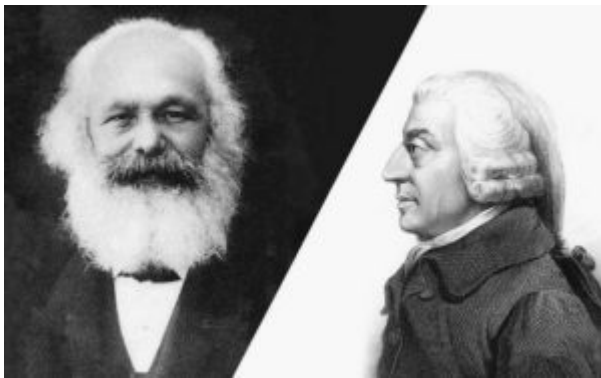
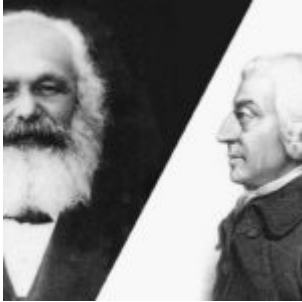


The Democratic Quest: Marxism Versus Liberalism

January 11, 2020



In a recent interview for the Minneapolis Interview Project, August Nimtz asserted that “to exercise political power, we must impose our will through collective action.”* In his new work, Nimtz says much the same when he writes, “If there is one historical constant, it is that the democratic quest can only be advanced—for those who truly want to do so—outside the electoral/parliamentary arenas.” (287) This conclusion may be fairly standard in most Marxist works of history and analysis, but what stands out in this case is the method the author uses to arrive at this well-worn conclusion.

Broadly, August Nimtz proposes an intervention into the question of socialism, which the Trump administration has negatively placed back on the agenda with its 2018 Council of Economic Advisers report. Among the charges against socialism is the idea that, as Nimtz puts it, the “Marxist socialist project lack[s] the assumed democratic groundings of the alternative liberal project.” (3) But how accurate is this? Nimtz proposes an answer with his new work on Marxism and liberalism.

If in Nimtz’s previous two volumes he focused on the electoral strategies of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, with this new and highly readable account, Nimtz returns to a familiar theme: the quest for democracy. The theme is not explicitly defined in this work, but he ties it strongly with a protagonistic vision of democratic participation as well as mass intervention in politics from the streets. What Nimtz proposes is to sharpen a new tool for illuminating his theme, what he terms a “comparative real-time political analysis.”

Nimtz’s Chosen Method

Comparative real-time political analysis, in Nimtz’s account, consists of examining “how a materialist conception of history, a Marxist perspective, compares to alternative varieties of liberal perspectives when subjected to real-time analysis.” (3) By “real-time analysis” Nimtz alludes to the need not only for a textual reading of those involved, but also to show what effects their actions had during events, how well the events were represented in their statements and writings, and “how

[well] did either perform for advancing the democratic quest?" (3) In comparing Marx, Engels, and Lenin's democratic commitment to those of their contemporary liberal counterparts, Nimitz is able to lay bare not only the theoretical positions on democracy that both sides hold, but what their actions during events demonstrated. One note for readers of this method at the outset: It is best exemplified not in the Introduction or Conclusion segments of the book, but in the comparison chapters themselves.

Nimitz spends the opening and ending chapters posing questions to be explored; this sets him up to draw broad conclusions about his subjects, as well as what lessons their performance holds for reading events in our own age. The reader will profit from Nimitz's advice in the introduction to read these and the broad conclusions first, which are worth reproducing at length:

What are the broad and key conclusions to be drawn from the four real-time politics comparisons? How do the claims that Marx, Engels and Lenin made about the historical moments under examination—the French edition of the European Spring, the American Civil War, the Russian Revolution of 1905, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the end to World War I—compare and contrast to those of Tocqueville, Mill, Weber and Wilson? To what extent are their readings of the events in agreement and disagreement? Which of them had a more accurate reading of the events and made better forecasts? How did their theoretical/political views influence their responses? How do the four comparisons reveal key differences between Marxist and different varieties of liberal real-time politics? Most important, to what extent, if any, did their actions advance the democratic quest that was posed in all four moments? Can, lastly, a case be made for a superior theoretical purchase of either perspective for doing real-time politics? (11)

Marxism versus Liberalism

The comparisons in the four chapters are progressively developed from Nimitz's original goals in the earlier 2000 book into a more focused argument, one which ultimately extends the argument to Lenin himself. In the closing sections of his work, he speculates on future projects involving possible comparisons to include Leon Trotsky/John Maynard Keynes, and Fidel Castro/John F. Kennedy. In connecting his past work to this foray, as well as speculating on future projects, one can clearly see that this project has been long in development and is still being written.

In refining his new technique, Nimitz is able to bring a rich analysis to the comparisons between Lenin, Weber, and Wilson. As he progresses, Nimitz honestly documents some of the drawbacks he encounters, such as that of Weber versus Lenin. The main chapter in this case consists of a mostly textual comparison, examining Weber and Lenin's writings on the 1905 Russian Revolution, whereas the appendix to the chapter contains real-time analysis of the pair concerning World War I and the 1917 revolution. This addendum, thankfully, not only lives up to what Nimitz envisioned with his analysis, but also helps to underwrite and confirm the findings of the earlier textual reading: In both cases, the differing class allegiances of Weber and Lenin are laid bare.

Nimitz's effort to expand his examination of Marx, Engels, and Lenin and their commitment to the quest for democracy succeeds in large part due to his method's ability to contextualize their struggles alongside the struggles of their purportedly democracy-friendly liberal contemporaries.

Setting up the comparisons requires some background; Nimitz proves himself a consummate teacher here. The background given on the French European Spring, Tocqueville, J.S. Mill, Weber, and

Wilson are enough to send any new reader well prepared into their writings. The background is neither cursory nor superficial, but calculated to draw the reader's attention to the attributes under review in the comparison portions. Readers looking to their writings outside of this book will surely find their eyes drawn to the material he illuminates.

A brief sample from the comparisons suffices to give readers a taste of the rich material unearthed here. In the second comparison, between Karl Marx and J.S. Mill, Nimitz recounts the engagement of both figures, finding that during the events of the American Civil War,

How to impact politics and how to advance the cause of the Union are what most differentiated Marx and Engels from Mill. For Mill it was about how to convince the enlightened English elite to support the Union. For Marx and Engels it was about winning and organizing the working class for the Union cause. And the most significant point about that difference was that Marx, especially, was willing to put in the requisite time and effort toward his goal. (114)

As can be seen here, Nimitz focuses on class allegiance and method of intervention to highlight how Marx and Mill acted during the events in question.

During the introduction, Nimitz gives a short literature review justifying the need for his work. The paucity of similar forays is evident. One of the items mentioned is Domenico Losurdo's 2005 work, *Liberalism: a counter-history*. Losurdo seeks to illuminate the actual character of liberalism in all its facets, as opposed to its ideological account of itself. While it may be true that Losurdo's work is not able to illuminate liberalism with more than textual readings, as Nimitz argues, I maintain that Losurdo's main objective in that work was to demonstrate how liberalism as practiced by its leading lights included aspects usually held by the modern world as external to that tradition, aspects such as slavery. Further, Losurdo's overarching goal in that work, the illumination of the more general struggle for recognition by the emerging working class, could easily stand in for Nimitz's democratic quest. I argue that this is complementary to Nimitz's demonstration of some of liberalism's most recognized figures' democratic shortfalls.

As mentioned earlier, the democratic quest is a theme Nimitz harkens to again and again in his exposition. He narrows the question to determine precisely in whom, in the discussed eras, democracy finds its real and best advocates. This not only reveals the class character and allegiance of the bourgeois men he analyses, as Losurdo does, but also places them in relief against real advocates for democracy: the communists. The contrast reveals many interesting and even unexpected results.

In perhaps the most revealing portion of the analysis of Woodrow Wilson and Lenin, Nimitz highlights point six of Wilson's Fourteen Points, which reads:

The evacuation of all Russian territory and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia as will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations of the world in obtaining for her an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy and assure her of a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing; and, more than a welcome, assistance also of every kind that she may need and may herself desire. The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to come will be the acid test of their good will, of their comprehension of her needs as distinguished from their own interests, and of their intelligent and unselfish sympathy. (214)

Nimtz's commentary following this section distills the importance of this overlooked chapter of U.S.-Soviet diplomacy: "Wilson, in essence, was taking, in a most public way, the side of the Soviet government in its negotiations with Berlin at Brest-Litovsk." He stresses the loss of this insight to later developments: "With the onset of the Cold War it's no wonder that the sixth point in Wilson's Fourteen Point speech was virtually forgotten." (214)

Full Circle

In closing his work, August Nimtz draws some broad conclusions for today's socialists from his study: "only in the streets, on the barricades and the battlefields is where the oppressed advance themselves." (283) In this we come full circle, returning to his recent interview and his words on organizing. Socialism, he maintains, citing the *Communist Manifesto*, entails "the destruction of the 'social' as well as 'political power of capital'" (289) He points out that both are maintained under the social democratic institutions created in Tocqueville's France and in the remains of the welfare state we have today.

As for our modern-day liberals, Nimtz warns that like Tocqueville they continue to fear the masses. Disdaining the "deplorables" and "abstainers," they tend to indict the victims of capitalism rather than the system itself. (283) For Nimtz, the lesson is clear: "class and class orientation matter." In our future activism, we socialists would do well to remember this.

Every activist and serious student of history should read Nimtz's *Marxism versus Liberalism* and seriously consider the lessons drawn from comparing liberalism's best to what Marx, Engels, and Lenin have to offer.