

RADICAL HISTORIANS NEWSLETTER

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Angry White Men On the Left; and No Exit: The Death of Utopia at the 1996 Socialist Scholars Conference

The fourteenth annual Socialist Scholars Conference took place at Borough of Manhattan Community College of the City University of New York, April 12–14, 1996. This version of the SSC, under different sponsorship, is quite different from the locus for left scholarly debate that some older readers may remember from the sixties and seventies, and it is valuable in different ways. Now it is more oriented toward contemporary analysis and activism. Sessions included “The Million Man March,” “The Assault on Public Higher Education,” “Feminism, Post-Modernism and Global Capital,” “From the Funeral Pyres of Stalinism and Social Democracy, Marxism Returns!” and a wide range of others.

The SSC is a project of the City University of New York branch of Democratic Socialists of America, and the usual suspects appear on the program year after year: Bogdan Denitch (who is conference chair), Stanley Aronowitz, Ellen Willis, Barbara Ehrenreich, Cornel West, as well as many non-DSA-ers like Daniel Singer, European correspondent of *The Nation*. The SSC seems quite open, with many DSA-organized sessions mixed in with sessions set up by such groups as *Monthly Review*, Radical Philosophy Association, the Haiti Anti-Intervention Committee, the Committee for the Study of Leon Trotsky’s Legacy, NACLA, and *Social Text*.

The SSC is a great gathering place for the left, a place to talk with old friends (including a good number from outside the New York metropolitan area), at a time when there are fewer and fewer

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such events. There was a good crowd — Stanley Aronowitz claimed an advance registration of 1500 — and the exhibit area seemed more crowded than it was last year.

The SSC has been supported in the past by CUNY, particularly when Joe Murphy was chancellor. Now CUNY is under assault by Governor Pataki, as well as by CUNY's downsizing chancellor, and the future is unclear. (Contributions should be made out to "Socialist Scholars Conference" and sent DSA, Dept. of Sociology, CUNY Graduate Center, 33 West 42nd St., New York, NY 10036.)

As always, there was a great deal of pluralism and diversity within the SSC's left universe this year. But — also as always — there was nonetheless a clear center of gravity in plenaries and major sessions. Obviously, the SSC reflects DSA politics. The opening plenary and the conference as a whole focused on the theme "Two Cheers for Utopia!" At registration, my alert friend Joanne Landy, president of the Campaign for Peace and Democracy, refused to wear the conference button which bore this slogan. And, as it turned out, the passivity and retreat from radicalism evident in the title — why are we holding back on the third cheer for utopia? asked Landy — was very much on display. As I experienced the SSC — others who attended other sessions might have experienced it differently — two especially problematic themes emerged: angry white men on the left; and "no exit."

Angry White Men on the Left

Todd Gitlin played a major role in the SSC, participating in three sessions: "Is the Radical and Marxist Tradition Hostile to Politics?," "Divisions, Identity and the Left in the US," and "Politics of Solidarity." In his recent book, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (1995) and in the SSC session on divisions, identity, and the left, Gitlin attacked "identity politics: ... groups overly concerned with protecting and purifying what they imagine to be their identities ... a very bad turn, a venture into quicksand."

Of course, much of the left rightly rejects the kind of "identity politics" that argues for exclusive concern with one's own group, denies universal values, and contends that one's particular group can solve its problems in isolation. And we can all see extremes of this kind of

politics in the solipsistic and often conservative thought that idolatrizes monarchy and male hierarchy in an invented African past; or, among some feminists, the analogous obsession with matriarchies and goddesses.

Gitlin's way of arguing — which reminds me of an approach frequently taken by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (another anti-multiculturalist) — is to find a fringe element of a broad group he disapproves of, and then, while using a couple of qualifiers, nonetheless to tar the whole thing. For instance, we know that feminism and some of the other movements have been racked by internal disagreement about essentialism, "the belief in a uniquely feminine essence, existing above and beyond cultural conditioning." But Gitlin chooses to see the entire movement through the lens of essentialism and damns it all: from the seventies on, he says, "The emphasis in the new movements veers towards a conception that men and women, gay and straight, were fundamentally, irreducibly different — a tendency so common as to be outfitted with the academic shorthand, 'essentialism.'"

Of course the truth is that many radical feminists were arguing an anti-essentialist position, saying that the allegedly "irreducible" differences might very well vanish if power were equalized. It is hardly justified to leap from a few dead-end examples to a condemnation of just about all independent organization around such issues as homosexuality, feminism, or race as inherently divisive and subversive of universals. And it is finally such movements that Gitlin and others at the SSC oppose.

These movements have been the health of the left, the result of hard-earned lessons emerging from past movements which have repeatedly submerged the interests of various groups in other people's priorities, and a way for all of us to keep thinking about what a thorough-going equality and real utopia would be.

The baby-with-the-bath-water tossing out of such independent organizing severs us from issues of race and gender which any movement that aims to build a democratic left majority in the US must face. The strategy that is both principled and has the most realistic chance of success involves weaving together support for the struggle for universal human rights and dignity with support for the self-defense of particular oppressed groups.

Gitlin has recently moved from Berkeley to become Professor of Culture, Journalism and
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Sociology at New York University. His arrival in New York City seems to have given heightened strength and legitimacy to a pre-existing condition: a straight male backlash among Big Apple left intellectuals. This was especially clear in the presentation by Bogdan Denitch, the conference organizer, who spoke along with Gitlin in the session on identity politics.

In his introduction to the conference program, Denitch had written, "We must learn to effectively confront the splintering politics of identity..." Speaking alongside Gitlin, it seemed that Denitch (who had gotten there on his own) had nonetheless been freed from a great burden, now that prestigious validation had been given to the attack on most kinds of feminism, gay liberation, and black self-organization.

In a truculent and martyred spirit, Denitch dragged out the old Lasch-ian vocabulary with its condemnation of "self-indulgence" (as if those who organize themselves on any basis other than class are frivolous, irresponsible, and destructive). To a sprinkling of applause from other anglers in the audience, Denitch announced, "we don't care if you are gay; we want to know whether you are a left gay!" And he was positively ferocious about some unspecified excesses by feminists which seemed to have been performed directly on his person. Whatever it was, I felt sorry for him and the obvious resultant trauma. As it hears more of this kind of belligerence within its ranks, DSA is going to have to figure out where it stands.

"No Exit"

Again and again throughout the conference, speakers used this phrase: in the sessions I attended, no fewer than four different speakers mentioned the term to convey the contemporary left's sense of helplessness, givenness, and inevitability in the face of rampant capitalism, globalization, etc. To his credit, in the early part of his talk, Denitch had addressed and tried to oppose this theme, although his effectiveness was undercut by his conservative conclusion, condemning unseemly particularism. I was struck by the amount of resignation to defeat that I felt in the air in other sessions. (On the other hand, Daniel Singer, I am told, spoke well about resistance in France in a session on "New Directions for the European Left," and others also countered this theme, as we will see.)

In a session on "Big Government, the Political

and the Left," Carol O'Cleiracain, formerly with AFSCME and then New York City Commissioner of Finance, exemplified how conservative defeatism has led to a disastrous narrowing of the radical agenda: "good management," she said, should be at the core of the left's agenda. This is the kind of sterile vision that two cheers for utopia leads to.

An air of defeat hung particularly heavily over a session chaired by Harry Magdoff and sponsored by *Monthly Review* on "Dominant Ideology: Power and Vulnerability." (*Monthly Review* has always been overwhelmed by the Great Forces; I recall their preoccupation with tungsten as the source of the war in Vietnam.) Richard Cloward of the Columbia University School of Social Work gave a somewhat moving but utterly defeated talk, repeatedly saying that he never imagined that he would live to see the day of such capitalist triumph, the repeal of the social contract which had begun to be forged in the thirties, the collapse of organized labor, the growth of inequality, the reappearance of deliberate policies seeking to create a reserve army of the unemployed, the capacity of capital to pick itself up and go to lower-wage areas. He offered many chilling figures in support of this analysis, including growing disparities between CEOs' and workers' wages. Ed Herman of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania told a similar story, although less dramatically. For both, there seemed no way out, no suggestion of the possibility of resistance.

I grew increasingly uncomfortable during these presentations. I have often been critical of a hortatory left culture that shows up in such places as left film, song, and history, and I think it's the job of left intellectuals to tell the truth, even when the truth is uninspiring. But what kind of analysis ignores agency and resistance, and how can analysis pretend to validity without them? How accurate is a social science that takes what is as what must be and abandons the quest for sources of tension within and against the system?

The last speaker at this session was Elaine Bernard, a long-time leader of Canada's New Democratic Party who heads the Harvard Trade Union Project. She is well known for her militant perspective and sharp analysis of health care reform. Her presentation at this session offered a stunning antidote to the two that had preceded hers. She began by asking, why had not Herman concluded that we must oppose and break the system that oppresses so many?

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Bernard's acute analysis pointed out the vulnerability of such new capitalist modes as "lean production": in a system run with smaller inventories, 3,000 brake workers had closed down GM's entire North American operations. Mobile as capital may be, she said — to cheers from an awakened audience — it must set its foot down someplace, it cannot leave the planet, she said (perhaps a little optimistically) — and our job is to grab that foot and break it!

Speaking against the grain of the 1996 SSC, Bernard reminds us of the relevance of utopia. Things do look pretty grim right now. But if you listen hard, you can find scattered resistance from below, antidotes to the sense of givenness and inevitability: changes in the American labor movement, increasing consciousness about layoffs, sweatshops, and wage disparities, the Living Wage movement, the collapse of Gingrich, hostility to HMOs, resistance to throwing new mothers out of hospitals, discontent with NAFTA, GATT, and European Union, resistance to the austere imperatives of Maastricht by French, Belgian, and German workers.

In the US, these things might well go noplacé: Clintonism and the sterile and vacuous two-party system indeed seem to gobble things up and to offer no exit. But our job is to find the system's points of vulnerability, to renew our sense of independence and agency from below, to imagine and invent resistance, to insist on the practicality and achievability of visionary alternatives, not to bury ourselves by declaring the death of utopia.

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