Afterword

What Can Grow in the Graveyard for Orthodoxies?

In the social theory, political philosophy, and revolutionary movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, certain orthodoxies made good sense. The stakes of world affairs seemed to hinge upon choosing one ideology or another. In the political debates of the late 19th century and early 20th, there was a palpable sense that the prevailing worldview would shape the future. This was true in the debates of thinkers who sought to throw the world of capital into question. Within European radicalism was the idea that following the influence of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon or Karl Marx could lead to hell or heaven on Earth, depending on one’s point of view. Everything was submitted as evidence for one side or the other, from the Paris Commune and its catastrophic fate to debates between Paul Lafargue and the anarchists, and between Lafargue and the Marxists too. The notion that there should be a decisive ideology for world affairs did not die easily, although one might have seen a possibly final embodiment in the reactionary discourses of the Cold War. But alas, as the current phase of neoliberal ideology meets with the materiality of capitalist crisis, and governments struggle for enduring relevance in transnational politics, all the old ideologies have come back again, like zombies hungry for life.

But in the 21st century, good work is a graveyard for orthodoxies. This means that good works today don’t contribute to the revitalization of the dead language of ideological purity. This does not mean that we cannot call ourselves “anarchists” or “communists,” or that there are no longer “capitalists” in the world. Such conclusions would be absurd. We do not live in a “post-capitalist” world, since most of the whole of human relations is governed by exchange relations according to the logic of capital. What it means to insist on a graveyard for orthodoxies is that we must rethink old traditions and trajectories against their calcified and vilified forms, burying zombified ideologies for good. A less ideological and more philosophical conversation has become necessary.

Indeed, one of the many places where Marx got it wrong was in his conceit in the poverty of philosophy. To be fair, Marx had good reasons at the time of The German Ideology and Theses on Feuerbach (1845–1846) to worry about the prominence of philosophers and to oppose Berlin’s youth culture of a Hegelian contemplation floating above the real world of human suffering. However, times have changed, the world is not overly philosophical, and philosophy is not ideology (and, arguably, never was). Philosophy is the process of open questioning that comes to an end in the rigid worldviews of ideology. Philosophy is
more practical than ideology. If we have learned anything from the failures and frustrations of 170 years of revolutionary theory and practice, it should be that ideological narrowness prevents an open approach to available resources, and is a dangerous dead end.

Perhaps the first thing to appreciate in John Asimakopoulos’s new book is how he makes good use of multifarious and divergent sources. His reach is far and wide because it needs to be. It is important to find references in this book to the work of Anton Pannekoek, a left communist and fierce critic of Lenin and other socialist derailments in the Soviet Union. Asimakopoulos understands that communists like Pannekoek (and also, for example, Sylvia Pankhurst, Herman Gorter, Amadeo Bordiga, and Jacques Camatte) have long been critical of what was/has been called “communism.” Today, there are influential theoretical movements operating under the rubric of “communization,” which misleadingly make communist anti-statism appear as if it were a new thing. The very existence of a long history of anti-“communist” communists, along with a real reckoning with Marx’s own complex theory of the state, helps to expose the false pretenses of ideological orthodoxy. When I teach my course on Marxist Philosophy, students are always surprised to learn that Marx was not an enthusiastic statist, that he wrote so much about the problems of state power, and so little about alternative forms of government. These facts are hard to see when we only consult ideological narratives about Marx, instead of Marx directly. A few weeks into the semester, students can no longer make use of the ideological apparatus they brought with them on the first day. Things are not as simple as ideology makes them out to be.

Ideology has also held hostage many streams of anarchist thought. There are still anarchist journals, magazines, and publishers that get squeamish around any serious consideration of Marxism, as if an affirmation of a single Marxist idea is tantamount to ideological betrayal. Asimakopoulos has no such allergies, and knows well that Kropotkin, Bakunin, Proudhon, Malatesta, Goldman, and so many other anarchists, have shared much in common with Marx and used his critique of capitalism as a basis for their own work. While Emma Goldman wrote about her disillusionment in Russia, so too did many communists, like Antonio Gramsci and Cornelius Castoriadis and critical theorists in the decades following World War II. Despite real common ground, there has been insufficient cross-pollination (and contamination) across the cleavages of different radical currents. What revolutionary theory needs to find out—what is being explored in this book and elsewhere in the world—is what can grow in the graveyard for orthodoxies.

Unlike a lot of research that draws on the primary sources of this book, Asimakopoulos’s work is empirically rich, always grounded in noncontroversial