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Civilization Was Once a Popular Subject

Malcolm Harris

November 28, 2011

The title is the fitting first sentence of David Bromwich's review of Niall Ferguson's latest, *Civilization: The West And The Rest* in the *NYRB*. I couldn't read the whole piece because I don't have a subscription to the *NYRB*, but I think the first line is probably sufficient. The same sort of (hilarious) lament hangs impotently over this *Der Spiegel* profile of Jürgen Habermas:

"Habermas is angry. He's really angry. He is nothing short of furious — because he takes it all personally.

He leans forward. He leans backward. He arranges his fidgety hands to illustrate his tirades before allowing them to fall back to his lap. He bangs on the table and yells: "Enough already!" He simply has no desire to see Europe consigned to the dustbin of world history.

"I'm speaking here as a citizen," he says. "I would rather be sitting back home at my desk, believe me. But this is too important. Everyone has to understand that we have critical decisions facing us. That's why

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I'm so involved in this debate. The European project can no longer continue in elite modus.”

Enough already! Europe is his project. It is the project of his generation.”

He takes the future so personally that he's willing to leave his desk. And what exactly is the future he's trying to protect?

“He truly believes in the old, ordered democracy.”

It's a justified fear – who among us will stand for old, ordered democracy? Not the grand project, which can't trust its member states to self-flagellate effectively. Not the Greek people, who seem to think democracy has something to do with stones. Not technocrat-in-chief Obama, whose former advisor Peter Orszag wrote “we need to counter the gridlock of our political institutions by making them a bit less democratic.” Not the conservatives, whose policies party-member David Frum describes as “a going-out-of-business sale for the baby-boom generation.” And not the international youth movement, with our anarchic occupations and twinkling consensus fingers. Even red China thinks the US needs a dose of austerity. All that remains are the dying philosophers and a few of their prematurely greying adepts. And what the fuck is Habermas even to do when he gets up from his desk – make a beeline for the agora? The guy hasn't even heard of Twitter. For the first time in my young memory we have somewhat generalized political struggle, and the social democrats have neither an army nor a flag.

Even the most optimistic of us on the street-hooligan left wouldn't have guessed the legacy of parliamentary democracy would shrivel so quickly. The battle between late capitalism and the public sphere is long over. In retrospect it really wasn't much of a contest – nor was there only one winner between the two – but it has catapulted us toward something different. A sequence

of global resistance that goes beyond reaction has finally found purchase, but it's decidedly not social democratic in expression or organization. I'm not sure how clear this will be until the election, and maybe the the coöptation will get older Democrats to the polls, but I doubt it. The death knell will be when the American left is at its most energized in memory and makes the conscious decision not to vote. And there won't be a one of us who seriously believes blue team will take the message and nominate Bernie Sanders in '16 or that Peter Camejo and the green team will make it any more interesting.

This moment is revolutionary and/or it's a part of a penultimate accumulation phase, but progressive it is not. The social democrats' best reform efforts haven't been able to slow even the rate of increase in the working class's immiseration. A state-supported minimum income, socialized healthcare, and paid vacation all sound great, but they're about as likely as full employment. That is, structurally impossible. And so-called transitional demands like these aren't much help when they provoke speculative analysis rather than revolutionary consciousness. The point isn't to figure out the right alignment of stars necessary for the capitalist state to provide free higher education for all, it's to reveal that it cannot and will not do so.

To be done then, with social democracy in practice and in aspiration. We must shut our ears to the civilizationists' plaintive death warbles. As Guatemalan President Juan Jose Arevalo said (as quoted by Corey Robin in *The Reactionary Mind*): "We are socialists because we live in the twentieth century." Following Arevalo, I think we can begin to periodize social-democracy. That is, to bury it. The time of the industrial unions is over, the workers' parties as well. If the annual Shirley Jackson special that is Black Friday tells us anything, it's that we live amidst actually existing barbarism. The twentieth century made its choice, we won't get the same question.

To be clear, as Evan names his blog, that choice was always socialism and/or barbarism – we got some of each. We witness the savagery of civilization every day, it looks just like the photogenic Linda Katehi. Public servants (state university employees, no less) attack kids, while the offending forces of anarchy hold each other tight and scream. When you push it a little, civil society is a warm glass of capsicum.

This isn't an argument for novelty for novelty's sake. As people who study history are good at explaining, nothing new ever really happens. I'm sure there was a pirate ship or a Quaker colony or something that used the same organizational model as OWS. No one's claiming to have invented horizontalism or the critique of representative democracy, nor would it matter if they had. The important thing is that, raised in a tunnel of neon bulbs, we're still able to recognize natural light when we see a trickle of it. Struggle and victory don't look the way we were told they would, but neither does anything else in our lives. So we'll pick up the bricks and mortar, seal the way back, and take to the light with pickaxes. Let Habermas fret in his crypt. Let the dead elect a burial commission.