



MARX, ENGELS, AND MARXISMS

# Socialist Practice

Histories and Theories

Victor Wallis

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# Marx, Engels, and Marxisms

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*To Alan and Byron*

## SERIES FOREWORD

### THE MARX REVIVAL

The Marx renaissance is underway on a global scale. Whether the puzzle is the economic boom in China or the economic bust in ‘the West’, there is no doubt that Marx appears regularly in the media nowadays as a guru, and not a threat, as he used to be. The literature dealing with Marxism, which all but dried up twenty-five years ago, is reviving in the global context. Academic and popular journals and even newspapers and on-line journalism are increasingly open to contributions on Marxism, just as there are now many international conferences, university courses and seminars on related themes. In all parts of the world, leading daily and weekly papers are featuring the contemporary relevance of Marx’s thought. From Latin America to Europe, and wherever the critique to capitalism is reemerging, there is an intellectual and political demand for a new critical encounter with Marxism.

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Toronto, Canada  
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## PREFACE

This book complements my books *Red-Green Revolution* (2018) and *Democracy Denied* (2019). In *Red-Green*, I explore the politics and technology of ecosocialism, raising questions of political strategy in the context of planetary emergency; in *Democracy Denied*, I discuss obstacles to revolutionary transformation in the United States.

The present work, while retaining the sense of urgency that drove its predecessors, steps back to examine the broad contours of recent history (Part I) while also going more deeply into certain particular struggles (Part II). The constituent chapters (or parts of chapters) were originally written at various times over a period of more than 40 years, but I have reworked much of the material and have updated data and references throughout. Only in two cases (Chap. 3 and the first full section of Chap. 4) was it essential—because of historical interest—to preserve the texts in their original form (changing only the titles and, in Chap. 3, reformatting the references and adding section-headings).

The book's temporal vantage point is thus for the most part consistent—grounded in the present—but there remain among its chapters differences in style of argumentation that correspond to the varying original venues and audiences for which I was writing. I have tried to make the chapters uniformly accessible and (with the noted exceptions) current, yet without smoothing over their distinctive polemical textures.

While the book covers a lot of ground, it lays no claim to completeness. The narratives, although spanning many countries and multiple issue-areas, are illustrative rather than exhaustive; they reflect in part the range of my own direct experience, which I allude to in the Introduction. No

individual vantage point can comprehend the totality of human perspectives and strivings, but any of us can begin to grasp the underlying reality if we keep in mind a pair of partly clashing principles:

On the one hand, in a relationship of domination, the oppressed knows the oppressor better than vice versa. This is because the oppressor has an outsized role in the life of the oppressed, which makes understanding the oppressor's *modus operandi* a matter of great importance—sometimes a matter of life and death—to the oppressed. On the other hand, each of us has the capacity, through interaction with and historical knowledge of others, to at least partly transcend the limitations arising from our own origins, whatever these may be.

This brings us to an observation that is not made often enough (at least not with full reflection on all its applications): namely, that oppression harms not only the oppressed but also the oppressor. It has always done so in the sense of cutting the oppressor off from his (and sometimes her) full humanity. But it now does so in an additional way, in that the structures generated by oppression threaten, through their ongoing destructiveness, the continuation of *all human life*.

Socialist practice has thus come to focus centrally on addressing environmental breakdown, but in doing so, it must engage—as it has always had to do—every dimension of human activity. Within its limits, this book seeks to stretch our thinking both about what needs to be done and about what *can* be done. It does this not only by reminding us of why the rule of capital must be overcome, but also by discussing, as dispassionately as possible, the strengths and the weaknesses of various approaches that have been taken to carrying out that task.

The political rhetoric around environmental restoration often invokes the opposition between the Global North and the Global South: the North destroys the environment and the South suffers the consequences. This is a reasonable first approximation to history, in the rough sense that the great conquering powers and the societies of mass consumption are situated mostly in the Northern temperate zone while a disproportionate share of global poverty is concentrated elsewhere.

But the correspondence is imperfect, as suggested most strikingly by the power of the current fascist ruler of Brazil—in collaboration with imperial capital—to wreak destruction on what have aptly been termed “the lungs of the world.” The point is that the geographical placement of oppressors and oppressed does not fall into any simple spatial pattern. There are oppressors in the South and there are victims in the North.

Similarly, within the US, despite the prevalence of white racism in the power structure, there are individuals of European descent who live in abject poverty while a very select few of African lineage have entered the ranks of the top “1 percent.” The dividing lines, in terms of policy-interests, are neither geographical nor “racial,” but are the expression of class division.

One often hears it said that the Global North owes an environmental debt to the Global South. It would be more accurate to say that capital and its agents owe such a debt to the human species as a whole, as well as to the intricate systems of biodiversity that they have done so much to destroy. This is not to claim that the scope or urgency of the requisite compensatory steps is everywhere the same, but it *is* to identify who is currently responsible for *taking* those steps. It is also to suggest the pattern of alliances or antagonisms that will shape the struggle to obtain their compliance or – ultimately – to replace them.

What humanity now needs is education, discussion, and action on a massive scale, informed by this awareness. If the arguments in this book contribute in any way to advancing such a process, my goal in putting them together will have been met.

Somerville, Massachusetts  
October 2019

Victor Wallis

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have come into being without the initiative of Marcello Musto. Thanks to his confidence in me and his patient insistence, I was inspired to weave together the disparate themes that have drawn my attention since the mid-1970s, with real hope that the resultant whole would be more than the sum of its parts. Babak Amini and Terrell Carver provided important advice and encouragement along the way. Michelle Chen and Rebecca Roberts, at Palgrave, helped me navigate the final stages of submission. Arumugam Hemalatha, at Spi Global, provided indispensable assistance in assuring accurate production.

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Finally, all my work has been nourished by the wisdom, the advice, and the moral support of my life-partner, Inez Hedges.

## Praise for *Socialist Practice*

“*Socialist Practice: Histories and Theories* is critical reading for all who care about the future sustainability of humanity. At a time of planetary dystopia, Victor Wallis offers a sweeping intellectual contribution to understanding the global economic, political, and ecological fissures threatening humanity. Drawing on impressive knowledge of Marxist and socialist discourse, Wallis masterfully unifies essential themes of the production of material and cultural resistance to the impending cataclysmic future through socialist transformation. Essential reading for all students of the politics and history of socialism.”

—Immanuel Ness, *Professor of Political Science, City University of New York, USA*, and author of *Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class* (2016)

“Wide-ranging, eloquent, accessible and inspiring, Victor Wallis’s collected essays in this volume embody an optimism about future political action, along with a fierce realism about the challenges we face as a planet. This is required reading for Marxists, socialists, organizers, feminists, Black Lives Matter folk, and anyone else who still hopes to avert the ecological/capitalist catastrophe now bearing down on us.”

—Hester Eisenstein, *Professor of Sociology and Women’s and Gender Studies, Queens College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, USA*

“Victor Wallis, an exemplary activist-scholar whose solidarity work with prisoners has lasted for decades, brings to light the political orientation that guides his efforts. He notes that ‘the oppressed knows the oppressor better than vice versa’ and that oppression cuts all of us off from our full humanity. His book seeks to illuminate ways to restore balance to the earth and to all our lives. His history of liberation movements’ theory and practice is instructive. I hope his call for ‘action on a massive scale’ resonates widely.”

—George Katsiaficas, *former Visiting Professor of Sociology, Chonnam National University, South Korea*, and author of *The Global Imagination of 1968* (2018) and *Asia’s Unknown Uprisings* (2012, 2013)



“Today socialism is experiencing a remarkable revival under the mantles of democratic socialism and ecosocialism. But what do these new conceptions of socialism mean, what issues are being raised, and how are they related to the fundamental struggles of our time encompassing numerous forms of oppression and threats to human survival? In search for concrete answers, one could hardly do better than to read Victor Wallis’s concise and comprehensive book on *Socialist Practice*.”

—John Bellamy Foster, *Professor of Sociology, University of Oregon, USA*, and editor of *Monthly Review*

“Victor Wallis presents us not with the answers but with a framework through which we can look at the successes and failures of the global socialist movements and conceptualize a way forward. This book rejects despair and cynicism with an emphasis on facing reality. But this is also a book designed to provoke debate rather than shutting down principled exchanges. Agreement is not the requisite for reading this book. Rather, a desire for deep and substantive engagement toward the reconstruction of emancipatory politics.”

—Bill Fletcher, Jr., Senior Scholar, *Institute for Policy Studies, USA*, Executive Editor of *The Global African Worker*, and *former president of TransAfrica Forum*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

### THE PRESENT MOMENT AND THE NEW DISCOURSE ABOUT SOCIALISM

Historian Eric Hobsbawm titled his book on the twentieth century *The Age of Extremes*. For the twenty-first century, this would be an understatement. No rubric can convey the level of emergency in which our species now finds itself. We live, both now and into the future, under a threat of geological proportions.<sup>1</sup> The magnitude of the danger is clearly seen—and acutely felt—by young people the world over. The discourse of the powers that be hovers far from the storm-center, mostly waging (especially in the United States) a relentless campaign to keep everyone’s eyes shut—if not to the reality of the eco-crisis, then at least to the idea that we might be able collectively to do something about it.

My own sense of the danger is longstanding but becomes more pressing with each passing year, even as capitalist politicians and corporate media squander precious time with their contrived emergencies, their self-indulgent jousting, and their endless flow of distractions.<sup>2</sup> The longer this hegemonic denial continues—and, along with it, the aggressions of powerfully armed governments and their vigilante shock-troops against largely

<sup>1</sup> Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth-System* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See Nolan Higdon and Mickey Huff, *United States of Distraction: Media Manipulation in Post-Truth America* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2019).

defenseless populations—the more urgent becomes the imperative to sweep from power all those who keep it up. The scope of the required changes has all along been of revolutionary proportions, but beyond this, the amount of time we now have for securing a future that is to any extent livable—for the majority of our species—has become desperately short.

The revolutionary implications of this crisis were the theme of my 2018 book *Red-Green Revolution: The Politics and Technology of Ecosocialism*. In it, I developed a wealth of considerations showing that the long-run changes necessary to our collective survival are inconceivable unless the capitalist economic calculus gives way to one grounded in the common good of both humanity and nature, as determined by a thoroughly informed democratic process. The transformation cannot come all at once (although there may be abrupt upheavals at particular moments along the way), but the incremental changes that are made in the near term must all be in tune with the ultimate goal; that is, they must be steadily creating structures—whether parties, educational networks, or governing apparatus—that embody the common interest of humanity as a whole and of a healthy environment. Empowering such structures is crucial to guaranteeing both the initial shift in class-power and the equally necessary permanent governing machinery grounded in universal participation.

The concept embodying this agenda, that of socialism, has an almost 200-year trajectory. But its most recent turns of historic fortune came, first, with the collapse or devolution, through the 1980s, of the majority of regimes claiming to embrace it, and subsequently, with the unexpected revival of popular interest in socialism in the United States in the years following the financial meltdown of 2008. In the wake of the “Occupy Wall Street” movement (2011), surveys have consistently shown, despite decades of anti-socialist indoctrination, an openness to socialism on the part of majorities or near-majorities both among African Americans and among people under 30. Of course, this does not yet reflect a precise notion of what socialism means, nor of what has shaped the historical attempts to implement it. But at least the S-word has ceased to be taboo for a great many people.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, it has become a target of ferocious attack not only from the governing Trump cabal but also from the “loyal opposition” of corporate Democrats, whose consistent pattern over the years has been to prefer defeat at the hands of the Republicans to any

<sup>3</sup> See John Nichols, *The “S” Word: A Short History of an American Tradition ... Socialism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2015).

scenario that, while promising near-term electoral success for their own party, would entail the activation and mobilization of its popular base.

The dynamic of Democrat/Republican collaboration is now long established. On the one hand, Democratic electoral strategists rejoice in the most outlandish (racist, misogynist, etc.) conduct of Republicans, as this allows the Democrats to present themselves as guardians of rationality and decency. On the other hand, Republicans, having no policies to address the economic needs of the majority, revel in being able to tar the Democrats as “socialists,” thereby setting firm limits on the degree to which Democrats, recoiling from the dreaded “red” label, can legislate an authentically popular agenda. The result is that whichever of these two parties working-class people vote for, they are voting—except in rare cases of individual candidates—against their own best interests.<sup>4</sup>

This dynamic affects the way activists sympathetic to socialism define themselves in the political arena. Given the systematic bias of the electoral system and the mass media against third-party challengers, there are powerful inducements for socialists to seek office as Democrats. This leads them to water down their conception of socialism to the point of rejecting any explicit challenge to the power of capital. What remains, typically, is an invocation of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal policies and his 1944 “Economic Bill of Rights.” Although these expanded the scope of social welfare, thereby strengthening the economic power of the working class (for which they were widely denounced as “socialist”),<sup>5</sup> they stopped short of questioning the legitimacy of the profit-system as such. The resulting political order has been variously dubbed “mixed economy,” “welfare capitalism,” and “social democracy,” but some of its advocates in the US—notably, Senator Bernie Sanders—refer to it as “democratic socialism.”

Given that the New Deal agenda did not entail dissolution of the capitalist class, the practice of implying that it was somehow socialist is highly misleading. Its socialist aspects, although real enough (as far as they went) in terms of their benefits, were in the nature of partial and transitory concessions. What the New Deal meant was that capital gave up a portion of

<sup>4</sup>For more detailed discussion, see Victor Wallis, *Democracy Denied: Five Lectures on U.S. Politics* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2019).

<sup>5</sup>An accusation that prompted President Harry S. Truman to say, in October 1952, “Socialism is their name for almost anything that helps all the people.”

its power in order—as Joseph P. Kennedy said at the time<sup>6</sup>—not to face the prospect of losing all of it. But when the historical moment was right, capital struck back. The first phase of its counterattack was the post-World War II anticommunist drive. This not only broke up the Left’s organizational infrastructure, it also had a long-lasting cultural impact, stigmatizing class consciousness on the part of workers and enshrining at the mass level—especially via racist suburban development planning<sup>7</sup>—an ethic of unalloyed individualism. The resulting conformity would be disrupted by the radical movements of the 1960s, but once again without diminishing the basic power of capital. The second phase of the capitalist counterattack is what has been increasingly in place since the mid-1970s, a period now generally known as the *neoliberal* era—referring to the systematic assault on every variety of welfare protection, along with widespread privatization, deregulation, and mass incarceration.

The evolution of this whole complex of hyper-capitalist policies—beginning in the late 1940s and with a fresh thrust since the mid-1970s—should decisively discredit any impression that the achievements of the 1930s brought some kind of systemic break (as the term “democratic socialism” might lead us to think) with capitalist power. In this sense, as Senator Sanders himself often insists, his core proposals, which typically revive New Deal-type priorities, are in no sense radical. They would bring the working-class majority certain obvious benefits, but (as he also says) would not threaten the decisive economic role of private capital, which he does not propose to replace.

In fact, in the US political context, programs even far more limited than that of Sanders do not escape the accusation of being socialist (recall the attacks made beginning in 2008 against Barack Obama). It therefore makes political sense for Sanders—especially considering the more fully socialist (including anti-imperialist) position he staked out earlier in his career, as well as his lifelong public admiration for Eugene Debs—not to disown his association with the word socialism. What his acceptance of the word ultimately reflects is the fact that socialism, despite any negative

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in G. William Domhoff, *Who Rules America?* 1st ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 153. It should be noted that the most significant reforms under FDR, those of the so-called “second New Deal,” came in response to the massive labor organizing drives (including sit-down strikes) of the mid-1930s.

<sup>7</sup>The explicitly racist and anticommunist agenda of postwar federal home-loan policy is documented in Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 171–200.

historical baggage and (above all) despite its sustained stigmatization, embodies the positive social goals that most people seek.

Given its broad albeit partly latent popularity, one might envisage socialism having ultimately a rather straightforward and successful faceoff with capitalism. Even granting the obvious military power of the capitalist ruling class, we could at least anticipate an embrace of socialism at the level of mass working-class opinion, which could possibly in turn sway some of capital's intermediate-level operatives. The reality, however, is not so clear-cut. Important divisions exist within the potentially socialist constituency. Some of these reflect longstanding strategic divergences, foreshadowed in the Marxist/anarchist clash during the First International (1864–72) and in continuing antagonisms between reformist and revolutionary currents within the working-class movement. Added onto these we now find, especially since the 1960s, an intricate web of partly overlapping demographic groups (ethnic, cultural, religious, or defined by gender, sexuality, age, or ability) that occupy definite political spaces, corresponding to multiple structures of oppression.

These crosscutting interests magnify all the habitual difficulties of forging a popular majority that would be sufficiently unified to overwhelm the tiny yet all-powerful capitalist class. So, how do we come to terms with all the complexity? What insights and what proactive steps will be required in order to surmount the initially unavoidable, yet now steadily heightening, fragmentation of the popular forces?

The response to these questions must be a collective one. If it is effective, it will ultimately take the form of a hegemonic Left project—one to which all who are not viscerally wedded to capitalism will be naturally drawn. The components of the response will come from at least as many directions as there are social and demographic differences among people. Some of the inputs will be individual, while others will be from groups. The forums within which they interact will be equally diverse, ranging from household, neighborhood, or workplace to national or international convergences. Some will be face-to-face while others will use all manner of electronic channels. Whatever the mix, there will be exchanges among the various levels. The point is that such processes are continuously unfolding already, but that the directions they have so far taken within the US are, in their totality, so chaotic that one is hard pressed to envisage any uniform message, let alone a clear outcome.

On the other hand, however, there are conditions—both historical and geological—that are so universally relevant and yet so far beyond the



control of any single human agent, that we will be compelled, sooner or later, to become aware of the common danger and, insofar as we recognize its scope, to see a narrowing of the range of available options that would assure our collective survival.

No single intellectual intervention into this process can expect to offer definitive guidance. At the same time, however, any set of reflections that spans a sufficiently broad range of issues, while drawing out the connections between them, may at least advance some moments of the larger dialectic. That is my hope for the discussions in this book, which are the fruit of several decades of observation, reflection, and interaction.

### THE PERSPECTIVE OF THIS BOOK

Having thought about or studied issues connected with socialism for most of my life (I was born in 1938), I can say that while my advocacy has been constant, the surrounding political environment has undergone major fluctuations. An account of these fluctuations—and my responses to them—will help ground and situate the arguments of this book.

Long before I could imagine becoming politically active, I experienced the pall of the post-World War II repression that was unleashed in the US against any challenge to capitalist orthodoxy. This had several immediate effects on me during my teen years. It made me apprehensive about sharing my thoughts with anyone in authority. It meant that when I went to college, I could not find any organized group of likeminded students. And it meant that my education proceeded along two largely separate tracks—one defined by formal course-requirements and the other by my political drive. The latter in turn was nourished, at that stage, more by theoretical study and book-learning than by practical experience. I felt myself to be cut off from ordinary humanity, especially because my anti-capitalism stemmed not—as would be “normal”—from personal material hardship inflicted by the system but rather from the malaise of seeing myself as the recipient of unmerited privilege.

Within this constricted framework, my readings broadened the basis for my opposition to capitalism<sup>8</sup> but left me unsure about the alternative. The Soviet model—especially what I could then see of it—did not inspire me, and the threat of war between the two great powers created a feeling of

<sup>8</sup>On my formative readings, see Victor Wallis, “Ecosocialist Struggles: Reminiscences, Reflections, and Danger Signals,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 25:1 (March 2014), 44.

helplessness. The first hint at a way out, on the global canvas, came with the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Cuba signaled that a break with the rule of capital did not necessarily have to produce the same outcome that it had done in Russia. (The Chinese case was not at that time within the scope of my awareness.) Cuba's revolution was, at its outset, entirely self-generated—an unexpected intrusion into a hitherto bleak order, embodying the surprising (as it then seemed) assumption that every country had the potential to set its own course.

The opening created by Cuba told me that political reality was less resistant to change than I had feared. Other factors as well helped draw me out of my pessimism. During my last undergraduate year at Harvard (1959–60), I studied US labor history and wrote my Honors thesis on “Sit-down Strikes.”<sup>9</sup> Just as I was finishing this work, which highlighted the factory-occupations of 1937, a similarly defiant action erupted onto the world stage with the first lunch-counter sit-ins of the US civil rights movement. In those same months, I discovered the *Monthly Review* (*MR*; then in its 11th year of publication) in the Harvard library. Here was a journal that conveyed a solidly grounded socialist perspective in a jargon-free style that could perhaps bridge the painful communication-gap that I felt in talking to people unfamiliar with my positions. Not incidentally, *MR* was the first US publication to give a full analysis of the political direction that the Cuban Revolution was taking.<sup>10</sup> It was at the suggestion of *MR*'s co-founder Paul Sweezy (in 1962) that I chose Latin America as the focus for my doctoral studies in political science. The year I subsequently spent in Chile (1966–67) strengthened my sense of being in tune with the majority of humanity, as I found myself for the first time at public events among thousands who resonated with the same calls that I did. By the time I returned home at the end of that year, I was able to enjoy similar occasions of solidarity in the US.

The leftist wave of the 1960s was what finally freed me of concern that my politics might be seen as arising from personal “deviance” rather than from a general commitment to human decency (amplified by the evident desperation of particular populations and by the permanent threat of catastrophic war). It now no longer mattered how I had come to my views; they would henceforward define me as part of a project much bigger than

<sup>9</sup>Unpublished text from 1960 available at Harvard College Library.

<sup>10</sup>Leo Huberman and Paul M. Sweezy, *Cuba: Anatomy of a Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1960).

myself. Even so, however, my particular trajectory set me apart, during the '60s, from the newer cohort of activists, who were on average several years younger than I was. They were less restrained by the kind of fear that I had grown up with. They seemed to constitute a community, of which I was not a part. Although I had more background than most of them did in socialist theory and history, I was not well placed to apply my knowledge to their ongoing debates. I supported and even drew inspiration from the broad thrust of their efforts, but I played no leadership role, and I felt torn as the student movement—riven by conflict between direct-action and base-building factions—blew apart.

I carried my uncertainties with me when I joined the New University Conference (NUC) in mid-1969, after my first year of college teaching.<sup>11</sup> This was a multi-tendency radical organization, which embraced a wider age-range than had the then-disintegrating Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). I felt at home in NUC, which inspired me when I lost my first teaching job (in late 1969) to take my second one at a state university in Indianapolis, where I would remain (apart from three foreign stays) from 1970 to 1994. In this conservative city of the US Midwest, I was re-immersed in some of the repressive 1950s culture, though now less at its mercy. NUC dissolved itself in 1972, but not before having helped me acquire a public platform in Central Indiana as an authority on Latin American issues—which became especially relevant in 1973 with the US-supported military coup in Chile; again in the 1980s with US interventions in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Grenada, and finally in the early '90s when the Soviet collapse prompted speculation that a similar fate might be in store for Cuba.

Through most of my time in Indianapolis, I continued my activities in the face of a largely antagonistic atmosphere produced both by the local media culture and by the national priorities of the Reagan/Bush era. But thanks to my experience of the 1950s, none of this really surprised me. I no longer enjoyed the political “high” of the '60s and early '70s, but I retained the benefit not only of having experienced that fleeting (illusory?) moment of collective empowerment, but also of having developed, during my earlier years of isolation, some of the intellectual tools I needed to resist the once-again dominant paradigm of repression. I was now helped in this by two unforeseen openings. One was my discovery (in

<sup>11</sup> For more detail, see my interview in Victor Cohen, ed., *The New American Movement: An Oral History*, in *Works and Days* 55/56 (2010), 263–272 (available online).