

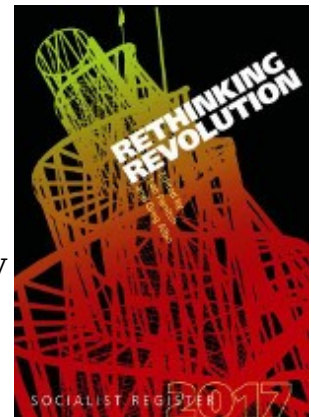
Food for Revolutionary Thought

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For those of us long enough in the tooth to recall what it was like ‘way back when’, there is sometimes a distinct whiff of something like the old sectarianism in the air these days. And it most often comes, oddly enough, from precisely those quarters which contrast their embrace of ecological and intersectional issues today with the alleged neglect of such by earlier socialist generations with whom they themselves once identified—but now proudly proclaim they no longer do for these reasons. I certainly discerned this lingering sectarian scent when reading Wayne Roberts account (<http://rabble.ca/node/127425>) of the Toronto launch of the 2017 *Socialist Register* on Rethinking Revolution (<http://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/issue/view/1792>).

As my coeditor Greg Albo opened the evening by saying, and is also said in the preface, we planned this volume not so much to look back at failed revolutions, as to try to constructively rethink what revolution means today. There will be in this centenary year many, many books that will focus in great detail on the Russian revolution, and it is indeed to be hoped they will address why, as Wayne rightly puts it, it never “allowed the free and open election of government officials... [or] empowered people to run their own daily lives in workplaces and communities as they choose.”



But for Wayne to claim that “no evening speaker or essayist talked or wrote seriously about” any of this is simply not true. Apart from what Bryan Palmer and Joan Sangster in their opening essay call the ‘Stalinist Thermidor’, the essay that follows theirs, which I wrote with Sam Gindin, argues that the democratic failure was rooted in Lenin’s and the Bolsheviks’ immediate tactical and strategic choices in 1917-18; and Greg Albo, again in his opening comments, drew attention, as I did in my closing ones, to the essay by the *Register’s* publisher, A. W. Zurbrugg, on “1917 and the Workers’ State” which is entirely devoted to detailing how the promise of workers’, peasants’ and women’s empowerment was stifled within the very first year of the revolution.

However, had Wayne Roberts indictment not gone further, I would have readily let it pass without a response. I would have taken it as indicating, despite his incorrect claim that this was not *at all* seriously addressed, that there was not *enough* of it. Fair criticism certainly, depending on what you want to concentrate on most in a volume on rethinking revolution. But what cannot be left alone are his astonishingly insupportable claims that the

volume totally ignores food and agriculture, let alone the role of peasants in revolution, or “the fact that several essays focused on the need to emphasize women’s struggles over the past 100 years, but none mentioned that food preparation and production have always remained the main household occupation of women,” or “the fact that the only reference to anyone who was ‘hungry’ was the result of a misspelled reference on page 21 to the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956.”

This last comment might suggest that Roberts has read the book carefully - and it might even be taken as funny - were it not for its neglect not only of Zurbrugg’s discussion of how ‘urban workers starved’ through the first year of the Russian revolution amidst severe tensions with the peasantry, but also of Andreas Malm’s essay, “Revolution in a warming world: lessons from the Russian to the Syrian Revolutions.” This was singled out repeatedly for special praise at the launch, and it centres entirely around the “catastrophe and famine” brought about by droughts, especially as climate change today “depletes groundwater and streams, parches the soil... and turns farmlands into cracked desert.”

It is especially surprising to see this volume’s attention to gender roles entirely ignored by someone whose critical comments appear to be especially speaking out for women. Joan Sangster’s talk at the launch actually began by noting how many women felt empowered by what Alexandra Kollontai and Clara Zetkin were doing to try to make familial and sexual liberation the *sine qua non* of social emancipation in Russia, and how this led female converts to revolutionary communism elsewhere to lead campaigns in which housewives mobilized around cost of living issues. Some may even think that this perspective makes the stress Zurbrugg puts in his essay on how, by the end of 1919, “women’s work remained: child-care cooking, etc. was unpaid and often unrecognised” appear unfair. What cannot be said is that this is a question that is left out.

But the problems with Wayne’s comments go much further. It is never a good idea for a critic not to read very much of a book he is criticizing. Peasants are at the center of the Wang Hui’s essay on ‘The people’s war and the legacy of Chinese revolution’. Robert Cavoors’s essay on Bolivia starts with the coca growers out of which Evo Morales’ MAS movement grew, and ends with how far Morales’ government is now in tension with the ‘anti-extractivist’, ‘internal horizon’ of ‘communal-popular’ economic and social practices like the Andean *ayni*, a mode of sharing common resources on a rotative basis.’ Steve Striffler’s essay on Venezuela addresses how amidst the current great inflation and food shortages the communal councils “have increasingly become oriented towards the creation of alternative sources of livelihood... with the idea of providing Venezuelans access to affordable goods through the creation of farms and non-profit shops.”

Patrick Bond's essay on "South Africa's next revolt" also addresses the importance of "commoning resources" among the rural poor who "lack access to basic means of production, such as land... live in crowded rural villages squeezed between commercial farmland (no longer exclusively white) and tourist game reserves." It also features urban mobilizations against water privatization as 'prefigurative examples of eco-socialist potentials', as well as the 'ideological innovations' of the Wimins eco-feminist network's critique of the Paris climate summit. David Schwartzman's essay 'Beyond eco-catastrophism' sets as its very first goal the 'creation of decentralized solar power, food, energy and farming cooperatives' alongside worker-owned factories as the foundation for a 'solidarity economy'. And among Andreas Malm's list of ten immediate demands (conceived as updating those in the *Communist Manifesto*), the reader will find the call to "limit the shipping of food and systematically promote local supplies" as well as to "dismantle the meat industry and move human protein requirements towards vegetable sources."

Of course, this is all easier said than done, as the experience with Syriza in Greece should starkly remind us today. Hilary Wainwright's essay stresses the importance there of the infrastructure of solidarity networks "created after 2010 as a strategy of survival against the relentless austerity measures coming from the institutions of the EU and IMF," and she rightly singles out "the links with agricultural production, as small and medium-size farmers who share the aims of the solidarity movement and have turned their farms into part of a solidarity food chain and into centres of education in eco-agriculture." But as Sam Gindin and I point out in our essay, a key measure of the left's failure in Greece was how far the Solidarity activists, including those from Syriza who went into the state, were unprepared for the challenge of transforming it:

Activists from the networks of food solidarity were rightly frustrated they could not even get from the new Minister of Agriculture the information they asked for on the locations of specific crops so they might approach a broader range of farmers. But they did not see it as their responsibility to develop and advance proposals on how the state apparatuses should be changed, even minimally, so as to cope with the economic crisis. For instance, how the agriculture ministry could have been engaged in identifying idle land to be given over to community food production co-ops, and in coordinating this across sub-regions; or how the defense ministry might have been engaged in directing military trucks (at least those sitting idle between demonstrations) to be used to facilitate the distribution of food through the solidarity networks... Insofar as the Syriza government has failed the most crucial democratic, let alone revolutionary test, of linking the administration up with popular

forces – not just for meeting basic needs but also for planning and implementing the restructuring of economic and social life – there were all too few on the radical left outside the state who really saw this as a priority either.

Wayne concluded his comments on the *Socialist Register's* attempt to rethink revolution with these defiant words: "If I can't eat local, sustainable and slow food, I don't want to be part of your revolution." Yes, indeed. although any sober perspective on this would need to take into account how hard it may be to do this through *the actuality of revolution* (the title of Jodi Dean's essay), which is no doubt why so many people shrink away from it no matter how unhappy they are with the current system. But we have to keep trying, and the *Socialist Register* will certainly keep trying to put a certain 'revolutionary optimism of the intellect' (the title of the volume's concluding essay) to work to this end. As Greg Albo mentioned in his opening remarks at the launch, the current volume is one of a series in the *Register's* current five year plan, and will be followed by another on 'ways of living' which will directly focus on how people might live well in the 21st century.

Had Wayne, who admits he "once shared the same heritage as most of the authors," wanted to ask any questions to clarify any of these matters he was free to do so in the question period, and we might have engaged a dialogue around food issues that could have been especially productive for planning this forthcoming volume. It is thus especially dismaying to see a certain old sectarianism, even if now poured into new bottles, once again getting in the way of what is obviously a common revolutionary goal.

Just one more thing. In his essay on the relationship between art and revolution today, 'Picturing the whole', Walter Benn Michael begins with a quote from John Berger talking about the political 'Uses of Photography' which says that most photographs are 'about suffering, and most of that suffering is man made', a point worth making because a lot of photography actually conceals it. Benn Michaels takes off from this to reflect on the political ways of seeing a recent book by the young American photographer, Daniel Shea. He concentrates especially on discussing a photograph of a young black man in southern Illinois. It is the first photograph to appear in all the 53 volumes since the *Register* was founded in 1964. The man, stripped bare to the waist, is fishing. •

