

Letters from our readers

22 November 2011

On "The counterrevolutionary role of the Egyptian pseudo-left"

This is an excellent outline of the development of the revolution in Egypt so far, and a devastating exposure of the pseudo-left forces that seek to co-opt and defuse it. Definitely a must-read for everybody.

Keep up the great work!

Mirko L

21 November 2011

On "Mayors conspired to close Occupy Wall Street encampments"

They probably won't drop charge against the protesters and journalists. I was told they wouldn't drop charges against me, because I was told by the police to leave. People are no longer important to them, only profit is. I feel we need to increase our efforts and start to educate what this movement is. I saw people who lost their jobs, benefits, and their homes. The police in my opinion are paid to protect corporations, not people. When I was arrested I said this. The police are now the jury, the judge, and now the executioner. They have more power they we do. I encourage all those to stand and fight with us. We are really fighting for you.

Paul

Washington, USA

18 November 2011

On "Mark Duggan unarmed when shot by UK police"

I would ask another question: What sort of "shoebox" was it that can sustain an incriminating fingerprint? Is it made of plastic or metal? Shoes I buy all come in cardboard boxes. Let us see this shoebox. And let us see proof that any sort of fingerprint can be taken off of one.

Julie Hyland's statement near the end of the article is wonderfully put: "a typical representative of a social layer filled with hatred, contempt and fear of those who are denied everything by the very system that gives him such a comfortable existence."

Charles H

Texas, USA

21 November 2011

On "Syria targeted for imperialist intrigue after Arab League suspension"

As soon as this all kicked off a while ago I knew we (the west) would be stirring things in Syria. Still, Assad is not handling the situation at all well.

Philip

18 November 2011

On "JVP dissidents in Sri Lanka: a new political trap"

When I was a student, trying desperately to understand the repressive political climate of Sri Lanka, the JVP was the only fighting party that was known to us. They managed to get sections of rural youth to join them because of the uneven development in Sri Lanka between the city and the village.

This became vividly clear to me when I joined the University. In the first year, students were "ragged", meaning senior students would subject us to humiliation. This was a process that was encouraged by the JVP in their attempt to pit the village student against the student from the city. The village youth was encouraged to harass the "English speaking" crowd from the city.

The JVP was active in the campus. The village youth depended on them more as they could not return home every day as some of us in the city could. JVP found it easy to use the relative helplessness of the village youth as the entry point into their brand of politics.

The students from the city of course had their own disdain for the village students, not in small measure due to the affirmative action policies of the Sri Lankan government that made a city student require a much higher score to get in to the university. The uneven development in Sri Lanka thus helped JVP to perpetuate their line.

We did not have a socialist perspective. There was no one who seemed to know why things were the way they are. Lecturers were no help.

Now you all are changing that. Your program will get a wide following because after the bloody war against the LTTE, nationalism has been exposed as the rotten husk that hides the predatory interests of the national bourgeoisie.

Sinhala and Tamil youth both increasingly realize that they have no nation. They have more in common with the youth getting pepper sprayed in California than they have with the upper middle class sections of Sri Lankan elite society who view them with the most open contempt.

I wish you well, and be safe.

Thushara

20 November 2011

On "'Chagall and the Russian Avant-Garde' at the Art Gallery of Ontario"

That was an excellent article and a truly fascinating exhibit at the AGO testifying to that magnificent period, when the long-oppressed

Jews in Russia's Pale of Settlement like Marc Chagall enjoyed for a time a political and artistic liberation and government sponsorship, and this amidst a cruel civil war and its associated hunger, suffering and death. Of necessity, a review needs to focus on what is most essential to our understanding, and this you did wonderfully. Still, I am bothered by a potentially false conclusion that may be drawn.

Chagall left Russia in 1923, as you mention, around the time when the first signs of bureaucratic degeneration became evident in the Soviet Union. It may appear falsely that Chagall, the former commissar of the arts in Vitebsk and personal friend of Lunacharsky, the culture minister who sponsored so many clashing modernist tendencies, somehow turned against the revolution disenchanted.

True, Chagall avoided the fierce clashes among artistic tendencies that reflected in distorted form some of the passions of a convulsive era when bourgeois rule was shaken across the world. Trotsky remembered with bemusement the blood-curdling proclamations and the café provocations to the sound of claxons that characterized the Dadaists only a few tables away from Lenin and the Bolsheviks at a café in Switzerland where artistic, scientific and political revolutions were plotted. It was Einstein's favorite joint. The great scientist had a sign up when Revolution broke out in Russia telling his students, "No class today: Revolution." It was like that in Berlin and Paris too, political passions refracted through arts by the most varied movements.

Indeed, Chagall left Vitebsk when his homeboy Malevich pasted a huge sign over the school they co-directed proclaiming it the Suprematist Academy after Malevich's movement with its abstractions and war on representation so at odds with Chagall's art, a story evident in each work. This was also the time when the New Objectivists in Germany clashed with the Expressionists about the same issue, testifying to the Internationalism of artistic movements that overcame borders not only among nations, but also among different genres.

You point out how photography and film are featured in the exhibit, and it is worth emphasizing that this cross-fertilization among artistic forms is a unique feature of modernism in the period of its greatest vitality, when it was not an entry in Wikipedia and still less a road to Auschwitz as the post-modernists propose, but a time of creative ferment, where in a world filled with cruelty, oppression and war, a place was made for artistic productions of great beauty, one artistic form stimulating another. Just as many modernist poets credit Eisenstein's montage in film for the abrupt cutting and transitions of, say, *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos*, so Chagall left his hometown to work creating sets for a Yiddish theater in Moscow sponsored by a revolutionary government which surely had other expenses and yet spared money for the arts—in Yiddish, yet.

Indeed, Chagall's first attraction to the arts was made possible by a great struggle waged in Yiddish within the Jewish Pale of Settlement between the forces of modernism and the Enlightenment and the backwardness and superstition of the villages or the *shtetl*. It was the Jewish socialists organized as the Bund that sponsored education in the arts and artistic productions in Yiddish as a way of bringing the light of reason where there was formerly ignorance and superstition. This brings up another possible misunderstanding that troubles me.

That Chagall's preoccupation was with *shtetl* life should not be confused with an admiration of its ways, as so many suppose. In fact, these were typical themes and images of Yiddish literature from Sholem Aleichem, to Isaac Bashevis Singer, modernizers who found a rich source of themes and symbolism in the villages in which they never lived. They were not the fiddlers on the roof among the flying cows of the villages, but sophisticated folk catering to their people's passion for learning denied to them in a world in which they were forever outsiders, at least until the forces of modernism swept away the feudal boundaries from 1848 onward.

Chagall managed to get a merchant's license, giving him permission to live in St. Petersburg and study art. This was in 1906, a year when Leon Trotsky, whose first language was Yiddish, defended brilliantly his role as leader of the Soviet that ruled the city, demonstrating just how weak the ruling class is and how powerful the workers when they move forward under decisive leadership. That, regrettably, was lacking in 1923 when Chagall arrived in Germany at the time of a badly managed uprising that permitted the Stalinists to consolidate power in the Soviet Union and recreate the boundaries and prejudices of the world in which Chagall was born.

Some decades ago, I visited the Pompidou Museum in Paris for a most wonderful exhibit called "Paris-Berlin" demonstrating how the first, heroic period of the Russian Revolution, with its material poverty and spiritual plenty, found counterparts in Berlin, and Paris. In Tokyo and Rome, New York and London, artists gathered in the most varied movements, insisting on an educational role for their art, in the belief that they would change the world through the power of their artistic creation. Given how inward-looking, isolated, competitive and contemptuous of the public so many artists are today, it is wonderful to go through the AGO exhibit and look at the artistic work of a time when the artist felt empowered, the boundaries in the sphere of science, politics and the arts lifted for a while, and beauty was created in very bad times such as ours. We have to do without the comfort of artistic productions that speak to us and to our times, and it hurts.

AL

Toronto, Canada
18 November 2011



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