A Radical Journal of Geography or A Journal of Radical Geography?

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In *What is to Be Done?*, Lenin said that “[W]ithout a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.” Clearly he meant that the former was absolutely necessary for the latter, but what he did not mean was that the former was sufficient for the latter. In this brief piece, I want to take exception with much of the content of *Antipode*, especially in light of the phenomenal consolidation of power we are witnessing after the events of 11 September 2001. The proximal cause of this rant is the special section on Lefebvre in the November 2001 issue in general, and the petulant piece by Elden in particular, although the stimulus has taken up the bulk of the *Antipode* pages for some time.

At this point, I will take a tack adopted by Lefebvre himself in “Comments on a New State Form” (2001) and give the punchline at the beginning. As Charcot is reputed to have said to Freud, “[T]heory is good, but it doesn’t keep things from happening.” And the things that are happening now cannot be kept from happening by continuing to refine our theoretical perspectives. Or alternatively, if we’re so smart, why do we lose so invariably, and why do monstrous things keep happening to so many people the world over? The punchline? We (the surplus army of intellectual social theoretic laborers) have sufficiently precise diagnostics of how the world works and why, and have had them (with some notable improvements) since Marx. It is now long past time to bend our intellect, will, and energy toward the practices (or praxis, as the *Antipode* mission statement has it) that will lead to more egalitarian outcomes for the world’s myriad oppressed. We must be working constantly and diligently to translate our theoretical insights into radical action. Talking about theory is not the same thing as action! In fact, it is often a diversion from action.

What’s wrong with additional theorizing? Doesn’t it bring new wisdom? Doesn’t it decrease the likelihood that we will take counter-productive actions? Of course. This is precisely what Lenin meant.
But at what point does the benefit of additional theoretical nuance become too costly in terms of the tradeoff with action? Often the tradeoff is simply logistic. How much time and energy does any one person have? At other moments, the tradeoff is pragmatic. What is any individual scholar willing or able to put at risk? Additionally, as we refine the precision of our understanding, we often run up against a phenomenon I call “paralysis by analysis” in which we understand problems so completely that we understand that nothing (short of revolution, which in the current police-state climate is hardly an attainable option) can be done to remedy them. Our conversations on theory also tend to be rather insular (partially because to be novel and useful they need to be sophisticated). While this is not precisely the same as “preaching to the choir” (since theoretical debates are often quite heated), it certainly tends to be preaching to the cognoscenti. Not exactly the stuff of practice.

I don’t want to be misunderstood here. This is not an anti-intellectual call to abandon theoretical work. But it is a call to re-examine the likelihood that such work will eventuate in a more just society, and it is a call to adjust the priorities of our work.

So, why rant now? As I was reading through the pieces by Brenner (2001) and, particularly, by Elden (2001), a number of cliches sprang to mind: angels on pinheads, deck chairs on the Titanic … While I recognize that the section was planned well before September 11, in light of that event and its aftermath, it is impossible to keep from reflecting on the (f)utility of the points they raise in these exceedingly exigent times. I’m not picking on the scholarship of these pieces, but wondering, is it really essential (and for whom and for what purposes) that we specify more carefully the exact articulations between Lefebvre and Nietzsche and Heidegger? How (and again, to whom) can it possibly matter if the precision with which Lefebvre is interpreted is refined by one iota? This same point is certainly applicable to the innumerable (though by no means all) articles in Antipode that call for “furthering the debate,” “increasing our understanding,” and “refining our concepts.”

Our (progressives’, radicals’, etc) diligent pursuit of greater understanding of how the world works is underlain by an assumption that such understanding will enable a more egalitarian practice (again, read the Antipode mission statement). But will it? Like Marx, Lefebvre (and all the other scholars in the long line since Marx) lived and died without making much of a dent in capital’s relentless and increasingly powerful march (the temporary impediment of 1917 notwithstanding). I used to have a motto that I applied in all my dealings with corporate elites and their governmental sponsors and agents: “One can never be cynical enough!” In the last couple of years (and especially after the U.S. coup d’etat of November 2000–January 2001), that motto, while still apt, has become woefully inadequate. I’ve now replaced it
with the equally banal yet more comprehensive “[I]t’s very useful to control everything.” It has never been clearer than since September 11 that this is the case for those in power, particularly in the US (whose power immediately, of course, extends to a global reach). This extraordinary coalescence is evident in the raw greed exhibited by corporate elites, legitimated by their governmental protectors/servants and interpreted for all by their media arms. While none of this is new since September 11 (contrary to the repeated, vapid claims that “everything has changed”), the ferocity with which elites are now pursuing their agenda has crystallized the need for immediate, effective actions. As Lillian Hellman (1976) appropriately described an earlier period, we are indeed once again immersed in “scoundrel time.”

What additional theoretical understanding do we need to be able to interpret these events or to predict their likely (uneven) outcomes? I would argue that we have all the theory necessary. What we don’t have is the essential bridging work to bring that theory to bear on effective practice. What we are witnessing at the moment is the tremendous hegemonic power of elites to command an astonishingly wide allegiance to a particular worldview. We may (and almost invariably do) critique that allegiance as incomplete, uninformed, and/or misguided, but it is real and useful to our rulers nevertheless. People buy into this worldview (in every sense) because they perceive (rightly or wrongly) that they get something in return. This is the essence of Gramsci’s notion of the difference between hegemony and coercion. What alternative do we now offer except critique? How will we mount a counterhegemony (always theoretically possible) when both the material and the discursive spaces of opposition are being contained, controlled, policed, and eliminated, the former through the very interesting (and dismaying) spatialization of protest (think about the Democratic national convention in Los Angeles and its official “protest zone”, or the most recent WTO meeting in Doha, Qatar, the logical extreme of this phenomenon), and the latter through the almost complete control of the mass media?

But offer a counterhegemony we must if we have any hope of seeing progressive social change. We have the theory. To some great extent, we even have the content of an alternative vision. What we lack are the mechanisms to link our theoretical understanding to altered conditions on the ground. This is what we must work on if we hope to matter. I don’t have a comprehensive solution for these issues, but I certainly do know that it will not be found solely (or most crucially) in the continued, distracting activity of further theoretical reformulation.

But at a minimum—and in order to respond to a colleague, whose comment after reading a draft of this piece was “Okay, smart guy, where’s the to-do list?”—I do have two sketches of the kind of work that we should be engaged in. The first is to begin excavating the ways in which elites legitimate their positions of power and privilege to
themselves and others and simultaneously assert that actions to main-
tain these positions constitute goals and objectives that are appropriate
for entire societies. In *The Monied Metropolis* (2001), Sven Beckert
argues persuasively that we need to exert a great deal of additional
effort in understanding specifically how elites (in this case, the bourgeois
class of New York City at the end of the 19th century) formulate and
further their own class interests. There have been quite compelling
reasons for progressive scholars to rescue the missing voices of the
subordinate classes in constructing more comprehensive narratives of
the past and present. But, as Beckert also argues (a point with which
I agree), this effort over the past couple of decades has left the upper
class severely underexamined (particularly in the US context, some-
what less so in Europe). We need to bring these legitimizing and
rationalizing mechanisms under harsh scrutiny in order to demon-
strate their constructedness and the places where they are vulnerable
to being dismantled.

A second area that I suggest would prove fruitful for bringing
theory closer to progressive practice is the systematic assessment of
specific instances of social change (whether successful or not), in par-
ticular those moments that resulted from attempts to alter the ground
of the “taken for granted” or the “common-sense.” Possible examples
are legion: the abolition of slavery, the elimination of prohibition, the
end of the Vietnam War, advances in feminism, and so on. Without
rehashing the numerous lists of scholarly works on these topics, I just
want to suggest that these cases (and many others) have not been
mined sufficiently to extract the rhetorical, discursive, and material
tactics and strategies that could prove helpful in other progressive
causes. Clearly here I am thinking of beginning with mini-Foucauldian
archeologies of particular, grounded cases in order reveal the pro-
cesses of naturalization in actual operation, but then moving beyond
those analyses to actions that can expose these processes and their
differential consequences.

It is true that we’ve learned a great deal about the workings of capital
(and its intricate, complex, and multifaceted connections with patriarchy,
racial/ethnic hierarchies, nationalism/imperialism/colonialism) since
Marx. But if history is a guide, I would argue that capital has learned
a great deal more about the workings of the world since then, and has
put that knowledge to highly effective use. It’s time we catch on and
catch up!

Finally, why pick on *Antipode*? First, I come back to the statement
of purpose. *Antipode* intends “to contribute to the praxis of develop-
ing a new and better society.” No other journals in geography make
such an explicit claim to a progressive politics. (For example, while
*Society and Space* is “committed to the nitty-gritty of practical politics”
and this is understood to be a progressive stance, it doesn’t say so with
the same frankness as Antipode.) And if this critique is apt here, how much more so might it be if directed at other journals in geography? But I also focus on Antipode because the shortcomings of our present tactics are encapsulated in its subtitle: A Radical Journal of Geography. This formulation (both grammatically and materially, as it turns out) leaves geography (as a discipline, and as places and spaces that real people inhabit) unmodified. What we have is, once again, a radical critique from the margins of a truly staid discipline that moves along mostly untouched by what happens in the pages of this journal. What I’m arguing for here is a redirection of effort that would allow Antipode to be subtitled “A Journal of Radical Geography,” and then would live up to that name by reporting on the good works of radical geographers.

References
Hellman L (1976) Scoundrel Time Boston: Little, Brown