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Theses on a Red Decade

1.

Red Decade. How to live? On the line of contact, we helped certain intellectual and political directions take shape. Sometimes head, sometimes tail, we went among other young people baptized in an economic crisis and anti-austerity struggle. I'm neither guarded nor attenuated about it; from 2008-2020 the small Red American left contributed to and coordinated with a spontaneous popular revolt against austerity and neoliberalism, even if this revolt of American left populism approached neither Venezuela's 1998-2008 nor Bolivia's 2006-2016 political sequences. The calibration of the term is meant to be utopian and programmatic, in Fredric Jameson's sense, as these are works of a poet, a critic, a labor organizer, a social movement participant, an observer of the times. More skeptically: The lines of political development thus far only point in these crimson-dawn directions by subtraction and failure in this mini-period. Offramps and escape routes—new solidarity and practical innovations like UBI—from an ever more closed social form of capitalism have briefly appeared in populist politics. From the other side of the decade, it is clearly visible that such enduring organizations await patent, self-sacrificing construction.

2.

Marxist renewal. Is there anything more repetitive than this very gesture? Again? Capitalism, as Donald Sassoon has noted, triumphed in this moment of the Great Financial Crisis, with bailed-out imperialism and financialization relying on some old (austerity) and some new (digital commodification) interlocking and self-reinforcing dynamics to revive growth in conditions of sustained credit easing. The persistence of capitalist social relations, with an opposition intelligentsia reduced a confined academic condition, has meant the persistence of socialism in US left politics too, so that a 2008 youth generation could give novel circulation to the older politics and ideas. As Tariq Ali said of the popularity of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders: young people are fond of dinosaurs. So they have defossilized ideas thought passe or outmoded, as if only under the extreme pressure of disappearance could the necessary excitation of a few

particles happen—in the streets, the reams of internet writing, as Mike Davis notes, sometimes “radical ideas acquire sudden telluric power.” The early 2000s on the American Left—expressed by the “folk politics” of Seattle 1999, with anarchist-led street demos and international populisms of autonomous or post-Marxist stripe—set the stage for 2008 with ideology and actors, nor have these been entirely superseded. In both Seattle and Occupy, the youth who demanded change did not encounter propitious historical circumstances. What’s required today, in Badiou’s terms, is a steadfast fidelity to the events of the post-crisis period, the political struggles after the crisis and the Marxist orientation that emerged out of them.

3.

Post-Crisis Years. These were best-worst times, with calamities in finance and public sector turning into organizing openings for Marxist political-economic analysis. These were socialism’s many evenings: one night a cookout with writers and revolutionaries; another night for writing and web-based publishing; another night, another mini-joust with the state’s special bodies of armed men; another night on campus and in an occupied building. Conferences, talks, analyses, before more strange and unexpected political syntheses, poetic repurposings bent to preservation.

4.

Poetry Criticism. The primacy of poetics distinguishes our age from previous ones, with its expansion of the field through byways of interpretive theory. An autonomous, sanitized lyric has long been emptied of Adornian criticality—delicately tense with the social—by creative writing discourse. Poetics, as in self-constituting, immanent criticism, paving the way to receptions, stands against this aesthetic dominant. Marxist criticism like mine, borrowing from a toolkit literary of modernism and postmodernism, combines creative production with political work. This specific continuation of poetics in the 21st century offers another way to gloss the mini-period after 2008. Politicized poetics resumes across the end of the century, while this 2008 period’s literary fads couldn’t generate schools and its political currents couldn’t congeal into fixed organs or parties. In both cases movements or literary tendencies in the aftermath of Occupy lacked perseverance, as Alain Badiou has recently noted, whereas doggedness once

emanated from political organizations and the unfashionably grand narratives attached to them. From the other side of the decade, it is clearly visible that such organizations to endure await patient, self-sacrificing construction.

5.

Today. What does a poet/critic make? Too many have in mind the full embrace of a memoir-crazed publishing industry looking for minor spokespeople. A response to these uneven days—that have worn away the easily legible lessons of the past with crisis after virus after crisis, leaving only the harsh tutelage—requires a different kind of endeavor. My works reflects a switchfoot stance between disciplines, moving from poetry to prose and back again. The Language writers call this terrain poetics. How else to expose that we are stuck at multiple impasses, now broken open by a looming period of great power conflict?

6.

Protean. Many-headed by Occupy-aftermath leftism, poetics today moves into aesthetic politics, journalism, and correspondence. It stitches in a sequence of poetry written with plangent and affirmative reference. But more is necessary than many of the intersectional liberals or ultralefts have ever imagined possible. From the time since the 2008 financial crisis, social movement intelligentsia have developed too little instinct for self-criticism. A critical poetics must account for production, but also for failure and defeat not registered enough by my fellow participants in these post-2008 struggles. What is necessary: a political program, a plan, a diagram of systems, an organization to carry them through.