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Capitalism and the Marxist Imaginary at Yale (and Elsewhere)

Richard Levin

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This is a kind of response to Michael Sprinker's essay in the last issue of *Journal x* on the TA strike at Yale in 1995-96, but like him I won't be concentrating on the strike itself. Instead I want to look at some of the more general questions raised by it and by his essay, beginning with the relationship between capitalism and our colleges and universities. Sprinker's analysis of the situation at Yale is based on an attempt to equate colleges/universities with capitalist factories, and the centerpiece of this effort is a chart in which he lists the groups of people in the academic hierarchy, from TAs to trustees, and connects them with equal signs to groups in the factory hierarchy, from temporary workers to the board of directors (Sprinker 210). This is the equation that enables him to argue that graduate students are really workers and so are "exploited" by the appropriation of their "surplus" labor (213, 215).

Despite his use of equal signs, however, and his insistence that the two hierarchies are "exactly" alike and march "to the very same tune, responding to identical imperatives" applied "with equal force" (210-11), the fact is that this isn't an equation but an *analogy* and, like most analogies, it serves the analogist's agenda by focusing only on similarities (real or alleged) between the two things that s/he wants to connect and passing over their differences that weaken this connection.¹ The differences become obvious once we realize that his factory hierarchy omits two essential groups of people — the customers who buy the factory products and so provide its income, and the owners (shareholders) who put up the capital to

operate the factory and reap the profits from its income, or, in Marxist parlance, from the “surplus labor” of its workers.² The reason they’re omitted is obvious: when we add them to the academic hierarchy the analogy is in big trouble. The owners are the taxpayers for public colleges and nonprofit corporations for private ones, and, if we limit ourselves to undergraduate programs where virtually all TAs work, the only customers are the students (or their parents) who buy the product with their tuition.³ But this tuition income is always less than the cost of the programs, and so colleges operate at a loss, which means that the owners, instead of reaping a profit, have to make good the loss through taxes or the endowment. This in turn means that, since no profit is made from their work, no “surplus labor” in the Marxist sense is appropriated from the TAs.

It seems clear, then, that Marx’s analysis of capitalism and “surplus labor” doesn’t apply to modern colleges or other nonprofit institutions, and there’s no reason why it should, since Marx wasn’t dealing with them.⁴ There is, however, another aspect of the Marxist tradition that impels believers to extend this analysis to all aspects of society, which I’ll call the Marxist “imaginary,” using the term loosely to draw on both Lacan’s concept of an infantile imaginary order of illusory unity prior to our entrance into the symbolic order, and Althusser’s concept of ideology as an imaginary or “mystified” relation to — and hence “misrecognition” of — social reality.⁵

Actually, the Marxist tradition has two distinct but related imaginaries. One is the myth of “primitive communism,” an idyllic society in the childhood of the race when there was no individuality or conflict and people lived together in perfect unity and harmony. Not all Marxists still believe in this, although it was recently revived in Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* and Frank Lentricchia’s call (before his conversion, of which more later) for “a redemptive project” that will “make us whole again beyond confusion” (151).⁶ Nor is the idea limited to Marxists, since many other groups have similar myths of a utopia in the past from which we have fallen — the Garden of Eden for Jews and Christians, the Golden Age of the pagans, the good old days of the founding fathers or simple small-town life for some reactionaries, and so on.⁷

The second and much more important Marxist imaginary is a view of the world as a Manichean conflict between the forces of good and evil. This too isn’t unique to Marxists; it’s shared by many other people, especially on the far right, although their definition of the two forces is obviously very different. It’s often connected to the first imaginary, since those who believe in a lost utopia in the childhood of the race or nation usually believe it was lost because of some evil entity that still operates today and must be opposed by the good forces. For those who look back to the Garden of Eden, this enemy is literally Satan, and for those with other “edens” the enemy is typically given satanic qualities. Reactionaries do this to secular humanism or feminism or whatever they blame for the loss of our earlier innocence, and Marxists do it to private property, class division, and their modern embodiment in capitalism, which destroyed primitive communism and so becomes their Satan or Evil Other (hereafter abbreviated EO). Stephen Greenblatt observes that Marxists see capitalism not “as a complex historical movement” in a complex and changing world but “as a unitary demonic principle” (151), and this is borne out, for example, when Jim

Neilson and Gregory Meyerson “identify capitalism as the engine behind global suffering” (242), and when Sprinker says that college officials who deal with capitalist enterprises are “sup[ping] with the devil” (212). It’s an analogy, to be sure, but it serves his agenda and reveals his mystification of capitalism as the EO — the Wicked Witch of the West who, like Crabby Appleton,⁸ is “rotten to the core.”

The Manicheanism of the Marxist imaginary dictates not only that capitalism must be the EO locked in this struggle with the good (socialist) forces opposed to it but also that every other issue must be viewed as a struggle between two — and only two — sides, one totally good and the other totally evil, and that all these struggles must turn out to be the same. Sprinker makes this explicit in his final statement that “the fundamental social conflict in our time remains that between labor and capital” (217), or what he refers to in the same essay as the conflict between “workers” and “bosses” or “owners” (210, 213, 215).⁹ He also divides all political positions into the good “progressive” camp that fights capitalism and the bosses/owners and the evil “conservative” camp that supports them (217). He makes a similar division between those who oppose the trend to “corporatize” the university (anti-capitalist progressives) and those who support it (pro-capitalist conservatives) (211-12). He even divides literary critics into the same two camps: the bad conservatives who treat literature in aesthetic terms and the good progressives who treat it in sociological terms (213-14). The Yale TA strike becomes another example of this polarized division between good/progressive/workers and evil/conservative/bosses. In fact he defines this polarization twice as a choice between two sides — “I know which side I’d rather be on” (213), and “we all have to get our heads straight about which side we’re on” (215) — just as in an earlier essay dealing with broader issues he insisted that “The only real question . . . is: Which side are you on?” (“Commentary” 116).

Sprinker’s Marxist imaginary (or these aspects of it) can therefore be summed up in a little chart, which I offer as an explanation of his chart of the academic and factory hierarchies, replacing each equal sign with a “vs.”:

Evil	vs.	Good
capitalism	vs.	socialism
capital, bosses, owners	vs.	labor, workers
conservative	vs.	progressive
corporatized university	vs.	uncorporatized university
aesthetic criticism	vs.	sociological criticism
Yale administration	vs.	Yale TAs

I call this an “imaginary” because, as in Althusser’s definition of ideology, it presents those interpellated into it with a mystified misrecognition of social reality, which doesn’t come neatly lined up into good and evil sides. It also resembles Lacan’s imaginary since it’s a simplistic and childish view of life — exemplified in folklore, fairy tales, and children’s literature and TV programs — that erases all complexities, nuances, and uncertainties.

It's easy to show that each of Sprinker's binaries is a mystification or misrecognition of reality, beginning with the opposition of labor and capital that's supposed to underlie all the others since it's "the fundamental social conflict in our time." He says that "You don't have to be an old-fashioned marxist to recognize" this (217), but in fact you *do* have to be a Marxist to "recognize" (that is, misrecognize) it, because anyone else will see that the evidence against it is overwhelming. It's true that in capitalist societies there are always conflicts between labor and capital, but they're usually dealt with by a series of short-term solutions through negotiation, litigation, or legislation. In many parts of the world, however, the most fundamental, intractable, and violent social conflicts are between racial/ethnic or religious or regional groups, and while economic class plays a part in some of them, it's usually a minor one. Indeed the most important social conflict in our time involving labor as an entity was in Poland, where organized workers after a long struggle ("class warfare"?) overthrew their Marxist rulers, who clearly were the "bosses" and I suppose could be considered "capital" ("state capitalism"?), but I don't think that's the kind of conflict Sprinker has in mind. The evidence shows that there's no *fundamental* social conflict; there are instead many kinds of social conflicts that may be interrelated in many ways but aren't reducible to any one kind. But this appeal to evidence won't affect Marxists (who could dismiss it as "empiricist"), since their imaginary always already knows that there must be a fundamental conflict and what it must be.

The evidence also contradicts Sprinker's division of political positions into evil "conservatives" and good "progressives." For one thing, it fails to account for centrists or liberals — a matter of some interest to me since I was recently accused by a Marxist of being "a self-confessed liberal" (Drakakis, Review 406), which I self-confess is true — and it also fails to distinguish conservatives from reactionaries. Presumably, since the imaginary dictates that there are only two sides, all these non-progressives must be lumped together as evil.¹⁰ But even when we restrict ourselves to the "progressives" we're in trouble, since we can't tell if this is a code word for Marxists or if it includes non-Marxist feminist, black, and gay activists who are also trying to bring about a better society but aren't trying to bring down capitalism. And we're still in trouble even if we're restricted to Marxists. Is Sprinker on the same side as Stalinists or Pol-Potists or Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, who, as we'll see, doesn't want to be on his side? The evidence tells us that there are many political positions, and while they can be arranged roughly on a continuum (although even this creates problems at each end — how do we determine if Zavarzadeh is more or less "progressive" than Sprinker?), they can't be reduced to two opposing sides.

The same objections apply to the treatment of what Sprinker calls the corporatizing of the university — the growing trend to run universities like business corporations. Since his Marxist imaginary defines corporations (that is, capitalism) as the EO, any attempt by the university to imitate or traffic with them must also be evil, and so academics must line up on two polarized sides — the good guys who oppose the trend and the bad guys who support it — and these groups must in turn be equated to the polarized political sides, with the former group as "progressive" and the latter "conservative." But Jeffrey

Williams demonstrates that opposition to this trend runs across the entire political spectrum, from reactionaries who want to return to the good old days when the university was an elitist ivory tower unsullied by capitalism, to radicals who want it to be an instrument for overthrowing capitalism.¹¹ And liberals like me avoid blanket a priori endorsements or rejections of the trend because we want to judge each manifestation on its merits. We certainly oppose any “corporatizing” that interferes with the university’s educational mission, but since we don’t believe that capitalism is inherently evil, we won’t assume that every attempt to imitate a corporation by working for greater economy and efficiency is necessarily a bad thing.

From this perspective some of Sprinker’s ghastly examples of the trend don’t seem very ghastly. One such example is the decision of Oregon State University to turn over its food services in the student union, which were run at a loss, to a Pepsi subsidiary (211-12). The “evil” here is supposed to be self-evident, but there’s no reason why a university should be in the restaurant business, and there’s good reason to believe that a company specializing in this would, if properly monitored, provide better service to the students.¹² It’s also hard to see what’s wrong with transforming an annual loss into an annual income that will go to the general operating fund that could be used, among other things, to increase TA salaries.

His most amusing example comes from Tufts University where, he says, “bribes” were “spread around” to have the registrar’s phone play an advertisement for Coca Cola, a “product that . . . will dissolve nails left in it overnight” (212). I haven’t heard that *bobe-mayse* (along with the one about the aphrodisiac effect of mixing Coke and aspirin) since my teens,¹³ but it explains a puzzling remark of Malcolm Evans, another Marxist, who laments the end of Mao’s Cultural Revolution when “Coca-Cola advertisements . . . returned to Beijing” (255). I wondered why he thinks that drinking a Coke is worse than being “struggled” by Red Guards and being imprisoned or banished to a “re-education” labor camp (the fate of millions of innocent victims of this revolution), but now I realize that he, like Sprinker, sees Coke as a symbol of capitalism and so as the EO.¹⁴ Nor is there any need to assume bribery; the company paid Tufts for the right to advertise and the money went into the aforementioned operating fund. The deal does sound rather tacky, but it’s not evil and won’t have any harmful effect on the students’ education or their stomachs.

The attempt to extend the Marxist imaginary to literary criticism is no more successful. Sprinker wants to divide all critics into two sides, those who view literature as a repository of “enduring, historically unchanging value,” and those who view it in “sociological” terms as “imbricated in . . . socio-political relations,” and he wants to line them up with his two political sides, the bad conservatives and good progressives (213-14). But the political line-up won’t work. Some of the most prominent “sociological” critics today are the New Historicists, who aren’t progressive in the Marxist sense (witness Greenblatt’s comment on Marxism quoted earlier), and the old historical critics were “sociological” but were often quite conservative politically. The division of the field into two kinds of criticism won’t work either. It omits the psychological critics, who don’t fit into either camp, and it omits critics like me who fit into both

— who believe that literary works are “imbricated” in their time and place, but that some of them have a more general appeal (not unchanging or universal) that can transcend that time and place, which is why people are still able to enjoy them.

The Marxist imaginary runs into the same kind of trouble when it’s applied to the Yale TA strike. Since it can’t count past two, it produces another either-or binary in Sprinker’s essay: good progressives, who view the TAs as workers and support them, versus bad conservatives, who view them as student-apprentices and support the administration. But again life isn’t that simple. Some people support the TAs but oppose their grade strike,¹⁵ while others support the administration but oppose its punishment of the strikers. There are also other intermediate positions, and I’ll bet my next sabbatical that way out on the far left there are ultra-progressives calling down a plague on both houses because the TAs are merely “union reformists” who aren’t trying to bring down capitalism and so are no better than the administration.

Moreover, our attitude toward the TAs doesn’t depend on whether we accept Sprinker’s equation of a university to a factory or the equation of it to a medieval guild that is proposed by some administration supporters, and that he dismisses as “the stupidities” they “spouted” (210). When I argued that the first equation is really an analogy that focuses on similarities that serve the analogist’s agenda and passes over differences that don’t, I wasn’t suggesting that we replace it with the second equation, which is also an analogy that serves the same purpose. One equation/analogy is thus no more (or less) “stupid” than the other, but we don’t have to choose between them because, as Crystal Bartolovich demonstrates in her perceptive essay on the strike in the same issue of *Jx* (225), the TAs are *both* workers and student-apprentices.¹⁶ Nor is there any way to determine which role is more fundamental or “real,” unless one is interpellated into the Marxist imaginary and so knows a priori that the boss vs. worker relationship is always the fundamental reality.

There is, however, a principle (not an analogy) that doesn’t require a choice between these two roles and that I think should determine our attitude toward the TAs. Since I’m a “self-confessed liberal,” it won’t be surprising to learn that this is the principle of liberal individualism, which recognizes that the TAs, in addition to being workers and apprentices, are also informed, rational adults and so are the best judges of their own interests — certainly better judges than the faculty or administration, who have their own interests at stake.¹⁷ If then they decide that it’s in their interests to form a union and to strike, they should have the right to do this (a right, I might add, that they wouldn’t have under most Marxist regimes), and liberals should support them on the basis of this principle and of the traditional liberal alliance with organized labor that goes back at least as far as the New Deal.

Sprinker’s Marxist imaginary isn’t even needed to judge the TA’s grievances. To adapt his own statement, you don’t have to be a Marxist to recognize that they’re exploited — all you have to do is compare what they’re paid per course with what Assistant Professors are paid. The imaginary is not only unnecessary here but is in fact obfuscatory, for it insists that the TAs will be exploited no matter how much they’re paid, since under capitalism *all* workers are exploited

through the extraction of their surplus labor to produce profits (although we saw that no profits are produced by TAs). Even the CEOs (Chief Evil Others) of our major corporations and our major sports stars, with seven-digit salaries, are exploited, apparently, because they too “sell their labor for money” (the Marxist definition of a worker) and, unlike TAs, really do produce profits for others. According to this logic, then, the only way to end the exploitation of TAs (and CEOs and sports stars) is not by raising their wages but by overthrowing capitalism and establishing socialism, which is no help to the TAs in their present plight. (Of course, exploited workers in advanced capitalist economies earn much more than unexploited workers in comparable jobs in socialist economies, but people trapped in the Marxist imaginary can’t recognize this reality.)

The Marxist imaginary also interferes with our perception of and response to the trend toward the “corporatizing” of our universities. This is a very real and very serious problem, which has troubled many liberals and even some conservatives, as I noted, but Sprinker’s analysis only muddies the waters. For one thing, he seems to be arguing against himself when he asserts that the university “is becoming more and more corporatized with each passing year” (211), because he can’t explain what it was before this trend or how in that earlier period it managed to escape corporatization. In other passages he argues that under capitalism the university is necessarily a form (and servant) of corporate enterprise, and this is confirmed by his chart of equations, which is supposed to apply to capitalist universities and factories at any time (it also applies, with a few changes in nomenclature, to socialist universities and factories, but that’s another story). Moreover, because his imaginary defines capitalism as the EO, all manifestations of the trend become evil, which makes it impossible to discriminate among them and even leads, as we saw in some of his examples (that awful Coke), to a trivializing of the problem. It’s not likely, therefore, that this essay will persuade any non-Marxists to oppose the trend, but that may not be its purpose.

One indication that Sprinker isn’t interested in persuading us is his indulgence in a kind of name-calling, which is another effect of the Marxist imaginary that misrecognizes all nonbelievers as the EO. People and organizations he disapproves of are “notorious,” “infamous,” “silly,” “benighted,” and traffic in “stupidities”; the people’s views are “spouted” rather than stated, their organizations are “spawned” rather than formed, and so on. And he regularly impugns the motives of these people: they accept “bribes,” as we saw (212), their arguments are “just self-serving” (210), and they are “paid lackeys” (215); Sandra Gilbert and Frank Lentricchia are guilty of “a breathtaking gesture of bad faith” for renouncing the progressive views of literature that they “once professed to think”; and John Ellis decided that “attacking theory would likely bring him to the attention of some movers and shakers” (213).

He doesn’t explain why it’s “bad faith” to change one’s mind, or whether this also applies to changes in the other direction. If a conservative converted to Marxism and renounced her former views, would Sprinker accuse her of “bad faith”? And he has no access to Ellis’s motives; he doesn’t have to, since the imaginary always already knows that the motives of the EO can never be sin-

cere and so must be venal. It's only fair, then, that his own motives should be impugned by a fellow Marxist, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, who thinks he's farther to the left than Sprinker and accuses him of "cynical pragmatism" because he serves the interests of "the Routledge-Verso cartel" (110).¹⁸

It's hard to believe that Sprinker (or Zavarzadeh) expects to convince anyone by this kind of personal attack, which will turn off those who aren't already convinced. I don't engage in it and I don't think I'm smarter than the people I'm arguing against or more sincere. (Indeed my restraint may itself have an ulterior motive — the desire to reach those who are turned off by name-calling.) I try to bear in mind Martin Mueller's statement of "the simple truth that intelligence, insight, and integrity have been found [in people] very far to one's political left and very far to one's political right" (29).¹⁹ But if I were to descend to the personal level, the attitude that I'd adopt (and urge others to adopt) toward Marxists would be not anger but compassion. After all, it can't be easy to be a Marxist today. Think of all the intellectual and emotional energy that must be expended in denying what obviously happened: that the Marxist imaginary has been abandoned (another "breathtaking gesture of bad faith"?) in most of the countries where it operated, and even those countries that still have Marxist regimes are busy converting to market economies,²⁰ so that just about the only true believers left are now holed up, completely isolated and completely impotent, in the academy. We can therefore expect to find in this pitiful remnant a lot of thrashing about, including some desperate clutches at straws (even their knowledge of children's TV programs), personal attacks on liberals and each other, and compulsive intoning of the old discredited mantras about "the fundamental social conflict," as they sink slowly into the ashcan of history.

Notes

1. Marxist rhetoric deploys a number of other "interested" analogies as if they were equations: "wage slavery" that isn't really slavery, "class warfare" that isn't really war, "economic violence" that isn't really violent, "state capitalism" that isn't really capitalism, and "economic democracy," "democratic centralism," and "Democratic People's Republic" (see note 20) that aren't really democratic. The first four are clearly meant to be dyslogistic and the last three eulogistic.

2. For the sake of the argument I'm using the Marxist theory of surplus labor that Sprinker assumes, but I don't believe it and don't know of any reputable economist who does. It's based on the medieval doctrine that labor and its products have a "real" value independent of the market, and it can't stand up under the most obvious questions, which presumably is why Zavarzadeh won't let us question it — he insists that it's "an unsurpassable *objectivity*" that is "ineradicable" and "is not open to interpretation" (98).

3. Graduate programs are more complex since many of them derive part of their income from public or private grants, but they don't make a profit on this. A university endowment, of course, makes profits from its investments, but not from the operation of the university.

4. There's a reference in *Capital* to a schoolmaster producing surplus value for his employer (644), but Marx is thinking here of a small, private elementary or secondary school that's owned by one man who profits from it.

5. In his introduction (11) Kamps suggests that Althusser's conception of (capitalist) ideology could be applied to the Marxists' own ideology, which is what I'll be trying to do.

6. Compare Plato's *Symposium* 189E-193D, where Aristophanes says that humans were once round but were bisected by Zeus, so that each half now yearns to recover its original wholeness. But that's not presented as history.

7. I call this imaginary "Edenism" and discuss it, with more examples, in "Bashing" 81-3. I also discuss the second or Manichean imaginary in "Polarization" 64-7.

8. He was the villain in *Tom Terrific*, and I drag him in here to counter Sprinker's claim that Marxists will win what he calls the "decisive battle" for students' minds because they know about childrens' TV programs and their opponents don't (213-14).

9. He sometimes conflates "bosses" and "owners," but in a modern corporation they are separate groups of people.

10. Thus Drakakis, who calls me a "self-confessed liberal," also calls me a "reactionary" in another essay published in the same year ("Terminator" 64), and Zavarzadeh relegates all those who are less "revolutionary" than he is (including many Marxists) to the same camp because they are "complicit" with capitalism (92, 93, 94, 99, 100, 101, and so on.). The slogan of the old Popular Front was "No enemies to the left!" but the slogan of our new academic progressives seems to be "No friends to the right!"

11. His essay is an intelligent analysis of the problem that doesn't rely on simplistic political binaries.

12. He objects that students now face a monopoly, but they also faced one under the earlier arrangement. There's a long tradition of student complaints about the food in university-operated cafeterias and dining halls.

13. I recall conducting an empirical (not, of course, empiricist) experiment by placing some nails of different kinds and sizes in a jar filled with Coca-Cola for a week, but they suffered no ill effects. I also remember taking a Coke and an aspirin, with no beneficial effects.

14. Jameson also laments the end of the Cultural Revolution and doesn't mention its victims (*Ideologies* 2.208).

Along the same lines, I have heard Marxists bemoan the opening of a McDonald's in Moscow, which apparently is more horrible than Stalin's purges, although they didn't claim that Big Macs dissolve iron.

15. Bérubé, who is certainly not a conservative and who strongly supports the TA union, points out that the grade strike pit it "against the interests of undergraduates and faculty alike, thus isolating the union politically" (40), and Bartolovich, who also argues for the TAs, wonders if "grade strikes are the best possible strategy for academic unions to deploy" (230).

16. Sprinker realizes that professors "are at once *cultural intellectuals* . . . and also *workers*" (209), but this insight doesn't extend to TAs.

17. Bérubé shows that the "*Yale faculty had no direct stake*" in the unionization of the TAs (48), but they obviously thought that they did.

18. This is another example of Marxist name-calling, since Routledge-Verso obviously isn't a cartel. The title of his essay shows that Zavarzadeh also regards views that he disagrees with as "stupidity."

19. Compare Bartolovich's conclusion that many who voted (as she did) for the MLA resolution condemning the Yale administration and many who voted against it acted "thoughtfully" and "carefully" (230). It's hard to imagine such a statement coming from an inhabitant of the Marxist imaginary.

20. The only exception is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea where the imaginary survives intact under Great Leader Kim Jong Il, who was recently elected General Secretary of the Workers' Party "by the Unanimous Will and Desire of the Korean People" (Committee A21), and who also happens to be the eldest son of the late Great Leader Kim Il Sung.

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