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Subversive Politics and the Imagination

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Magical Marxism

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SERIES PREFACE

What if the whole edifice is not as hegemonic as it appears? What if we only need a little, perhaps, a lot more imagination, now that economic crisis has twinned with the virtual collapse of legitimacy for much of the political class that signed up to the neo-liberal paradigm? What if the Marxist critique of capitalism is already the common-sense of many activists busily building alternative models to existing society? What if these practical political projects suggest to Marxism that to move from *critique* to *practice*, it must rethink means and even some ends? The 1990s spawned a new language of resistance and Andy Merrifield's book, the latest in the *Marxism and Culture* series, reflects that, as well as an impatience with some of the traditional language and concepts of Marxism, especially the ones that block the paths from critique to practice.

Everybody knows (as Leonard Cohen once sang) that the ship is leaking and that the captain lied. Given this, the task might be to move beyond recycling ever more opaque ways of saying pretty much the same thing (the frequent fate of academic Marxism) and get on with the task of fashioning a language fit for intervention and engagement. But intervention and engagement with whom? A small and by no means the most important part of what *Magical Marxism* offers the reader, is a survey of the many who are already creating practical models of alternative living. In those alternative models lie the seeds of future visions that challenge not only capitalism's logic but some traditional Marxist thinking on the good society as well and how to get there. Marxism's traditional paradox is that to succeed in the long run it must create the conditions that destroy the means by which it at first succeeds in the short run. Party, state and labor are not ends in themselves. At best they can only be the means to begin a journey that must at some point diminish these motors of change if something really

new is to emerge. Perhaps, as is argued in this book, the journey cannot begin at all with these motors. Lots of things that augur the genuinely new are in fact to be found outside the traditional terrain of the left.

Integration and intimidation muzzled the traditional political agent of Marxism (the organized workers) after the tumult of the 1960s and 1970s—but resistance is mobile and it simply relocated and mobilized in different forms. The language of liberation is increasingly one of *living* differently, a rather broader and many would argue a more radical vision than the more narrow workerist focus of Marxism’s traditional political imaginary. To live differently requires breaking the ossified husk of the old society and kick-starting the imagination as the creative wellspring from which real change comes. In the traditional Marxist imaginary, workers taking control of the means of production—usually the factory—was the powerful prefigurative projection into the future that served as the springboard for what a different society would look like. But what if the embryonic outlines of a different society are being drawn in many different ways outside the traditional model? A Marxism open to these initiatives would indeed be “magical.”

The prefigurative dynamic of culture thus looms large here as a resource for a new political imagination, inspired in large part by the culture and politics of Latin America, which has, since the 1990s, been the epicenter for resistance to neo-liberal capitalism. There are many cultures of living, of living cultures, that seed values, perspectives, habits, etc., that are explicitly antithetical to corporate capitalism, state power, and more broadly, institutional life, with its bureaucracies and hierarchies. If the participants of these new ways of living appear in the west to be overwhelmingly white and middle class, this does not in itself torpedo the validity of the politics, not least because similar political themes crop up in the global South where political agency is brown, black, and poor.

A new language of liberation is a risky project and as with everything new, it will make mistakes, go up blind alleys and fall flat on its face once in a while. In this new language, a more “orthodox” Marxism might with reason wonder where the state

is in all this talk of imminent transformation? For perhaps the edifice is not as shaky as it appears? Perhaps the timber is being happily colonized by the woodworm of alternative projects, but the concrete and steel remains sturdy and strong and will not be eaten away from within? And perhaps in many cases, these alternative projects, these alternative ways of living are content to remain “autonomous zones”, various escape routes that will never converge, never seeking broader social transformation?

Yet for all the difficulty in coming up with answers to such hard political questions, a more orthodox Marxism must let itself be infused by the utopian energies and aspirations, politics, and practical ideas flowing from the movement of movements. It must ask the hard questions to itself as much as to these multiple alternatives flourishing independently of corporate and state surveillance and power (independent for now, but what of tomorrow?). This is so if Marxism does not want to imitate what it seeks to overthrow.

The gap between the multiple political subjects today and the political subject of Marxism’s traditional imagination may still one day close in unexpected ways. And one suspects that such a prospect would truly frighten the life out of our rulers. As general strikes roll across Europe as the economic crisis unfolds, it is obvious that such a convergence cannot be ruled out. For the moment it is in this gap that any revitalization of Marxism and socialism will be found. It is not the project of this book to attempt to close this gap and reconfigure both sides of the equation, the old political subject and the new political subjects. But arguably this is what the coming revolutions *must* accomplish and will only do so with the help of intelligently optimistic, imaginative and poetic works like Andy Merrifield’s *Magical Marxism*.

Esther Leslie (Professor in Political Aesthetics at Birkbeck, University of London) and Mike Wayne (Reader in Film and Television Studies at Brunel University)

PREFACE

This book attempts to make mischief with Marxism, tries to subvert and refresh it, tries to shake it up from *within*. It pits a fantastical, dreaming Marxism in comradely opposition to scientific and staid versions of Marxism, doing so as it denounces the criminality of bourgeois society. It's a book that will doubtless fall between two stools, appalling the purists for its revisionist meanderings, turning off others with its Marxist pretensions, because it remains *too* Marxist. Yet what's on offer here isn't a deeper, more profound Marxism so much as a broader, more versatile one, a more supple Marxism that happily falls between these two stools because it bounces right back up again; and, besides, down there, in the space in between, between the stools, lurks a great big shady world of other mischief makers, young radical people, and maybe a few older ones, too, all of whom fall between two stools themselves. This book hopes to find its audience in this shady world of the unaffiliated, suggesting that they're actually more Marxist than they might think, and that we who call ourselves Marxists might become less Marxist than we think while still remaining good communists, while still keeping the red flag flying. Together, we might be able to do dangerous subversive things, mischievous things. What this book puts before its readers, then, isn't perhaps a "bad Marxism," as John Hutnyk might have it,¹ but a "mad" Marxism, a mad *magical* Marxism that calls upon the magician, that invokes a magical madness as the necessary nemesis of the chaos of our crazy times.

The book has arisen out of a double dissatisfaction: an obvious dissatisfaction with the world and a more delicate dissatisfaction with actually existing Marxism, out of a belief that the two are intimately related, that the understandable pessimism of the era has equally contaminated Marxism itself, has turned it inward and defensive, made it safe and cautious because it justifiably

feels under threat, because it fears itself crumbling into dust like the Berlin wall. Here, though, I want to propose a corrective to Marxism's serial pessimism, to its perennial bad faith. Here, too, my dissatisfaction also embraces certain Marxist journals and scholarly publications, which, for a long time now, have seemed unreadable to me, too dry and predictable, too *exclusive* to insiders. Perhaps I'm not alone in thinking this? The many long, detailed articles and analyses of crises and disasters, of capitalist catastrophes, never seem to excite or inspire me, even when they are almost always right: as Marx said of the bourgeoisie, they all appear to be happy in their alienation, or at least happy in their assessments of capitalist alienation, reveling in the one-way streets they've consecrated, in the dead-ends and no exits their portrayals have built around themselves.

For years and years, I've been content to call myself "amongst other things" a Marxist,² even in the United States where it was sometimes awkward, and even though I've never found a Marxist party or organization to subscribe to, any mouthpiece I felt I could really associate myself with or could wholeheartedly endorse. I've always felt like a fellow-traveler somehow, like Sartre's Mathieu in *The Age of Reason* who, despite Brunet's constant urgings, never could quite commit himself "institutionally" to the cause, never could sign up "officially" to any Marxism—not that anybody has ever asked me to officially sign up. Nor was this necessarily because I feared relinquishing my freedom; more because in refusing, in not participating institutionally, I could cling onto my membership card of the Imaginary Party, the one I knew existed out there, somewhere, the one I knew *had to exist* out there, and whose ranks are swelling. The present book is really written for this imaginary constituency, for those card-carriers I know really exist. To that degree, *Magical Marxism* will, I hope, appeal to all those stray, non-aligned mischief makers who want to do something radical, who want to invent another world because they know this one sucks. I have the distinct feeling—an inkling, really—that there are a lot of us about, a lot of people

sneaking about between two stools, plotting and waiting for news of what's going on above ground.

*

Prefaces are frequently the last thing authors pen to their books and this effort is no exception. It's in doing so that a writer can retrace his or her steps through their book, figure out what it might be, why it came about, now that the heat is off, now that the work itself has been done. One can reflect with a certain peace of mind, and then re-present the text as if it had been an *a priori* construct all along. In writing this preface, retrospectively, there are three key factors that now strike me as important in the book's genesis. The first was the decision I made back in 2003 to quit my life as an academic and go off to live in rural France, burying myself away initially in the Haute-Savoie, in the mountains, and then, a couple of years later, in an upland hideaway in the Massif Central, in the Auvergne, one of France's poorest regions. In fleeing urban life (New York), as well as the world of steady paid work, I wasn't sure if I was affirming my frustrated Marxist spirit or running away from it. I'd hitherto thought that radical Marxism meant engagement from within, from inside places of power like big cities, not opting out, downing tools and running to the outside, to some shadowy marginal world far away from urban life. Ironically, my choice of refuge was largely inspired by another Marxist, and a former metropolitan one, Guy Debord, who had himself tried to flee the spectacle during the 1970s—the “repugnant seventies” as he called them—and bivouacked in this self-same Auvergne, in a farmhouse behind a high stone wall. The house, he was fond of saying, “opened directly onto the Milky Way.”³

It turned out that this house became, after Clausewitz, a sort of post-'68 fortress for Debord, a block of ice in the course of river whose torrential current was either tossing people aside or forcing you to go with its flow. Clausewitz said that the effectiveness of defense—the effectiveness of any fortress—hinged on two distinct elements, one passive, the other active. The latter, he

said, can't be imagined without the former. Passive fortresses act as "real barriers," like barricades: they block roads, immobilize movement, dam rivers. Accordingly, they become "oases in the desert," "shields against enemy attack," "buttresses for a whole system of defense."⁴ Passive fortresses try to prevent an enemy's advance, making it both difficult and hazardous: from there you can launch an active attack and dispatch garrisons to intercept or seek out any enemy.

Not long after I'd arrived in the Auvergne, I realized that Debord's ghost lived on: not only in its physical proximity, but also in its political reincarnation. All around me, often hidden away in small hamlets and tiny communities, were and are groups of people who've constructed active and passive fortresses for themselves, and who are creating whole new collective defense systems against spectacular society and its culture of consumption. And from these outposts, from these "new undergrounds," these "new reserves," they're sometimes launching frontal attacks on this degenerative system. The idea of a "new underground" or "new reserve" is the mystical surrealist André Gregory's idea, from Louis Malle's film *My Dinner With André*: people are coming together, Gregory said, presciently, in their desire to create new practical concepts about how to live and function in our neo-Dark Age. We're glimpsing, he said, "new islands of safety where history can be remembered and the human being can continue to dream and function."⁵ And these islands are cropping up not only in my adoptive Haute-Loire but also in neighboring *départements* like Lozère, Aveyron and Corrèze, to name just a few, where people are struggling to affirm *terra novas* and new magical geographies of the imagination, new islands of safety inspired by dream, by the normative desire to do something more autonomous, something more meaningful in our own neo-Dark Age.

Against all odds, they're seeking out a more "authentic life" than contemporary capitalism, with its fast food and supermarkets, its labor markets and world market, can offer. Against an erstwhile deadening of the spirit at work, and a pollution of the mind at home, these people in their new communes, in their assorted ways, with their different links and survival systems,

now farm organically, make honey and bake bread, raise goats and fabricate cheese, do small-scale, ostensibly trivial things that hang together as something larger, as a social movement in the making, one that has political awareness as well as practical savvy and technical know-how, one that doesn't necessarily think of itself as class-based, yet knows all-too-well where it stands within the global system of capital accumulation. These people are forming collective micro-movements against the totalitarian mega-machine, disparate groups who often ally themselves with struggles worldwide, with the *Confédération Paysanne* and *Via Campesina*, with global landless struggles, fair trade issues, and food sovereignty in defiance of neo-liberal orthodoxies. The list is almost endless. It's as if they've read what the young Marx wrote in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, as if they're trying to shrug off alienating forces, trying simply to be themselves, trying to liberate themselves in their external, objective world at the same time as they free themselves in their internal, subjective worlds. Their authenticity is thus an authenticity of action and consciousness, something both real and ideal, a positive energy that creates pockets of light—"pockets of resistance," to use Subcomandante Marcos's term—pockets of affirmation. "Pockets of resistance are multiplying," says Marcos. "Each has its own history, its specificities, its similarities, its demands, its struggles, its successes. If humanity wants to survive and improve, its only hope resides in these pockets made up of the excluded, of the left-for-dead, of the disposable."⁶

And so what at first seemed to me an escape from politics, I've since come to consider as a *reframing* of politics; and its testing ground has been right before me, in my own everyday life. What I've seen emerge, and what is still emerging, still taking shape ever so steadily, and what I'll explore further in this book, is a new brand of Marxism that has at its core a neo-communist impulse: more and more people are electing themselves into office, subscribing to a new Imaginary Party, to the degree that now, rather than involve a fleeing to the outside, to the margins of society, this activism has transformed itself into a sufficiently large critical mass of people to be edging its way back *inside* society.

And it's assaulting society as it strengthens its rank-and-file. At least I think it is, hope it is, have to hope that it is...

The idea for a book called specifically *magical* Marxism came in a strange, unforeseen place, in a flash, and in somewhat bizarre circumstances: in a hammock in the Portuguese colonial coastal town of Paraty, mid-way between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, along Brazil's "Green Coast." There, amid a tropical downpour, listening to the rain dance off the palm trees, for about a week solid I read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and began to believe, believe in another reality, in another possible world, in a magical one. It's not that I didn't believe before, of course; it's just that the *surreality* of where I found myself somehow let me glimpse another aspect of everyday life, a fantastical one. I should say *re-read* *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, because for several years I had tried in vain to grapple with Gabriel García Márquez's epic saga of the Buendias, of Ursula and José Arcadio and their many, many offspring in the village of Macondo, hacked out of the middle of the damp jungle, not far from a sunken Spanish galleon. But I'd always been distracted by something, interrupted along the way, overwhelmed by the array of characters all bearing more or less the same name; I was never really able to get beyond the opening sequences with the gypsy magician Melquiades' mad inventions. Yet in Paraty, at the *pousada* "Caminho do Ouro," surrounded by fabulous plants, exotic flowers and little hummingbirds, all next to a gushing river, I was dazzled by García Márquez's vision of the world, by the vivacity of his human spirit, by our obsession with offsetting death, by life's emptiness without love, by our never-ending quest for adventure, for magic, for fantasy—for true fantastic reality.

Soon, after having the chance to spend a year in Brazil—to spend a whole year thinking about, conceiving and writing this book—I had a burning desire to enter into García Márquez's magical world myself, to let us all enter into his magical world, all those mischief makers out there, to become one his protagonists, to be Colonel Aureliano Buendia, *One Hundred Years of Solitude's* principal character, to spend time like him "sneaking about through narrow trails of permanent subversion."⁷ But I needed some point of entry,

some trail to sneak through, and before long realized that “the political” offered this entry point, realized too that the magical was also urgently needed in politics itself. Accordingly, *Magical Marxism* is an invitation to a voyage, an invitation to enter a magical realm, to learn how to take a looking-glass perspective on life and politics. The book asks would-be readers to sneak about in this magical world with me, a world many readers actually know better than the author himself, because they’ve already broken out of ordinary daily life, because, through their own active volition, they’ve entered into another everyday life, one where everything is possible, where all is permitted for people with imagination. As such, this magical world is already real, if we look hard enough around us; it’s just a question of changing one’s perception about what reality is, about what politics is, about what it can be, ought to be, and about how we can follow the white rabbit down a hole into another political realm, and how we can do so while still staying solid Marxists.

This leads directly on to the third factor in the book’s genesis: the magical dialogue that unfolds here is really a dialogue between Marxism as realism and Marxism as romantic dreaming, where the latter’s ontological basis differs significantly to the former’s. It is a dialogue that explores the respective efficacy of each camp for trying to transform the world, and for trying to transform Marxism. Hugely influential in this regard is the film—or rather *anti-film*—*My Dinner with André*, and the strange encounter between the skeptical realist “Wally,” who worries about making the next rent check, and the loose-cannon romantic dreamer André, who’s searching for new philosophical principles, for a new meaning to life.⁸ Everybody believes André has cracked up and gone mad, and Wally presents him as a cranky freak. The dialogue starts off lightly, even whimsically, but steadily the intensity and gravity gets ratcheted-up, until it is André’s existential voyage that dominates; he could talk all day and night if need be.

André bemoans the modern world’s incapacity to feel anymore, overwhelmed as it is by electric blankets, central heating and air-conditioning. People no longer have time to think, no longer want to think—are no longer allowed to think. At one point, André