

Thesis 11 at 40 years

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Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.

Karl Marx—Thesis 11 (Marx 1845)

As the second longest serving editor of Dialectical Anthropology (after founder Stanley Diamond), I begin this reflection with some personal context on what Dialectical Anthropology means to me and hopefully also to my profession.

Marxists often speak of a permanent “crisis of capitalism.” But I grew up in one of those rare moments when there did not appear to be a crisis: the golden age of capitalism, or the three decades after the second inter-imperialist war. Born in 1963, the penultimate year of the baby boom, my childhood involved endless gratitude for the prosperity, economic expansion, and fabulous wealth of American capitalism. We had the expectation that each year would be better than the last so that by the year 2000 scarcity would be conquered, cities would have moving sidewalks, and we would all only work a few hours a week. There were terrible upheavals out there, such as the killing of almost three million people to prevent national healthcare in Vietnam, and similar horrors and absurdities in dozens of other countries,¹ as well there were urban insurrections in the USA. However, these events were somehow not the symptoms of a crisis, but punctuation marks in a golden sentence.

What is so strange is that this was, in fact, the one period during the last 100 years when government officials, their intellectual helpmates and their big

¹ Oddly, a similar death toll for similar reasons in the Korean War barely gets a mention in most accounts, and only seems to merit a footnote here.

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bourgeois paymasters actually believed that capitalism was in crisis.² In 1946, when the war ended, it was still less than 30 years after the October revolution had ripped large sections of the old world out of capitalism. The USSR was triumphant over Central European fascism, and a billion Chinese were removing themselves from the circuits of capitalist accumulation. Even “Balkan Europe” was united in embrace of an anti-capitalist alternative, and there were similar threats across the planet in far flung places like Vietnam, Korea, Cuba, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. When the USSR finally achieved a clear and decisive victory over the USA and the West in the symbolically crucial and militarily important space race, every petty bourgeois nationalist movement and every penny ante dictator across the former colonial world had a big stick to wave at Washington, Wall Street, and the City of London. A look at nearly any first-person source from government officials to would-be leaders of the global bourgeoisie like Henry Luce suggests a deep sense of crisis and an overarching fear of a red planet (see for instance Marcus and Giggie 2016, p. 244 for republished US government memos on sputnik). So despite this golden age illusion (Webber 1996), many of those who wielded power in the west really believed that capitalism’s days were numbered.

And what of the belief on the part of the working class in the West—me and my parents, for instance—that in the year 2000 your clothes would go to work while you stayed home? There is only a need for such promises to an aristocracy of labor when there is a threat from other laborers. Gilded age robber baron Jay Gould famously boasted that he could always pay half of the working class to kill the other half, but this strategy did not work so well in two inter-imperialist wars, where there were clear indications that Gould’s math was wrong. One of those wars had created the USSR and the second one probably saved it and made it far stronger, despite millions and millions of deaths. So for a brief few decades, after World War Two there was a limited, but highly significant substitution of carrots for sticks, despite, or maybe because of Vietnam, Korea, etc.

Finally in the 1970s, the cost of integrating vast sections of the world proletariat and peasantries into modern governance formations finally caught up with the capitalist powers, the Soviet/national/Import Substitution Industrialism path to development lost its luster, and the world got pitched into the current period, which usually gets described as neo-liberalism or a “crisis of capitalism.” This was particularly unhappy and probably useful for my own development as a Marxist, when at 17 revanchist-imperialist Ronald Reagan took the White House and suddenly there was no longer an aristocracy of labor and I was all dressed up for a bright post-scarcity future, with no place to go. This was also the period in which Stanley Diamond launched *Dialectical Anthropology*; just as this crisis of capitalism that started in October 1917 and snowballed after 1946 was waning for the first time in six decades.

In founding the journal at this moment, Diamond may have been orienting toward post-Vietnam War radicalism (as the Wikipedia article on our journal

² For the sake of brevity, I will count the brief period after the first inter-imperialist war as only worthy of a footnote, despite a clear period of as much as 5–10 years when we could talk about a crisis of capitalism.

claims), the political openings for out-Marxists that finally seemed to be institutionalized in academe by the 1970s, a prescient sense of a crisis in anti-capitalist ideology and the coming revanchism—or all three. Regardless, I can only say, “good onya Stanley.” There was never a better time to pose the need for an Anthropology journal that was not really an Anthropology journal, but a vehicle for, as our website still proclaims, “the transformation of class society through internationalizing conversations about the stakes of contemporary crises and the means for social change.” He offered a journal as his contribution to fighting FOR a crisis of capitalism within the section of academe over which he had influence.

From page one, issue one, volume one, Diamond posed the journal in big terms that were philosophically engaged, dizzyingly diverse, and almost delusionally ambitious (Diamond 1975). Not prone to false modesty or professional and scientific dispassion, Diamond’s first sentence in his new journal was “this journal is a significant episode in a wider effort to resurrect and redefine the Marxist tradition.” Though Diamond mentions Anthropology several times in these first moments of our journal’s life, it seems at best a vehicle of convenience for a man with a degree in it and lots of anthropologists in his social network. The essay is worth reading for its wide-ranging and magisterial vision of a global crisis for humanity that will be resolved through the great combination of thought and action. In such an endeavor, Anthropology clearly has a small part to play in what Eric Wolf, described in his more cool and composed way as “promethean Marxism”, rather than “systems Marxism” (Wolf 1997). I prefer to think of it as being solidly grounded in Thesis 11 (see epigraph).

While Diamond never lived to see the global anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, revolution that he sought to be a part of, he did see the journal become a significant episode in left wing intellectual life. It was always an Anthropology journal with diverse and catholic appetites, publishing new and emergent work that would come to form varied sub-disciplines that went far beyond the political economy remit of much of Anthropological Marxism. Everything from the first stirrings of post-modernism to the Anthropology of emotion and symbolism found a home in Dialectical Anthropology. However, the goal of the journal was always far bigger than a left wing pole of attraction restricted by disciplinary boundaries. And the journal’s path wound its way through poetry, ethno-poetry, philosophy, political science, economics, history, archeology, geography, psychology, sociology, literary theory and explicit Marxist theorizing, drawing on writers from outside of Anthropology such as Eugene Genovese, Andre Gunder-Frank, Joel Kovel, Gyorgy Márkus, Randy Martin, Michael Webber, Noam Chomsky, Jock Young, Rohini Hensman, Kim Moody, James Petras, Stanley Aronowitz, David Roediger, Bryan Palmer, Lisa Maher, Ronald Weitzer, and Aijaz Ahmad.

However, at the end of day, the question for me, and I would put myself in with Stanley Diamond, Eleanor Leacock, and others who evidenced a belief that Thesis 11 is the key moment for Marxists (see for example, Richard Lee, this issue), is whether to make your labor a vehicle for your profession or your profession a vehicle for your labor. As the few people who have read my obituary for Eric Wolf (Marcus 1999) probably know, the balance struck between these two poles by Wolf and many other Anthropological Marxists of his generation was something of a

disappointment to me for its overweighting toward traditional intellectualism and fantasies of disciplinary professionalism. However, more unsettling to me than the problem of balancing professional attainment with some attempt to organize an anti-capitalist alternative is the way in which both sides of the divide posed by Wolf: “systems Marxists” and “promethean Marxists,” often agree that their task is the liberal imperative to speak the name of a demon, in order to defeat that demon.³

That strategy of “speaking truth to power” may have once seemed empowering when sputnik was going beep-beep-beep and the bourgeoisie was quaking in its boots every time a third world dictator talked about infant mortality in the third world equaling the death toll of World War II every 5 years. However, in the current conjuncture, it is more clearly revealed as one of liberal powerlessness. There is something almost condescending about posing angry and waxing eloquent on the depredations of capitalist class rule, as if the world did not know how shitty things are. It is easy to fall victim to the belief that the latest journal article or editorial is the promethean task of bringing fire and will produce the righteous indignation among people of good conscience to start making things right. Such work has a tendency to provide cover for the bourgeois state-legitimizing-fantasy that we live in an essentially fair world, where shining light on injustices leads to change.

The systems approach that Wolf mentions probably refers to Althusserian social theory or the muscular materialism of Stalinized communist parties that, at one point, looked to atomic energy as the bringer of socialism’s promise of a post-scarcity society. Its Ptolemaic speculations might have once been appealing hope-makers that were thought to push everybody a tiny bit further toward the goal of change when sputnik was scaring the capitalist world with its beep-beep-beep. However, in the present, with no crisis of capitalism on the horizon, it is difficult to see it as anything but an argument for combining silence with passivity.

If either of these approaches to defeating demons by speaking their name ever worked, they certainly do not now. We live in a world where this, the capitalist system, is generally seen as, “as good as it gets.” And that is why there is no crisis of capitalism, no matter how much of a mess the world seems to have descended into for those who work for a living. Nobody is likely to rise up in face of literary indignation. Yes, much of the world is truly miserable, underdeveloped, disappointed and suffering, but this is not crisis. Crisis is when yesterday gives no indication of today and today gives no indication of tomorrow at the societal level. Crisis is when all bets are off and it is impossible to predict what laws of motion will govern society. We know that whether Bernie Sanders wins or Donald Trump wins the next Presidential US election, the bankers in the City of London, on Wall Street and in Tokyo will prosper and the world will continue to burn carbon. It

³ In his new preface to *Europe and the People Without History*, Wolf addresses those readers who “bemoaned” the book’s “lack of promethean enthusiasm” (Wolf 1997: xxii), implying that enthusiasm and words are the difference between “promethean” and “systems” Marxism. The suggestion is that systems Marxists are objective scientists and prometheans are sentimentalists with loud voices. He warns us on the same page that prometheus came to a bad end. Clearly, Wolf was not a big one for promethean sensibilities or the Olympian heights of systems Marxism. His answer seems to be in bringing voiceless people’s humanity to light and using Marxism as a tool for doing this—the classic eighteenth century humanist, but not revolutionary core of Marxism.

is worth remembering that peasants in medieval Europe actually spent centuries starving and then starving worse, without the big uprising ever coming. Only the Black Death came and still people paid in blood, sweat and tears to their betters, with no relief before, during, or, after, as Robert Brenner has demonstrated in his work on the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

The fundamental rule of human history is that change does not happen unless groups of people with a shared consciousness take a program of change and try to apply it to real life. This was the case in the transition to capitalism. It was almost certainly the case in the rise of land-based rent systems that arrived with the origins of the family, private property and the state and it was probably the case when humans were first dragged out of Eden and into full-time agriculture. It will almost certainly be the case in trying to remove the bourgeoisie from its management and ownership of this planet. The tasks of our social class, the proletariat, are far bigger than naming intimate demons that we all know and see every day. It becomes increasingly clear to me that the time is now for a revolutionary, Marxist, and dialectical Anthropology. However, after 8 years as editor, I still have no idea what it would look like. For now I continue to regard the pursuit of it as the next best thing to being there. If the North Korean secret police sent assassins to eliminate everybody connected to the three highest ranked anthropology journals there would be a dozen journals that would immediately step into the breach. If DA disappeared tomorrow there would be things lost that were not so easily replaced.

While there is something to be said for less self-reflection—we have done a lot of it since our editor-in-chief, comrade, and friend Ananthkrishnan Aiyer died last year—some of this is necessary to find our way toward renewal of this important mission that we believe the top ranked professionalist journals do not have. Ananth, like Stanley, was a lesser known and lesser published scholar than the Marxist comrades he came up with, but in his own way he was a giant figure in making a Marxist Anthropology. His ability to find his own way from the standards of professionalism, the boundaries of his discipline, and the imperatives of “traditional intellectualism” to build an intellectual life around the defining sentence of Marxism—Thesis 11—is something that comes to the rest of us with more difficulty and less natural inclination.

It is for this reason that we use this fortieth year reflection on past, present and future to consider what has changed and where we are going, as a journal, and as a species living on a planet that is endangered by environmental catastrophe, forever-war, hunger, poisoned water, and countless other examples of the venality and incompetence of a social class that has proven itself obsolete and unfit to rule—not because it is in crisis, but because this is the new normal.

So what alternative is there for an editor-in-chief seeking Diamond’s goal of the “transformation of class society”? It would be simpler if Thesis 11 said, “the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to write journal articles about changing it.” However, Marx’s words are clear: “the point is to change it.” Our initial foray into addressing these tasks and perspectives at 40 years comes largely from within Anthropology, our editorial circle, and those near it. However, we continue to seek the input of others who share this revolutionary goal, working outside the circle, outside the discipline and outside

academe. The goal is, I think, a theoretically vigorous body of left scholarship that intersects with social movements against capitalism—both as research agenda and as actual human dialogue. We may therefore, hopefully, be of some use to a new generation that did not grow up with anti-communism as the state religion and is seeking to generalize on experience through theory, memory, data, analysis, or just the conversation(s) that Stanley Diamond prioritized as the method for getting to transformation in his opening to this episode.

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