I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the reflections of Justin Paulson and Rebecca Schein and to those of Herman Rosenfeld. There is something unsparing in the office of criticism, and I hope that my remarks to their reflections do not exceed the everyday boundaries of propriety. Such exchanges do provide an invaluable opportunity both to clarify the essentials of an argument and to dilate upon one’s original observations.

The Left is facing an historic crisis. Upon this basic point we all agree. Beyond this consensus, the extent of the disagreement is always difficult to gauge. “The Left After Politics” draws attention to the fact that our lives are unfolding in the context of our own historic disintegration as a political force. Several contradictory tendencies are bearing down on us: we are as energetic as ever, yet utterly unable to stem the neoliberal rollback; the mainstream political parties offer no alternatives to capitalism, yet many people reject the essential aspects of capitalism in their daily lives; and the Left can survive only through the rational interrogation of capitalism, yet everywhere—even in the realm of run-of-the-mill party politics—rational discourse has been eclipsed. My specific proposal to identify and explore sociopolitical venues that respond to these contradictory tendencies is scarcely the last word, but rather one that recognizes that the contradictions themselves define a new reality for the Left. If the old paradigms of political behaviour are not revised and complemented by new political strategies that respond to this new reality, then we will be finished as a political force for the next few decades. We will be a Left in name only; I am not alone in my suspicions that we are close to that now.

Neither the response of Paulson and Schein nor that of Rosenfeld countered my basic point that any new strategies on the Left must construc-
tively navigate their way through the paradoxical pressures that define our horizons, especially the demise of the social democratic project and the withering of rational political discourse. If my proposal to create a Left public culture is doomed to failure from the outset—although I doubt it—then we still need to find strategies and create new venues that respond to the “brave new world” standing before us. Rather, both responses lapsed into a tedious and somewhat flaccid restatement of the old ways—the very political strategies that have helped to consign the Left to the political wilderness. Paulson and Schein provided a full-throated defense of electoral politics, and Rosenfeld, whose response was more engaging and reflective, a re-statement of the importance of seizing upon opportune moments for political education. Nowhere in the “The Left After Politics” are these strategies rejected in principle.

By responding to the most basic political claims of both pieces, the key points of “The Left After Politics” can be reiterated. Let me begin with Paulson and Schein’s emphatic defense of electoralism. The spirit of this idea arises at several points in their piece, and they write that there are “real gains to be won from principled, thoughtful participation in the mainstream arenas of political engagement.”² Perhaps, although, given the historical debate on this, we might not want to be so complacent. But nowhere do I say that this might not be the case—a good phenomenologist might say that I have bracketed this question. I do, however, stress that civics politics at this moment in history is a waste of time, a drain on our energy, and one that has likely made things worse. Clichéd remarks about “zero sum games” miss this point.³ In its present state, civic politics—i.e., writing your legislative members, campaigning for your favourite political party on the Left, voting for the candidate who will least misrepresent you and so forth—is an unqualified waste of time, and one that worsens things by helping to replicate an administrative paradigm singularly devoted towards driving home the great rollback. If I were a capitalist, this is the Left I would want—one that gift-wraps the neoliberal agenda with illusions about its own relevance at the ballot box.

The claim by Paulson and Schein that the decay of politics is merely a product of neoliberalism reflects insensitivity to the political uniqueness of
our age. They argue that social exhaustion created by a neoliberal world has translated into political decay, apathy, and indifference. “Even at the university,” they write, “we see this in our own students: they are taking too many classes while working full time and, with a few admirable exceptions, are disengaged from politics.” This is undoubtedly true, but, in “The Left After Politics,” several other causes of political decay were implied or stated directly. These range from the accommodating policies of the NDP to the rise of a mass culture over and against a more class-based culture. Such causes work together to create a political atmosphere infused with an utter disregard for historical truthfulness and an indifference to rational dialogue and exchange. In this unique political era, the concomitance of “bullshit” and “buzzwords” has created a very different political context, and one utterly unhelpful to the revival of a Left political force. At this particular historical conjuncture, politics is an utter waste of time and effort, and contributes to the exacerbation of the condition of working people by inter alia fostering the illusion that there are meaningful electoral options. At best, the choice between the gentrified neoliberalism of the NDP and the bald-faced neoliberalism of the Liberals is still about ramming home the neoliberal agenda.

We cannot quit politics just as we cannot quit caring about poverty. The suggestion that we suspend our civics reflex must go along with revived efforts to forge a Left political culture. The challenge at this historical moment is to find political venues that operate beneath the radar screen of the smothering world of politics as entertainment-by-other-means. The participation in “show politics” is absolutely injurious to the Left project. It is, indeed, the death knell for the Left to the horrifying extent that it eclipses rational discourse, and several commentators have warned us that this is exactly what has been happening. There is nothing in my proposal that warrants the fears about “insularity” (expressed on several occasions by Paulson and Schein) or concerns about “disconnectedness from political reality” (as it was put by Rosenfeld). Localized examples of what I have in mind sometimes come close to the community unions appearing in some North American cities. Permanent spaces for the cultivation of a Left culture must be forged in a wider sense. Such venues will permit working families
to explore their contradictory experiences and resolve them in a progressive and inclusive manner. The challenge is to build a Left public culture infused with the rational interrogation of capitalism *qua* capitalism. This will not happen in the political world as we know it today; we have to find new venues for sustained dialogue and reflection.

I fear that my emphasis on rationalism is being glossed—perhaps the natural product of an unselfconscious post-Nietzschean intellectual climate that has spent much of the last century attacking the capital-R notion of reason and rationality with alacrity. A Left culture, by definition, must be both empathetic and reflective. When Paulson and Schein adduce the example of Christian fundamentalism in the aftermath of the Scopes trial, they evince little regard for the central place of rational exchange in the revival of the Left. That vulgar, anti-intellectual, and altogether reactionary movement of the 1920s encouraged sustained reflection and dialogue in no way whatsoever. It was driven by narrow-minded indignation with the demagogic William Jennings Bryan leading the flock—the newly unemployed flock, thanks to a rash of closures in the southern resource industries. Understandable social concerns about narcissism and decadence were sifted through a restatement of Christian principles traceable to the immediate pre-WWI period—the so-called fundamentals—to produce a charged reaction. In using this particular example to illuminate a proposal to build a Left public culture by promoting venues of sustained reflection, dropping in language like “retreat” and “self-righteousness” along the way,6 Paulson and Schein’s misunderstanding about the idea of “rational interrogation” is evident.

To an extent, pith and brevity are responsible for this. I had prefaced this theme with a quick reference to Plato’s celebrated emphasis on reasoned moderation and Kant’s famous musings about reason and the Enlightenment, but perhaps they no longer have the same purchase that they once had. Certainly, a lot more could be said to stress the centrality of the notion of a Left culture infused with rational discourse. Education will always be a part of this process, but the central theme has to be the reflective exploration of the contradictions of consciousness borne through our capitalist life experiences. And so I heartily share Rosenfeld’s endorsement of political education,
but we have to get to the point where such efforts unfold in the context of a more receptive cultural environment. For the moment, we might summarize this conjunctual strategy by asserting that culture precedes politics; we cannot merely move from one educational opportunity to another only to have our efforts fade to nothing in the general sea of neoliberal hostility. The creation of a more receptive and cradling Left public culture must be part of our long-term goals, and venues must be found to promote this goal. It is precisely such combined efforts that will allow us to tie education “to the real experience and interests of workers engaged in struggles.”

If we can build a Left public culture, then a more authentic working-class politics can be forged. I repeat this point several times in “The Left After Politics.” No political venue can be left unturned in the long run. Let us hope that the electoral arena does not remain as vacuous and hostile to working people in the decades to come. But, again, we can do our part here. At the risk of overdrawing things, we can reiterate that culture must precede politics at this historical moment; only the formation of a Left public culture will permit the rise of authentic working-class parties that refuse to parrot the accumulation-first line. In this respect, Rosenfeld’s engaging reflections and concerns about political praxis will go hand in hand with a bolder political world cradled by a receptive, working class culture.

Capitalism is cursed with a brutal class politics disguised as benign prerogative. If labour is ever to be drawn out of its political shell—and its invisibility during the student protests in Quebec in 2012 confirms an alarming historical trend—a Left public culture must be built. This culture must tap the energies on the Left, develop a proactive agenda, explore alternatives to capitalism, and operate apart from the mediated world of “show politics.” Cultivating a Left public culture will take time. I see some hope in community unions; in the publications, orations, and study sessions that were an important feature of Occupy; in the appearance of a grassroots media, or even in some cyber dissent—but there is a long, long way to go.

**Notes**

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