

Endgame Marxism (and Urbanism)

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I love the old questions.

[With fervour]

Ah the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them!

—HAMM IN SAMUEL BECKETT, *Endgame*

One of the inspiring things about the Marxist tradition at the bicentenary of Karl Marx's birth is its resilience, its capacity for seemingly endless spinoffs and interpretations, innumerable adaptations and provocations. It is an innovative body of thought that has given people plenty to work with and think about when the world itself has been less inspiring. Marxism has kept people going when it has been hard to keep going.

A while back, the late Eduardo Galeano advocated a Marxism that “celebrates continuous birth.” He had one of his rummy characters call it *Magical Marxism*: “one half reason, one half passion, and a third half mystery.” “Not a bad idea!” his drinking buddies agree, toasting this new school of Marxism, which has always seemed like a good idea to me too, even if I would fill that third half with *hope*.

But keeping hope alive is never straightforward. Sometimes you need a sense of humor. So there is another strand of Marxism that inspires – at least it has inspired me – an ironic variety, a *Groucho Marxism*, drawing sustenance from comedian Groucho Marx, who, declining an invitation to join an exclusive Hollywood organization, said he cared not to belong to any club that accepted his type as a member.

Of course, what Groucho meant was that he would rather keep sacred his own individuality, affirm his own free will, beyond the grasp of any collective. All of which might seem antithetical to Marxism. Yet, perhaps those sensibilities – collectivity and individuality – express two different aspects of Marxism's humanist tradition, of how they ought to go together. It is another way to frame the dialectic of justice and *jouissance*, a radical hope for equality on the one side, plus a diversity of self-expression on the other. In a sense, this is not only what Marxism should offer; it is what any city should offer, too. Cities should reconcile problems of freedom

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and necessity, ought to provide affordable housing and a decent quality of life, alongside novelty of experience and scope for expansive individuality.

Alas, a stroll around a lot of our cities today is not likely to reveal too much intrigue or novelty, nor much democracy. Our cities are invariably unfair and uninteresting. They are flattened by familiarity, even as different skyscrapers go up. Their ubiquity is in their sameness, in the predictability of their function. Everywhere the same insipid chain stores commandeering prime locations; everywhere the same kinds of spectacular glass and steel architectural structures, catering to familiar financial services and high-tech activities, dispersed among familiar multinational corporations, the same accountancy firms, the same banks and management consultancies, the Googles and the Amazons, the Facebooks and the Microsofts.

The glitter belies the banality. Texture and diversity have gone. In the urban mix, there is little mix. Boredom and disconnect prevail. For the ordinary person, it is hard not to feel that disconnect the way Jean-Paul Sartre's protagonist Roquentin felt it in *Nausea*: a human being encountering cold inanimate objects, objects everywhere around you, that tower over you, that provide the context of your life – objects you must live with yet are somehow cut off from you, beyond you, against you. They make you shudder with *that* feeling, with the *nausea* that overcomes you, that alienated subjectivity.

These days, we are living in a world that has undergone colossal urban expansion. At the same time, the parameters for human expansion, for the expansion of the self, have diminished, dwindled for many denizens just as those city lights shine evermore brilliantly. Our urban system is superdynamic yet wreaks dullness for the bulk of people. Cities are exploitable commodities, their land a pure financial asset, an evermore frackable spatial unit. They gorge on capital and wealth, on labor power and resources. They have vast appetites that chew up what they need, only to spit things out afterward. Cities expel a *residue* of the unwanted, the no-longer-necessary, the used and abused. Marx saw this residue as a "relative surplus population," as workers "set free" from the whole world of work; nowadays, it is people set free from the whole totality of urban life. It is an exclusion process that creates a massive urban *banlieue* on the periphery, where residues reside: the evicted and displaced, the downsized and degraded, the expelled and exhausted.

Residues are workers without regularity of work. They are refugees rejected and rebuked, profiled and patrolled no matter where they wander, victims of war and economic collapse, of environmental devastation, of drought and deforestation, of wildfires and wild regimes. A lot

of refugees end up somewhere on the city fringes. Residues are other displacees, people forced off the land, tenants thrown out of housing, people land grabbed, space deficient, victims of impersonal land markets and property booms – and busts. Residues come from the city as well as the countryside, and congregate in a space that is often somewhere in between, neither traditional city nor traditional countryside. Residues are not merely the city’s secretion: they are now the very substance of the global city itself, an urban default position.

Thus, the question: When the rich have displaced *all* the poor from the urban core, banished them from its neoliberal isotropic plane, from its plane of business immanence, have we not reached a strange apotheosis? Have we not reached a sort of endgame, when the game is really up, even as we still feign the moves? When, after the pawns have finally gone, have been sacrificed, when little is left on the urban checkboard besides kings, kings playing off against other kings, square by square, is there nothing left to win and no possibility of ever winning? Endgame. *Fin de Partie*.

Maybe there is another strand of Marxism we ought to explore today. Let’s call it *Beckettian Marxism* – the kind of Marxism needed to confront this endgame urbanism, a Marxism that engages with a Samuel Beckett *mise-en-scène*, honing in on the Irish writer’s peculiar specialty: claustrophobic confinement. In our case, it is the confinement engendered by a space-hungry, market-driven urban expansion. As buildings go up, partition walls move in for millions of people. Speculative space opens up, dwelling space closes down, gets sliced up, and is subdivided. Richness for the few resonates as cramped emptiness for the many. Public space itself resembles a scene from *Waiting for Godot* – a street, a tree, a few vagrants hanging around. Accommodation hunting is as depressing as the microdesolation of Hamm and Clov in *Endgame* – “you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that”; or maybe the chamber of horrors in Beckett’s extraordinary short work, *The Lost Ones*, is more apt, with “one body per square metre or two hundred bodies in all round numbers. Whether relatives near and far or friends in varying degree many in theory are acquainted. The gloom and press make recognition difficult.” Is this a vision of the death camps, or refugees in a transit camp? Or is it just a vision of ordinary everyday madness, of multioccupancy in an unaffordable city, in which rents have skyrocketed? An abode “where lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one.”

Beckett himself was a displaced person, displaced by choice, of course, but displaced nonetheless. A native English speaker who wrote his best works in French, in Paris; an atheist Protestant in an aggressive Catholic

Irish state; an alien Irishmen in France, an uprooted Frenchman in Ireland, never living in his country of citizenship, never a citizen in the country in which he chose to live. He was said to be nonpolitical, yet he fought for the French Resistance. He earned the *Croix de Guerre* for bravery and later went on to write a literature of rights from the standpoint of people who never knew they had any.

In 1945, sitting at his mother's deathbed, Beckett had a revelation. It prompted a change of heart and inspired a new mission for him as a writer. For years, he had been trying to shrug off the shadow of mentor James Joyce. "I realized that Joyce had gone as far as one could," said Beckett, "in the direction of knowing more. He was always adding...I realized that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting." Henceforth, his work would focus on poverty and loss, on failure and exile, on destitution and despair. It would strip away words, unearth the silent tragicomedy of bare life, its lessness.

If Joyce's universe was the kaleidoscopic expanse of *Finnegans Wake's* *chaosmos*, Beckett's was the dim bedsit room, within its narrow four walls, bleak and bereft of anything, soon bereft of the lodgers themselves, of tenants expelled, like Murphy, or like the anonymous antihero of "The Expelled," flung out onto the boardinghouse's front steps. "As I fell I heard the door slam," the evictee says. "That meant they were not pursuing me down into the street, with a stick, to beat me.... So, for once, they had confined themselves to throwing me out and no more about it. I had time, before coming to rest in the gutter, to conclude this piece of reasoning."

From Murphy and Watt, and Molloy and Malone, to Mercier and Camier, and onward to the Unnamable one—who had to express himself with words yet eventually chose silence—Beckett's literary imagination is populated by clochards and vagabonds, by the wretched of the earth. "Did they beat you?" Vladimir asks Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. "Where did you spend the night?" "Don't touch me!" Estragon responds. "Don't question me! Don't speak to me! Stay with me!" Earlier, Estragon had lamented: "We've no rights any more." "We've lost our rights," he says. "We got rid of them," Vladimir rejoins.

Waiting for Godot, first performed in Paris in 1952, marked a turning point for Beckett as a writer and existentialist. Maybe it is no coincidence that 1952 was also the year of Jean-Paul Clébert's *Paris Insolite*, a book about the postwar Parisian poor, about their efforts to stay warm, to eat and drink in the *zone*, in a no-man's land of homeless panhandlers and rag-and-bone men, prostitutes and scrap-metal dealers. It was war's aftermath; yet another war had commenced. Clébert himself took to

streets, lived with these destitute souls, recounted their tales as one of them. It was a bedraggled realism, an insider reportage. They were Beckett's people, looking and sounding like his *dramatis personae*, right down to their dress sense, their wives, their visions of who they were, and how they got there. Yet Beckett's genius was not only to dramatize this *zeitgeist*; he heard what went on inside these peoples' heads too, he voiced their stuttering broken words, their private language, their lack of language. He still hears this lack today, what goes on inside our bedsits and basement flats.

For Beckett, to shrink vistas was to glimpse bare life. You could understand more by figuring out less. If flows of global capital at the high end of *Financial Times* life resemble a giant Jackson Pollock canvas, then maybe it is the minuscule world of Paul Klee that comes closest to a Beckett bedsit. ("Burdened Children," Klee's crayon-and-ink composition from 1930, with two interlocking human figures, made up of boxes, stick legs, and dots for eyes, seems a perfect visual analogue of Beckett's *How It Is*.) Beckett's darkest evocation of bare life is surely *Endgame*, from 1957. Stark interior. Gray light. Left and right back, two small windows, curtains drawn. Four characters, Nagg and Nell, living in two ash bins; Hamm, blind, infirm, in a wheelchair; Clov, younger, lame, Hamm's helper, a kind of adopted son. "Clov," Hamm asks, in a question many might pose today, if only to oneself, "Have you had enough?" "Yes!" Clov answers – then, pausing, wonders, "Of what?" "Of this...this...thing," says Hamm. "I always had," Clov adds. Have you had enough? Of what? Of this...this...thing? Brexit?...Trump?...Capitalism?

"Outside of here it's death," says Hamm. "Beyond is the other hell." Looking through his telescope, at the outside, Clov says, "nothing stirs. All is –" "All is what?" demands Hamm. "What all is? in a word? *corpsed*," says Clov. Hamm and Clov's dialogue here is razor sharp, pure gallows humor, full of Groucho Marxist flourishes. It is existential slapstick, a theater of the absurd, like real life. At one point, Hamm declares – "*with fervour*" – in Beckett's italics: "I love the old questions. Ah the old questions, [and] the old answers, there's nothing like them!" This declaration seems vital somehow, profound, more than a few throwaway lines. What does it mean, what could it mean...the old questions, and the old answers – that there is nothing like them?

Maybe there are some old questions in the Marxist tradition, time immemorial questions, and regardless of the particular forms they take, there is, as Hamm says, *nothing like them*. One old question might be, *What Is to Be Done?* Lenin asked it in 1901. Since then, it has usually provoked an old response: *class struggle, dictatorship of the proletariat*, the founding and

organization of a Party, a Party of and for this proletariat, including its *lumpen* variant. Perhaps there still is not anything like it.

The old Party was there to *represent* the interests of the working class, even if some members of this working class were not interested in joining this Party, never wanted to belong to it. Nevertheless, the Party had the interests of a public in mind, the interests of the majority. There were services this public needed, public services – social housing, decent education, adequate health care, reliable buses, trains, and subways. Under the old questions, the city itself was never a market: it was a public good, a space managed in the public interest, not in the interest of the rich – *not managed by the rich in the interests of the rich*. There was a city government and this city government had a plan. City governors and city planners were elected officials, constituted by the Party in office, who were accountable to “the people,” often made up of “the people,” with checks and balances that assured democracy was agreed upon.

Indeed, it was assumed that the checks and balances would control what the rich did, preventing them from speculating on those vital public goods, so that all any city government needed to do was to ensure its poorest citizens could live in safe and stable neighborhoods. Any Hobbesian war of all against all had to stop; the overarching public interest had to be maintained. Perhaps the old questions and the old responses can become new solutions again, ending this endgame urbanism of ours? “Old endgame lost of old, play and lose and have done with losing.”

Beckett’s focus on poverty and loss, on lessness, is maybe the new spirit the Marxist tradition needs to resuscitate. A new old Marxism based on immiseration. A macro practice around the micro, around concrete poverty, not around abstract long waves of history. Perhaps Marxism and Marxists need to take to the streets to see things close up, in the raw, like the vagabond Clébert? Perhaps it needs a new epiphany about what it once was? Its theory has lost sight of its subject, abandoned its subject: this residue of neoliberal capitalism, this rank and file, Marxism’s real constituency, the Beckettian evicted and exhausted, thrown out of their dwelling space as well as their workspace. It is a global working class whose ranks swell by the day, yet that no longer has its Party – indeed has witnessed a *fin du parti*. Is the Labour Party up for being its representative in Britain? We are still not sure.

An old question might not be so much *What Is to Be Done?* as *Where to Begin Again?* After the defeat of the Paris Commune, Arthur Rimbaud, a 17-year-old poet-protagonist, said the blood of its victims drained away all hope for his generation. For a long time to come, Rimbaud said, truth will have to go underground. It had been reduced to tatters, along with

life. Our age today is one in which truth has similarly been reduced to tatters, along with life. To trace out any hope of its recovery, Marxists need to organize underground, follow Old Mole of old, agitate underground, assemble in Beckettian bedsits, in sunken basements, maybe in communal squats, somewhere cheap, somewhere far away. Or perhaps close by. Begin again. Build up again. For it is true that truth today is more truthful in the underground than in the commercial overground. Truth will not be voiced from the rich core, but from the honest poor periphery, from the margins of life, from the margins of our cities, from its grungy peripheral *banlieues*, from broken-down informal *zones à défendre*, defended to the end. There, as Beckett said, nothing will be truer than nothingness, the source of a new radical beginning.

The other likelihood is that truth will get communicated via old means not new media. Ah, the old answers! It will be shared by word of mouth and on paper, not online. One of the problems with the ubiquity of our current social media is its saturation, that there is too much of it, and too much of it peddling lies, and fear and loathing. Too much commercial media play too many channels that offer people too little choice. We are flooded with truths, making it hard to decide which truth is not false. A new underground truth will emerge like it once did, from smart people living off very little, living in ruined and cheap neighborhoods, often in experimental neighborhoods, communicating via old experimental media.

And there will be cafés and hang outs where kindred spirits and fellow travelers can commune with one another, bump into one another, talk and argue with one another, share sounds together, maybe some old jazz riffs. They can be present, in person, and engage in old debates about the future, have direct human encounters not mediated screen encounters. Some of these new experimental neighborhoods might mimic the Greenwich Villages and SoHos (and Sohos) of old. There might be new reparatory theaters, reenacting old plays by Beckett or Bertolt Brecht or by new Living Theatre troupes, putting fresh spins on old staples, reinventing a new vanguard, inspiring new audiences while reenergizing old ones who have not entirely forgotten what it was like the first time around.

What would begin again is a new Marxist Underground, where a new critical culture might be incubated, a will to live differently, like it did before, making our cities interesting and democratic again. Or perhaps it will not happen. Perhaps nothing like this will ever happen. Not again. Perhaps it is no longer possible for Marxism to go on, having lost so much. Try again with the old answers? Fail again, fail better? And even if Marxism cannot go on, it will go on – maybe for another two hundred years.