EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

FLEA MARKETS

The annual summer conference of the Union for Radical Political Economics always hosts a special lecture, the David Gordon Memorial Lecture. Last year, the Gordon Lecture was delivered by the undersigned S&S Editor, on the topic “The Future Within the Present: Seven Theses for a Robust 21st-Century Socialism.”1 A central theme of the talk concerned what I call the withering away of markets — the gradual attenuation of their alienating and polarizing qualities, and absorption of their positive signaling and coordination functions into democratic planning, as maturing socialist conditions increasingly make that possible. In the question period following the talk, someone wanted to know what all this would mean for the continued existence of flea markets. I was not prepared for the question; apart from suggesting that this was something to be determined not in theory but by a popular democratic process, I had little to say in response. I would like to try to correct that failure here. My purpose is not to undermine that self-same democratic process the second time around; only to illustrate the importance of penetrating behind market forms to the inner social realities expressed and enabled by them.

Hard data are all but non-existent. I googled “flea markets” and got 1.7 million hits, mostly advertising copy about what goods are available, and where. Googling “flea markets” & “data”/“analysis”/“statistics”/“research,” etc., produced no hits. Some information was obtained from the National Flea Market Association, and from several interviews. For both structural and prudential reasons, flea market operators do not collect numbers in a systematic way. The following is based on the best estimates I have been able to obtain, which should be regarded as provisional and subject to correction.

There are perhaps 2500 flea markets regularly operating in the United States today — based on an average of 900 selling spaces in an average flea market, and an estimated 2.25 million vendors selling on any given day.

1 The full text of the Lecture will appear in a forthcoming issue of the Review of Radical Political Economics.
They generate $30 billion in annual sales (for comparison purposes, Walmart’s sales in 2005 were $285 billion), an annual payroll of $1.5 billion, and 80,000 jobs. The last two figures imply an annual average personal income of $18,750. It is not clear whether this figure is in line with the incomes of the much larger number of vendors. The incomes of site owners and managers, and of vendors who hire their own sales personnel, are undoubtedly much higher.

There is no consensus on the definition of “flea market.” I suggest the following categorization of the retail sector, using a pair of cross-cutting distinctions: market organization is either formal or casual; the goods are either new or pre-owned. In the first distinction, “casual” refers not only to the “underground” or “second” economy, but also to seasonal, weekend and part-time engagement of sales space under fairly short-term contracts; “formal” refers to the existence of a fixed, indoor selling space and long-term leases or ownership. The distinction is not binary, but implies different shades or degrees of informality. There is no suggestion that flea markets are entirely part of a shadowy underground; they do generate $1.8 billion in taxes each year.

Combining “new goods” with “formal organization” gives us the usual image of retail trade, with (perhaps) Bloomingdale’s representing the high end and Walmart the low end of the quality/price spectrum. “New goods” and “casual organization” suggest craft fairs, art shows (high end), and street vendors of various sorts (low end). Turning to “pre-owned goods,” “formal organization” includes antique shops and auction houses (high), and the entire spectrum of thrift shops, consignment shops, and Dollar Stores (low). (Actually, consignment shops and sample sales range from low to high, or at least middle.) Finally, we arrive at pre-owned goods sold in (relatively) informal or casual markets, and this is prime flea-market terrain: mostly outdoor, weekend and/or seasonal markets in clothing, jewelry, furniture, household goods, music recordings, tools, books, and other merchandise that was produced, sold and used in the past, and whose use-value is to some degree based on antiquity as well as on intrinsic properties. The flea-market category thus bleeds into thrift shops in one direction, and into arts-and-crafts fairs, antique shops and yard or stoop sales in others; the dividing lines are blurry.

My questioner at the socialism talk seemed to be identifying with the demand side of flea markets — as a person walking up and down the rows of

2 Concerning the origin of the term, “flea market,” there are two theories. 1) In New York, around the time of the American Revolution; a market in lower Manhattan was named “Fly,” from the Dutch “Fly” or “Vlie,” which means “valley” (the “valley market”), and is pronounced “flea.” 2) The term originated in Paris, as “Le Marche aux Puces” (“The Market of the Fleas”) at a later date, and makes its appearance in the United States in the 1920s. The references to “puces” refers (semi-humorously?) to a popular perception that fleas infested either the goods or the merchants! (One is not sure which.)
stalls and enjoying the merchandise. Flea-market “junk” is indeed appealing; it brings us into contact with our own past, and deepens our sense of aesthetic continuity. Old coins, 1970s bell-bottom pants, Wendell Wilkie campaign buttons, sturdy old toaster ovens, Tramp Art picture frames, juke boxes, 1950s costume jewelry, guitars with Elvis Presley emblazoned on the front, art-deco chinaware, bauhaus reproductions — this stuff is fun. Life is nothing, if not fun! Socialism must have this sense of joy and connectedness at its heart, and it is good that socialists are thinking about this tradition and enjoying the flea-market experience, from the standpoint of the customer.

We must, however, also take a walk on the supply side. The vendors, it would seem, fall into three main categories. First, there are full-timers who rely entirely on the income from flea-market sales for their livelihoods, and sell mainly low-grade goods: clothing and housewares of recent vintage, often seconds, or quality rejects, acquired from current manufacturers, if not illegally at least informally. These vendors put in long hours, and the time spent acquiring merchandise, perhaps during the week, must be added to the time spent in the stalls on weekends when computing income per hour. It is not hard to see this category of vendors as a component of Marx’s reserve army of unemployed — an instance of the casualization of labor whose other forms have been increasing in importance: involuntary part-time work, “service” employment and working below acquired skill levels, in addition to “official” unemployment. The growth of flea markets in recent years may be, to some extent, an element in the deepening crisis of accumulation afflicting our imperiled economy; the increasing capital flight and outsourcing associated with imperialist “globalization” destroys the skilled jobs base, sending large numbers of workers into insecure, unskilled, casual or part-time labor — or flea markets. That puts the antique candlestick holders and Turkish carpets in a somewhat different light.

The second category of vendors are the part-time hobbyists, and this category tends to dominate the popular image of flea markets. These people have “regular” jobs, and incomes. They enjoy selling in weekend flea markets partly for the extra income, but mainly as participants in the community of collectors and sellers of a particular category of merchandise, and for the culture of camaraderie and fellowship at the flea-market sites themselves. For these folks, flea markets are a way of life, and — despite tales of fabulous enrichment — they usually acknowledge that money, especially money per hour, is not the object. Thus, an NFMA survey of vendors included

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3 Flea-market mythology is ripe with contradiction: tales of easy wealth (magnified by selective perception), against persistent references to those who persevere out of sheer love for the process; customers who range from formidable (“our people have incredibly long memories; you can’t bring the same items twice”) to stupid (“they will buy anything”); it is, of course, the reality itself that is contradictory.
the question: “What are the top three issues that you see challenging the success of your market and the flea market industry overall?” The second most common response: Walmart, Ebay/Internet, and Dollar Stores; vendors are clearly feeling the pressure from these sources. (The only response more common than these three was “price of gas.” The role of the automobile and gasoline prices in deepening exploitation in the U. S. economy is another story, for another time.)

Finally, the third group of vendors, who may be part-time or full-time, completes the spectrum by representing its high end. These are the purveyors of quality goods: fine art, vintage furniture, real (non-costume) jewelry, often from different countries or with genuine antique value. These vendors must be expert in their fields, must know their merchandise, and their customers. They work very hard acquiring goods, must be skilled at determining optimal rotations of stock, and must be sensitive to changing tastes and styles. Among the more successful vendors in this class, significant incomes can be made, although markups are often not as large as on the cheaper ranges of goods. From a socioeconomic standpoint, the high-end flea-market vendors soak up a considerable amount of discretionary income from the more affluent customers. The growth of this category, as well as of its opposite number in the first category, together reflect, and symbolize, the increasing polarization of income and wealth in recent decades.

Does any of this answer the “flea markets and socialism” question? The beginning of an answer may be found by considering the underlying social processes represented by vendor categories 1 and 3. First, a reserve of casual labor both weakens employed labor, contributing to increasing exploitation and polarization, and provides a safety valve defusing the potential political crisis associated with deepening unemployment and underemployment. (The unemployed, in effect, have a place to go — flea markets.) Second, the high end within flea markets, along with the high end of the formal retail sector, is a partial return to the visible flaunting of wealth that characterized earlier epochs in U. S. capitalist history. Power consumption motivates the elites and middle strata, maintaining ideological control; it also sends symbols of the unbreakable permanence of the existing social order to the lower levels of the class structure.

Socialism has no use for a reserve army of un- and underemployed workers. This negative incentive to submit to being exploited will have been replaced long since by the positive incentive of individual and collective self-development. Indeed, the basic premise of a materialist socialism is that this transition from lower to higher forms of incentive and consciousness is not only desirable; it is essential for the continued development of the productive forces, with due concern for the ecological constraint. A maturing socialist society, then, will not ask any of its members to accept the rigors of
casual salesmanship — indeed, would not have the mechanisms in place to make such a “request.”

Similarly, socialism rejects — progressively sloughs off — all distorting associations of consumption with status and power. As the core living standard rises, people gradually become accustomed to appreciating consumption for intrinsic reasons and not for invidious ones. The prospect of individually owning valuable collectibles — as opposed, for example, to participating in acquiring them as part of groups of people for community use and appreciation (in museums, public spaces, schools, etc.) — will be increasingly less attractive. Absent also the perverse income distribution characteristic of capitalist societies, the basis for the high-end flea-market sector will atrophy.

There remains the middle range, and I like to imagine that a socialism born of our deepest cultural traditions will be able to provide the infrastructures for people to come together, on weekends or whenever, to swap those wonderful memorabilia and artefacts of times past, and to help overcome the remnants of standardization and “mallification” — to find things that enrich our consumption, and our living spaces, with singularity and fine detail and a sense of history, and of time. Perhaps with basic human needs irreversibly taken care of, and with acquisition-for-acquisition’s-sake becoming increasingly foreign to the popular culture, we will still come together in flea markets — not so much as buyers and sellers but as sharers and preservers of our rich goods culture, and history. Thus — the socialist flea market. Hunger, and greed, and rivalry, all wither away. Postage stamp collections, Irish tin whistles, glorious old-fashioned woolen scarves, and hand-blown glass remain forever.

IN THIS ISSUE

The present period of global polarization and shift in the world balance of forces in favor of capital may be understood, at least partially, as a crisis of capitalist expanded reproduction: a manifestation of capitalism’s inability to carry forward its historic role of transforming the world in its own image. The vacuum created by the loss of postcapitalist state power in large parts of the world is being filled by a resurgent religious fundamentalism, most notably in the Islamic countries of the Middle East, Central and South Asia. A parallel development is the re-emergence of Christian fundamentalism, in a peculiar right-wing form, in the United States. This attack against secularism is also a sign of capitalist weakness, a retreat from the confident cosmopolitanism and univeralism of the early bourgeoisie, as well as an element in the retreat of working-class cultural and political influence from
the mid–20th century on. If we are to grasp these phenomena seriously, they must be placed within the frame of a Marxist understanding of religion in general, and for this a quite reasonable starting point would be the work of Marx and Engels and subsequent generations of Marxists on the subject.

The study by Alexander Saxton, “Marxism, Labor and the Failed Critique of Religion,” begins this long-overdue inquiry. Saxton collects the scattered references to religion in the early writings, notes Marx’s claim that the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism, and traces the subsequent failure of either the founding or later generations to carry this forward on a systematic level. One conclusion is that, in the interest of working-class political unity, Marxists have often avoided any sort of confrontation with religious belief. The spirit of Christian–Marxist dialog, for example, has often been one of seeking common ground while postponing full examination of the foundations of both religious and secular belief systems. While Saxton does not outline the analysis whose absence he decries, the idea is planted that, perhaps ironically, a more frank and direct confrontation with religious philosophy from a materialist and secular standpoint may be needed, if genuine unity-in-action between secular left forces and the progressive elements and potentials within the religious communities is to be forged.

One early Marxist contribution to the study of religion came from the well-known German Social Democrat, Karl Kautsky; his *Foundations of Christianity* was first published in 1908. Kautsky was famously subjected to the formidable polemical attention of V. I. Lenin, and his image today is dominated by imputations of mechanistic, determinist, and crudely evolutionist ideas. It is time, says author Paul Blackledge (“Karl Kautsky and Marxist Historiography”) to repudiate this image, and to go back to Kautsky’s work, on the early Church but also on the United States and Russian social formations, for the genuine insights it contains. This is partly a matter of distinguishing carefully between the earlier and later work, and not rejecting the former *in toto* because of deficiencies in the latter. There is also a need to separate Kautsky’s positions — as, for instance, on the revolutionary potential of the U. S. working class — from the manner of their expression, which does, Blackledge acknowledges, use formulations that come down to us today as fatalistic or abstractly universal.

We are always pleased to learn that work presented in *S&S* is not only being read, but is considered sufficiently outrageous to provoke the reader to action! (Readers of the current issue, take note!) For some reason, we have experienced a convergence of several debates on topics in Marxist economic theory, which we have brought together as a Symposium, “Debate in Political Economy.” (I wish we could claim to have planned it this way.) Debate always sparks interest, and interest is the root of knowledge acquisition. I will not try to summarize the contents of these varied interventions,
concerning absolute rent, *homo economicus*, the theory of value, and the theory of accumulation & crisis, except to observe that continuing controversy in these areas moves us greatly forward in the development of a political economy tradition that can have a forceful presence in current political discussion and give that discussion more secure foundations. We hope that this spirit of comradely exchange of views will spill over into many other areas of investigation in our pages.

Steve Ellner’s Communication, “The Defensive Strategy of the Left in Latin America,” completes a round of discussion provoked by his earlier article in SS (Spring 2004), which led to the Symposium among three noted personalities on the Latin American left, Jorge Castañeda, Marta Harnecker and James Petras (April 2005). Present-day promising political developments aside, the Latin American experience is a unique and fertile testing ground for the ever-vital strategic needs of the worldwide left, and we hope potential contributors will continue to share their insights with us.

Finally, we are pleased to present Bettina Aptheker’s review-essay on the remarkable autobiography, *Fireweed*, by Gerda Lerner. Lerner’s extraordinary political life began in Austria in the 1930s in the emerging resistance to the *Anschluss*, continued in the United States in the political ambit of the Communist Party, and flowered subsequently in her work as a pioneer women’s historian and feminist. The later period, exemplified by Lerner’s writings in the 1990s, is better known, but *Fireweed* now tells the earlier part of the story, with unusual honesty and both political and psychological insight. Readers should consult the book itself, and Aptheker’s review may also be read in connection with the Symposium occasioned by Kate Weigand’s *Red Feminism* (SS, Winter 2002–2003).

D. L.