear why the ‘Fourth International’ needed the students, but not so clear why the students needed the Fourth International. After all, if they already were fully-formed conscious revolutionaries, then they would create their own future, as, in a sense, they did.

Writing about the emerging youth culture and its radical dimensions Tom Nairn said ‘youth’ **“can for the first time assume an other than biological meaning, a positive social meaning, as the bearer of those pressures in the social body which prefigure the new society instead of the reproduction of the old one.”** John Clarke and his associates at the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies parodied Lenin with the suggestion that **“youth was the vanguard party—of the classless, post-protestant consumer society to come.”** But the difficulty was precisely that social change was reduced to a biological meaning in the cult of youth. There is nothing intrinsically revolutionary about youth. In the pages of the Communist Party journal *Marxism Today*, Don Milligan reproduced the statistical evidence of young people’s political affiliations—Young Conservatives 100,000 members, Young Liberals 15,000, Young Socialists 15,000, Young Communists 5000—and commented caustically: **“here we can see the unadorned evidence—the real situation is that the reactionary section outnumbers the progressive section by four to one”.** Milligan

accurately interpreted the much-celebrated protest songs of the sixties as more cynical than revolutionary.

In the United States a yet more potent argument was made for a new agent of revolutionary change: black Americans. The organization of the Black Panther Freedom Party drew together a number of black militants from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Democratic Party, and the civil rights movement. Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale had worked as administrators in Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty program. Stokely Carmichael of the SNCC had raised the slogan 'black power' in 1966, as well as organizing the Lowndes County Freedom Organization out of the delegates of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which had refused accreditation at the 1964 Democratic Convention. The Black Panthers raised the slogan of armed self-defense, and, citing their constitutional rights, openly carried rifles. The stage was set for an all out conflict with a nervous FBI. Many Black Panthers were assassinated or wounded and imprisoned in a year-long military campaign of armed raids and frame-ups. The revolutionary reputation of the Black Panthers left white radicals awestruck, as Tom Wolfe parodied in his essay 'Radical Chic', a description of Leonard Bernstein's fundraising dinner for the Panthers.

The militancy of the Panthers contrasted unfavourably with the generally conservative outlook of the white American working class. According to the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, only if white workers followed the lead of blacks, whose **"liberation struggle... is moving at a quickening pace"**, could they shed their "white skin privilege" and join the world wide revolution. **Leonard Harris and Cedric Robinson argued the case that the revolutionary subject was now the black race, not the 'white' working class.** So Harris writes, citing Robinson, that "Marx's model of the working class, to the extent that the working class is pictured as a historical subject... is misguided." "The radical nationalism of African people", by contrast, "is an historical form of subjectivity."

The revolutionary élan of the Black Panther Party was indeed impressive. But the very confidence with which the Black Panthers made their case tended to disguise their precarious situation. While radicals applauded them from afar, they were being killed off and jailed. At the high-tide of sixties radicalism, the Panthers' seized the moment, but their tactical creativity was

indicative of a relatively narrow and precarious social base. Once underground, they were isolated. Worse still, the ebbing tide of sixties radicalism left the remaining members of the group hunted and alone, in the face of a murderous FBI campaign. Radicals were impressed by the militancy of the Black Panthers, but the truth is that black militancy was born of desperation. They had been rebuffed by the Democratic Party and beaten by the Chicago police. Taking up arms was a sign of having very little to lose. The paramilitary defeat of the Black Panthers and the return of a hostile Republican administration in 1968 added to the demoralization of black America.

The lauding of the black vanguard said more about the frustrations of radicals with the greater part of the American working class, and their apparent indifference to the political agendas of the radicals.

The outcome of the debate over agency is often described as the emergence of the New Social Movements, as in the late Ralph Miliband's tribute to the **“quite outstanding contribution which feminist, ecological, anti-racist and other ‘new social movements’ have made.”** But the existence of the new social movements has often proved difficult to pin down. **The German social scientist Claus Offe's examination of the role of the new social movements is cautious.** “Even enumerations aiming at completeness are rare in the literature”, he says, before recommending Alberto Melucci's list of “the student movements, feminism, sexual liberation, urban movements, ecology struggles, the mobilization of consumers and users of services, of ethnic and linguistic minorities, communitarian and counter-cultural movements, the struggles around health issues, and others.” The difficulty in enumerating the new social movements is often short-circuited with a guilty ‘etc.’, as in **Roger Harris's rushed typology** of “socialist political parties, trade unions, feminist, environmental, etc., movements”. This ‘etc.’ tells us that Harris is building a movement in his head, as surely as if he had said ‘and Uncle Tom Cobbley and all’. Ralph Miliband's “and other ‘new social movements’” is only slightly less obvious. Martin Heidegger wrote of the homogeneity of modern society that there was a **“boundless etcetera of indifference”**, but this is the boundless etcetera of *difference*. It is the bad infinity of the endless sequence that can always be expanded by the addition of another forgotten or excluded social movement.

The ambiguity of the new social movements does not end with definitions. In fact **the new social movements themselves are in their nature amorphous, as Offe explains.** “The process by which multitudes of individuals become collective actors is highly informal, ad hoc, discontinuous.... They have at best rudimentary membership roles, programs platforms, representatives, officials, staffs, and membership dues. The new social movements consist of participants, campaigns, spokespersons, networks, voluntary helpers, and donations. Typically, in contrast to traditional forms of political organizations, they do not employ the organizational principle of differentiation in either horizontal (insider versus outsider) or the vertical (leader versus rank-and-file members) dimension.” The organizational ambiguity of the new social movements is presented here as an advantage over the old organizations. But is it? With officers elected by members, the rights of the members to challenge policy or leaders are clear. In an informal network, decisions cannot be tested, nor members held accountable for their actions. The environmentalist campaign Greenpeace has had considerable success intervening in the meetings of industry shareholders to protest over genetic modification and pollution. It is pointed that Greenpeace itself could never be the target of such an intervention itself. The organization has a tiny staff, and an unelected board. The millions of Greenpeace subscribers who pay standing orders to Greenpeace have no rights over policy.

However, it is a mistake to assess the new social movements in terms drawn from more traditional organizations. The formula ‘new social movement’ is something of a misnomer. What are called new social movements are not really social movements at all, in the meaning that the words suggest. The debate over agency should not be taken on face value. In the first flush of the New Left, these groups borrowed the language of the old left, of ‘vanguards’ and revolutions. As first expressed, the debate over agency was about the emergence of *new agents of social transformation*. But the appearance of the debate was deceptive. The real meaning of the ‘new social movements’ is a move away from the idea of an agent of social transformation altogether. The novel forms of organization are a break with the idea of collective agency.

Alberto Melucci, the Italian sociologist who has done most to theorize the rise of the new social movements, **makes this very clear.** “Social movements cannot be represented as characters, as subjects endowed with an essence

and a purpose within a *pièce* whose finale is knowable,” he writes. “Many analyses start from the implicit... assumption that the actor exists: in other words, that there is a ‘workers’ movement’, a ‘women’s movement’, a ‘youth movement’, an ‘environmental movement’, and so on.” What is wrong with this approach? Melucci explains, “the image of a movement as a character is inadequate.... These ‘movements’ reveal conflicts,” but “these conflicts do not have a subject.”

What Melucci is trying to say is that the new social movements are not agents of change and not historical subjects. That would be to see them in terms of the old social movements. What then is the positive effect of the ‘new social movements’? “The allegedly ‘anti-modern’ character of ‘movements’ in fact consists in their proclamation of the end of linear progress,” he writes, thinking, one imagines, of environmentalist and other defensive campaigns against unwelcome changes. Melucci thinks this is what is needed: “the central problem of complex systems is the maintenance of equilibrium.” Not social change then, but its opposite, the maintenance of equilibrium in the face of an unwelcome ‘linear progress’ is the concern of the new social movements. Reluctantly, **Claus Offe agrees** that the new social movements are essentially conservative in their character. “These movements often strongly emphasize the preservation of traditional communities, identities and social as well as cultural environments.” Also, new social movements are “abandoning the idea of progress and perfection in favour of tenaciously defending present values and identities.” As defensive and even traditionalist organizations, the ‘new social movements’ simply do not fit the model of an agent of social change, or an historical subject. That would imply a future-orientation and strategic intent that is alien to the underlying nature of the new social movements.

Instead of acting as historical subjects, the ‘new social movements’ are primarily concerned with ‘rendering power visible’. “Power which is recognizable is also negotiable, since it can be confronted and because it is forced to take differences into account”, Melucci adds. The strategy of bringing out into the open the ‘powers-that-be’ and negotiating with them is a long cry from the transformative action of historical subjects. It is, as Melucci perceptively explains, a process that leads to “*the selection of new elites....* In many Western countries during the 1970s, for example, collective action produced certain changes in left-wing or progressive political organizations (such as political parties and trade unions) and, above all,

resulted in the emergence of a new generation of skilled personnel in the key communications media, advertising, and marketing sectors of the ‘information society’”. **Offe agrees that the new social movements** “are rooted in major sections of the new middle class”. Offe claims that the new middle class is often allied with ‘decommodified’ or peripheral groups, such as middle-class housewives, students, the retired, and the unemployed. But the excluded sections are essentially in a subordinate relation to the new middle class, as Offe hints. “These two segments also sometimes share institutional environments, as in the cases of teachers and their students, social workers and their clients and so on.”

The transition from the radical rhetoric of the New Left to the elite-building middle-class politics of the New Social Movements needs to be accounted for. Where early on the talk was of revolutionizing sexual relations, race and society, in more recent times the preoccupation is with negotiating power, managing change, and maintaining equilibrium. Most pointedly the relationship of advocate to social group has degenerated into that between professional carer and client group. The explanation for these changes is not something that can be fully understood within the inner life of the new social movements themselves. Rather, it is in their relation to the central historical subject of the twentieth century, the collective subject of organized labor that all of the limitations and possibilities of the new social movements had played themselves out. Throughout the literature of the New Left and the new social movements, the central attainment that is cited as the turning point in the history of these movements is this: the understanding that the new social movements will not take a subordinate role to organized labor, and, in consequence of that, that the exploitation of labor by capital will not be seen as overriding the contradiction in modern societies. Using the terminology of the Chinese Communist Party in its breach with Moscow, the new social movements rejected the *hegemony* of the organized working class.

The irony is that, in truth, the decisive influence in the course of the new social movements has been the fortunes of the labor movement. As long as organized labor was strong, the New Left was essentially peripheral, and in its character radical. With the decline of the labor movement, the new social movements revealed their character as vehicles of a conservative, middle-

class outlook. The debate over agency took the form of a search for new social subjects, but the underlying trend that provoked that debate was the defeat of the historical agency of the working class. In **Russell Jacoby's account of the emergence of *the movement***, “the intensification of subjectivity is a direct response to its actual decline.”

Intriguingly the other aspect of the new social movements is their growing disappointment even with the alternative agents of social change identified by the New Left in the Sixties. The new social movements have turned their attitude to Third World nationalism through 180 degrees. Whereas solidarity movements uncritically embraced third world nationalism in the sixties and seventies, increasingly activism on Third World issues is coming to mean vilifying Third World regimes for their presumed human rights abuses. **According to human rights lawyer Geoffrey Robertson**, the “movement for global justice has been a struggle against sovereignty.” “The great play of sovereignty, with all its pomp and panoply, can now be seen for what it hides: a posturing troupe of human actors, who when offstage are sometimes prone to the chorus.” Radicals who would have been defending Vietnam against American intervention in the 60s were cheering NATO's bombardment of Belgrade in 1999. Not just Third World nationalism, but nationalism amongst the Black populations of the West is viewed with much greater anxiety than it was. The growth of the Nation of Islam in the US caused serious heart-searching amongst American radicals. Feminists were appalled by Louis Farrakhan's million-man march, as they were by the Promise Keepers' movement. Even looking back, the romance has drained from black militancy; Stokely Carmichael is today **remembered more often** for his statement that “the only position for women in the SNCC is prone” than he is for coining the phrase “black power.” In Britain the National Union of Students imposed a ban on Islamic groups for their opposition to homosexuality, and the gay activist group Outrage organized a campaign around the ‘special problem’ of gay-bashing in the black district of Brixton (Outrage have also targeted Zimbabwean president Mugabe, once a star of radical Third Worldists, for anti-gay laws in his country).

Of course it is true that many Third World nations have illiberal social policies, as it is that black men are not necessarily anti-sexists, or that women often collaborate in unequal relationships. But whoever thought that that was not the case? The New Left's powerful illusions in their chosen ‘vanguard’ groups created the conditions for this embittered sense of

disappointment. A more realistic approach would have understood that there are no spontaneously radical social groups, and political change comes as a result of convincing people; it does not fall out of the sky. This experience of disappointment, though, meant that the new social movements are qualitatively different in their attitude to the focus of their actions than were the New Left. Rather than advocating on behalf of given social groups, the new social movements have become interested in speaking up for those who by definition have no voice. The mode of advocacy is—at least in appearance—altruistic rather than representative. In the ecology movement this is most pointed. The subject of the ecology movement is necessarily amorphous. The subject is ‘nature’, which cannot speak. Or, if that appears too awkward, the subject is the future generations who will inherit the Earth from us. Similarly, many feminists have gravitated to advocacy on behalf of abused children, who, in the words of **Beatrix Campbell’s** book have suffered ‘Stolen Voices’. Rather than solidarity with mass nationalist movements, Third World activists have agitated on behalf of small national minorities, like the Ogoni in Nigeria, or indigenous peoples in Latin America. The characteristic feature of these campaigns is that there is little chance that the target of the beneficence of such campaigns will disappoint by failing to go along with the strategy. In fact the relationship has changed from one in which the subject of the campaign is itself an agent of social change, to one where victims become the mascots of altruistic campaigners.

The agency debate began looking like the invigoration of the left, with the identification of new subjects of historical transition. But the underlying motivation was a disbelief in the possibilities of building a popular movement out of the mass of working people. In its eventual conclusion, the development of the new social movements reveals these not to be social movements at all. Rather the underlying dynamic was always conservative and elite politics, though that could only finally be expressed with the defeat of the organized labor movement in the eighties.



James Heartfield writes and teaches in London. He is the author of many books, including *The ‘Death of the Subject’ Explained* (2002), *An Unpatriotic*

History of the Second World War (2012), and *The Equal Opportunities Revolution* (2017).



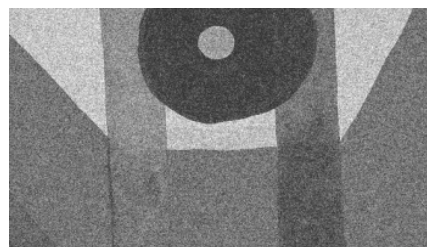
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