Two Intellectual Giants of the American Left

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Think for a moment, reader, about the major Marxist figures of the mid-twentieth-century United States. It is a difficult question, for at least two reasons: first, because since at least the 1870s, American thought had seemed, to Europeans at least, impermeable to the difficult ideas of Marxism. Some of the purported deepest intellects at the high point of Debsian socialism essentially defended Marxist theory against challenge, as in Louis B. Boudin’s Theoretical System of Karl Marx in the Light of Recent Criticism (1907). Instead of theory, U.S. radicals excelled in reportage, like John Reed’s Ten Days That Shook the World, or fiction, like Upton Sinclair’s packing-house shocker The Jungle. Despite efforts at popularization in the 1930s “Red Decade,” innovative Marxist theory remained, or was at least considered, a European domain. And then again, the U.S. left was knocked flat on its back in the postwar era, with the combined success of McCarthyite political repression and the burst of consumer prosperity. The “end of ideology” then famously celebrated by Daniel Bell was also, according to liberal and conservative consensus, the end of socialism and Marxism. They had been refuted, politically and intellectually, once and for all.

But wait. By the late 1950s, the civil rights movement was well underway, and in just a few years, the Cuban Revolution shook the self-confidence of the nation’s rulers. Soon the dramatic appearance of a kind of Pan-Africanism led by Malcolm X among others suggested that U.S. politics could not remain insulated from the restless world outside. In fact, a little New Left had already appeared on a few U.S. campuses, linked to Monthly Review through the circles around the pictorial magazine American Socialist. The journal Studies on the Left was launched in 1959, marking the thoughtful early scholarship of a new generation.

What texts and writers offered a way forward for these young thinkers? Two classic Marxist historical works that were only just being

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rediscovered by readers in the 1960s pointed up a pair of revolutionary intellectual giants: *Black Reconstruction* (1937) by W. E. B. Du Bois, the architectonic text, was destined to be recognized as a masterpiece; and *The Black Jacobins* (1938) by C. L. R. James, who moved to the United States only a year or so after its publication, and who similarly turned the history of slave revolts upside down. The two authors also shared another uncommon trait: they were globalists as well as Pan-Africans. Looking back at Marxist thought of the period, their globalism becomes central, and for good reason. On this side of the Atlantic, Marxism could be recognized and used best only through a proper grasp of empire.

This crucial fact made the founding of *Monthly Review* in 1949 central to a newly realized if not entirely new trend in American Marxist thought. It might be said that until that time Marxist ideas rested upon the political assumption that sooner or later, capitalism would collapse, and the working class would rise up to smite its rulers. The main problem was to align an understanding of U.S. conditions to Marxism as it was then understood. The American left had denounced “imperialism” since at least the Spanish-American War, with avowedly revolutionary socialists standing against such ventures. To that evil, racism was added, if mainly by non-Marxist Christian socialists early on, but also by the newer Communist movement that emerged from the First World War. The idea that empire could or would extend the life of capitalism (as Rosa Luxemburg and Irish revolutionary James Connolly warned) had not sunk in, nor were the possible larger implications explored. If U.S. capitalism had not recovered after 1945, and if the struggle for a “second New Deal” had reached the socialistic phase widely predicted, Marxist thought surely would have taken a different course. But instead, after around 1950, the collapse of the “old Left,” Communist, Trotskyist, and Socialist alike, offered both opportunity and necessity for a new view.

Before reading the letters collected in *The Age of Monopoly Capital*, this reviewer did not realize the degree to which Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy had together worked out the world system and the role of U.S. imperialism in global capitalism before 1960. Both Baran’s *The Political Economy of Growth* (1957) and their jointly authored *Monopoly Capital* (1966)—vital texts for any student of American socialist ideas, which still offer a sophisticated approach to the overwhelming problems of the world’s economies—can be traced to the intellectual and political collaboration documented in this new volume.

The book is unsuited for breezy, superficial reading. Not that its pages bear cumbersome theoretical vocabulary—far from it—but it is an epistolary work, in the best sense of the old British novels (minus the aristocracy
and romantic intrigues), fascinating for its details and quiet wisdom. It tells the saga of two friends fighting together, across the distance of a continent, against capitalism, and grappling with the significance of an empire entering a new age. Despite all the changes in the decades since, what they saw persists in our age as well.

Hidden behind the triumphant claims of capitalism’s midcentury champions was the actual nearness in time of the New Deal and its many contradictory elements. Social planners, activists, and experts, engaged in every aspect of government and supportive of the Popular Front, had worked toward a higher and more cooperative U.S. order. The Second World War, with antifascism in high gear, seemed to bring the stars into alignment for world peace, the final necessity of such a transition. The paucity of outright Marxist theory, like the absence of a European-style Marxist party with a mass membership, disguised the degree of labor education (with MR cofounder Leo Huberman among the foremost figures), leftwing screenwriting, and the presence of younger figures considered the promise of a bright socialist future. Paul Sweezy, a Harvard economist highly regarded in scholarly circles as a precocious economic thinker, could be called one of the most promising young intellectuals of the time. Then came the Cold War.

Paul Baran, likewise caught in the grips of the Cold War, was a unique addition to this scene. Born in Ukraine in what was then part of the Tsarist Empire and educated in the USSR and Germany, Baran was a leading economist for a time associated with the Frankfurt School, and brought the latter’s dialectical method to bear on neoclassical and Keynesian economics. He also read and spoke fluently in a half-dozen languages: he was a world intellectual.

In this perilous time, academic freedom was sharply limited, especially for those without tenure. While Sweezy had already set out on his own course, joining Huberman to found MR in the aftermath of the redbaited and badly failed Henry Wallace presidential campaign, Baran was teaching economics at Stanford, under intermittent threat of persecution. The university authorities were at first delighted to snatch him up, and only later learned that he was by nature profoundly, insightfully anticapitalist. But unlike Sweezy, Baran badly needed a paycheck. Thus the trial by fire went on, amid harassment from on high, while students naturally rallied to his side.

Despite the McCarthyite witch-hunts that scared off so many former leftists from political commitments, these two youngish intellectuals were at the height of their powers. They studied and debated developments at home and across the world, day by day, sometimes hour by hour, and spoke to audiences far and wide, when asked and able. For Sweezy and
Baran, current affairs prompted reflections on the long history of capitalism, as well as on the rapidly changing nature of the current economic system. It is a stretch, but not much of one, to imagine these two as radical intellectual partners following in the footsteps of Marx and Engels.

A young person happening upon *Monthly Review* around 1960 would discover a field of thought dramatically distant from anything else then available in the United States, even within the left. That young person would possibly come to Baran’s *Political Economy of Growth* and find the magazine’s insights further consolidated, with staggering results. As Baran’s book revealed, the world economy was truly a *political* economy, and the magic formulae of the day (“development”) promoted and rationalized the domination and exploitation of the third world. In the mainstream vision, especially popular with the Kennedy administration, the United States would dictate the terms of development. Behind the seemingly kindly offer of assistance lurked the reality of counterinsurgency, with hundreds of thousands of dead and so many millions of poor left behind by the “pacification” of Latin America in the 1960s alone.

Baran and Sweezy began their shared project with few illusions. The brilliance of the two men stands out in these letters, as they discuss, back and forth, agreeing and disagreeing, theories of economy and issues of contemporary society in ways then unthinkable to other commentators. The problems of capitalism had changed dramatically, not once but several times within a generation before their writing, and if some of the earlier efforts (such as Lewis Corey’s 1934 *The Decline of American Capitalism*, which had probed the issue of “unproductive capital” feeding the stock market frenzy of the 1920s) were impressive, none had the technical expertise to go very far.

Staring them in the face were the grand claims of a booming consumer economy offering cars, washing machines, and further endless proof that the existing system had overwhelmed its critics and made itself eternal. C. L. R. James, responding to the appeal of consumerism as the true American way, wrote that “men are not pigs to be fattened.” In their letters, Baran and Sweezy conclude that the notion of a universal consumerism, American-style, is a delusion. More than half a century later, the cost to global ecology of unchecked consumerism suggests the lasting significance and insight of their critique. Where others saw “more” as an end in itself, Baran and Sweezy had already grasped the implication of “waste” as an engine of ultimate destruction.

They also saw what the contemporary left did not care to see. This part of the volume makes tough reading, because anyone active in left movements is likely to operate better with happy illusions. From West Germany
northward and well into the south, European labor and social democratic parties of their era were competing for or holding power, where less than a decade earlier, the Italian Communist Party had been the largest political party of any kind in Europe. For leftwing optimists, likewise, Eastern Europe held new hope with the repudiation of Stalin in favor of what Alexander Dubček a few years later would call “socialism with a human face,” and signs here and there pointed to a kind of rejuvenation.

Baran and Sweezy would have none of it. The Western left parties were essentially marking time. So long as capitalism survived, let alone thrived, the west’s most prominent Communist leaders’ only response was to enter political coalitions to govern. It was a trap, the same one that, under another name, held the Eastern Bloc, in large part because no degree of economic growth in Poland or Bulgaria or Lithuania could provide the consumer items readily available in the West, idealized as emblems of modern life. To the legitimate complaints of intellectuals, artists, and others seeking a socialist renewal, Eastern European leaders offered for the most part only punishment. In the survival and revival of capitalism after the Second World lay a crisis for socialism of any definition, and these two thinkers did not shy away from the consequences.

Baran and Sweezy saw the American left as almost pre-modern, in such an enfeebled state that things would need to begin over again. And so they did: by the end of the volume, in 1964, Baran is offered an opportunity to edit an issue of a European journal on the U.S. civil rights movement. He did not live to attempt it, dying in March of that year. The radicalization of U.S. political life in the late 1960s still lay ahead, and could not be foreseen by the end of this correspondence. And yet the problems, if not the solutions, are very much on display here. The Cuban Revolution, a breakthrough unexpected in West and East alike, seemed destined to change the direction of history, and with their connections, Baran and Sweezy could see its significance in a context that few others grasped.

This review could not be complete without a note on the introduction by John Bellamy Foster and the annotations by Foster and Nicholas Baran. The former stands for itself not only as a lucid overview of the book but also as an inside view or even immanent critique, so to speak, of the Monthly Review saga. The lasting value of the contributions made over a half-century ago can be found in the intellectual continuity of MR, as well as in the penetrating insights into the nature of what we could call the imperial economy. The painstaking annotations and footnotes that give citations, point to further reading, and identify vanished personalities offer much to the close reader.