JUSTIN PAULSON AND REBECCA SCHEIN’S RESPONSE TO “THE LEFT AFTER POLITICS”

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Thom Workman’s provocative intervention on how to revitalize the Left makes an important contribution to this ongoing debate, not least for arguing explicitly for a strategy that socialists too often fail to consider a serious possibility. When an election campaign arrives, many on the Left feel the impulse to ignore it or to reject the vote, but the argument for doing so often relies on anarchist truisms and is rarely posed in such stark and coherent ways. Certainly we agree with Workman’s starting point: that most of us engaged in Left politics of any kind feel stuck in a never-ending Sisyphean task of pushing against an array of neoliberal boulders. We also wholeheartedly agree with the premise that the emergence of a Left culture is integral to the project of renewal. Yet we disagree entirely with the proposition that a retreat from politics helps us to get there.

Most fundamentally, Workman misidentifies the problem. He insists that the “civics reflex” is the proximate cause of a “politics of minimum salvage that assumes the wholesale sublimation of the instinct to rebel.” We argue instead that such a politics is a function of neoliberal society and that a failed civic politics merely reflects that. The Left’s small size, low expectations, disorganization, and lack of sufficient interest in “afternoon public lectures and weekend retreats” are hardly caused by a concern with electoral politics or the mediocrity of the NDP and Greens, but are a function of people working too much amid too much personal and financial insecurity in an ideological climate hostile to critical thought.

Even at the university, we see this in our own students: they are taking too many classes while working full time and, with a few admirable excep-
tions, are disengaged from politics. The “civics reflex” is surely not to blame here; there is simply not a lot of “organic social repugnance” that could be parried into disengaged disenchantment by social democrats. (Indeed, to the extent that our students demonstrate a “civics reflex,” it is not to be found in electoral engagement but in their endless search for résumé-worthy internships and volunteer experiences—itself a symptom of the triumph of a culture of scarcity and competition.) The lack of “organic social repugnance” and the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of Left politics (of all stripes) are symptoms of the same problem.

In principle, we agree that there could be benefits to a short-term “retreat and regroup” (or at least “pause and regroup”) strategy in order to make intentional and thoughtful decisions about how to move forward. Yet Workman’s call to retreat is rooted in an economy of opportunity costs, as if politics is a zero-sum game (“we must stop wasting precious time and energy”) in which we must choose between civic engagement or building a Left culture. This is a false choice.

There are, in fact, historical examples of retreats from civic politics. Except in a handful of cases when they turned into underground guerrilla movements—typically under military regimes, when liberal democratic space was already closed off—the results have not strengthened the groups involved. As a matter of strategy, the most instructive example is that of the Christian fundamentalists in the United States, who largely abandoned politics after the 1925 Scopes trial and remained insular for decades (along much the same lines that Workman proposes). While the fundamentalists remained in political exile, they were successful in incubating a self-contained culture of righteousness and purity. Whether they emerged “stronger” from their retreat depends on the measure of strength: subcultural survival or social change? While we note the Christian Right’s substantial impact on both US political parties, we also point to the ways in which this influence has typically been reactionary: relegated to fighting a rearguard action against reproductive rights, civil rights, gay marriage, feminism, etc. For most of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, the movement was in a tense relationship with the Republican Party, with its principles pandered to—often disingenuously—by Party leaders with their own agenda but in need of foot soldiers.
(Incidentally, this isolation seems also to have moved the group to the Right; this was the period of the emergence of the social gospel of Left Protestantism in the Canadian prairies, a development successfully curtailed in the United States.) Ultimately, the retreat from politics, which cast a long shadow over subsequent generations, did create a subculture more insular, fundamentalist, and sure of itself than ever, and one certainly able to interfere with progressive struggles. But its actual successes—delaying gay marriage here, closing a reproductive health centre there, cutting arts funding somewhere else—have been episodic and often short-lived. American morals and social norms are no closer to those of a fundamentalist utopia than they were at the time the fundamentalists abandoned politics, and are arguably further away. Although the Right as a whole has nearly monopolized American common sense for several decades, the fundamentalist piece of this—the part of the Right that went into retreat in order to regroup and preserve itself—has been relegated to playing second-fiddle to the neoliberals, neoconservatives, and others. So if the retreat from politics is to be a recipe for success, we have to ask: success at what? The history of the Left is already rife with instances of splitting into smaller and smaller factions that may offer more ideological purity but far less capacity. Workman’s vision of retreat would surely allow us to increase our sense of self-righteousness and to not have to play with others, but how this builds capacity to transform society remains a mystery.

And what of capitalism in our absence? Workman insists that “without the NDP and Greens, the neoliberal project will have a much harder go of things.” Why? Do we not see quite the opposite in the United States, which has no social democrats to offer such ideological cover to neoliberalism? Nor can we agree with Workman that the dominant Left in Canada is “party-centred.” While in the 1930s and 1940s there may well have been a party-centred Left coalescing around the CCF and the Communist Party, the most salient feature of the Canadian Left today seems to be its decentralization and disorganization. Obviously, many social democrats are party-oriented and direct their political energies towards the NDP or the Greens, but surely it is inaccurate to say that either the NDP or the Greens are anchoring the activities of Left social movements in Canada generally.
Workman’s call does appear to rest on a presumption that the broadly social democratic political parties have monopolized and domesticated the rebellious impulses of people who would otherwise be…doing what? Setting up worker cooperatives and fair-trade buying clubs? Holding day-long public meetings? We would ask how existing struggles for public space in which to hold such meetings might figure into Workman’s call for a retreat from civic politics. What of the hundreds who lined up overnight at Toronto’s City Hall to give deputations opposing cuts to libraries and recreation centres? The grim reality facing the Left today is that we engage reactively and episodically in disjointed struggles because, in any given moment, the stakes feel too high to choose not to react at all. The problem is not that the Left fails to understand that our response is inadequate or that we need to build a bigger, more ambitious, and integrated strategy of opposition to capitalism, but rather that we feel compelled—both morally and tactically—to respond in piecemeal fashion to this library cut, this wage freeze, this fare hike. We need a Left culture that frames these battles in terms of the larger picture, certainly. But only a Left wholly disconnected from the day-to-day struggles of workers can claim that such struggles don’t matter, or that openings for a Left culture will suddenly appear if the terrain of these struggles is abandoned to liberals and the Right.

Workman sees hope for an immanent oppositional culture in the existence of what he calls a “second-society,” comprised not of Canada’s “party-centred Left,” but of the “refusniks” who seem to be “turn[ing] their backs on the essential features of capitalism in one way or another.” In the vein of recent trends in autonomist and poststructuralist political economy, Workman reads in the choice to join a community garden, start a small business, or purchase fair-trade goods a rejection of wage labour (how?) and a deep sense that capitalism is “unnatural to a life lived properly.” Perhaps. We lack the space here to do more than register a difference in our understanding of the “essential features” of capitalism and exploitation, and whether they can indeed be negated one “aspect” at a time. But surely the people who know most deeply “in their bones” that capitalism is “an unbearable form of life” are not those choosing to withdraw from the conventional workforce to join a co-op or start their own business, but those whose ensnarement by the
system of wage labour means working three part-time jobs. How will these people ever have the time to attend a day-long public meeting? (Do such people have a place in Workman’s vision of a Left culture?) Not only are we doubtful that there is a clear divide between the “party-centred Left” and the alternative subculture that Workman describes as a second-society, but we question how a new “culture of low-key contemplation” will overcome the subcultural insularity that already plagues the Left. Workman seems to celebrate the second-society’s rejection of the mainstream as an expression of its deep-seated suspicion of capitalism, and yet one symptom of the Left’s political impotence in recent years has been a perverse tendency to embrace marginality as a proxy for radicalism. The Left has well-nigh made a virtue of its abandonment of the mainstream to the common sense of the Right.

If indeed we face, as Workman argues we do (and we agree), a general “eclipse of rational political discourse,” it is far from clear that a retreat into an insular, “low-key culture of contemplation” will help in any way. The eclipse is social; civic politics merely reflect it. Yet civic politics also hold out the possibility of critical discourse in the public sphere, no matter how difficult it may be to exploit it. If anything, the Left has failed to make productive use of the challenges and opportunities offered by a real engagement in civic politics, ceding the space of public discourse not only to the organized Right but also to the weakest and most conciliatory representatives of the nominal opposition. While the risks of cooptation and demobilization associated with “Left electoralism” are real, there are also real gains to be won from principled, thoughtful participation in the mainstream arenas of political engagement.

Interestingly, Workman sees the NDP’s abandonment of anticapitalist politics as evidence of what Herbert Marcuse called “one-dimensionality,” but the conclusion he draws from this observation is deeply un-Marcusean. For Marcuse, one-dimensionality—effectively a measure of reification—is a barrier to organization, not a proscription on organizing (which is needed more than ever). Marcuse would have never made the claim that engagement with party politics specifically, or civic politics in general, deepens one-dimensionality, nor would he have suggested that an insular political subculture is a remedy. He argued quite the opposite: “Radicalism has much
to gain from the ‘legitimate’ protest against the war, inflation, and unemployment, from the defense of civil rights—even perhaps from a ‘lesser evil’ in local elections. The ground for building a united front is shifting and sometimes dirty—but it is there…” 17 The kind of self-confident, energetic, and inviting Left public culture that Workman dreams of will not materialize in the wilderness of retreat. It will be pieced together arduously through tireless, disciplined public engagement. We will overcome the “immuring conditions” 18 that we face today only by talking with people we don’t usually talk to, building new relationships, and crafting widely shared vocabularies of hope and critique. Political campaigns and other venues of “official” politics are opportunities to reach outside our comfort zones and engage with people who may not yet, but could, identify with an anticapitalist Left.

It would be foolish for the Left to abandon the few existing venues for public political engagement, not only because the demands of such participation provide a healthy challenge for an insular and self-referential Left culture, but also because the stakes are too high for politically silent retrenchment. It is not at all trivial or tangential to the Left that, for example, the right to collectively bargain be defended in Parliament and in the pages or screens of whatever media is most seen or read. Does this mean the Left should limit itself to electioneering for any particular party, or at all? That would be absurd (just as it is absurd that we seem to have to repeat this statement of common sense with every utterance that electoral politics do matter). But it is equally absurd to cede the electoral space—the space of civic politics—entirely to the Right. The Left is small enough as it is. Talking only to ourselves, abandoning federal and provincial Parliaments and municipal councils (and through them all the institutions of the state that set the framework in which we organize) is hardly a recipe for growth. In a neoliberal context, it is more important than ever that we maintain some sort of a space in broad political discourse, not merely in our own little-read publications and pages of debate and evening meetings.

We will never emerge out of the wilderness with blueprints for the perfect new institutions, the perfect new playbook for a vibrant, resilient, and emboldened anticapitalist movement. The difficult truth is that we know what institutions we need, but we have to do the hard work of reviving and
rebuilding them. We know that unions will play a critical role if we are ever to regain the ground we have lost, and we know that our existing unions are weak, bureaucratic, unambitious, and generally share in the political and cultural deformations of the day. We know that we need real movements and real political parties of the Left, and that real advances for social and environmental justice require both electoral and legislative victories as well as tireless organizing in our workplaces and communities. Farmers’ markets, discussion groups, and cooperative businesses cannot replace unions or political parties, nor will they spontaneously produce the cultural knowledge, the relationships, or the political savvy necessary to rebuild the institutions that we need in order to defend ourselves and, ultimately, grow.

Notes

7. See especially Diamond, Not by Politics Alone, pp. 89–112.
11. See especially J.K. Gibson-Graham, A Postcapitalist Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) and The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It) (Minnesota, 2006).