
HOUSE ORGAN

Rhubarb. Anglophones know that “rhubarb” is slang for a “heated dispute or row,” but readers from other lands may not be familiar with this usage. The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary also describes the plant we call rhubarb as the “pale red, acid leaf-stalks of a garden rheum.” Rhubarb might first have been a medicinal plant, when it was originally cultivated in China, then imported from China to Europe through Russia. By the 17th century Europeans regularly grew rhubarb as a food crop, because of its fleshy stalks and bittersweet taste, seemingly without any loss of its popularity for medicinal uses.

When Roger Keil and *CNS*’s Toronto Editorial Group recently organized a public discussion of the value of the works of Henri Levebvre for red-green thinking and practice, they called the event (the first of a projected series) Rhubarb Pie. Rhubarb seems a perfect heading for our discussion and debates section, and so it has become. A check-list of other OED definitions of the rheum helps to explain why. One is rhubarb as “indistinct conversation” or “background noise,” good descriptions of many a political meeting. Another is a “low-level flight for opportune strafing,” which nicely captures one debate tactic, when someone blasts an auditorium platform with words he wishes were bullets. These seem apt significations for excitable audiences and hot debates, including the kind where people talk past one another, and where ideas are held and defended so dogmatically that the very sound of them dry freeze the air.

The OED’s final sense or usage of rhubarb, as a “purgative and astringent rootstock,” is also apposite. Academic not only political meetings sometimes work as verbal laxatives for speakers who can no longer restrain themselves when confronted with what they are sure are wrong-headed or silly ideas. But debates may also function as intellectual cleaning agents, which scour the grit and muck that collects on one’s brain. The problem is that too many political debates are “astringent” in the sense of pungent and acrimonious, with all parties competing to deliver unkind cuts without thought about their effects on those who hear or overhear the debates, which therefore may do extra harm of which the debaters are unaware. Not only do speakers or debaters lose when they think and act like deliverers of received truth — hence not only don’t listen to others but also don’t listen to how they are being listened to — the audience does, too. Especially when

someone at the podium denounces someone else's work without that person being present to defend his or her ideas; or makes wild generalizations about organizations, publications and movements, without the curiosity or good grace to learn more before qualifying themselves as experts.

Unkind cuts are fine qualities in the work of star columnists, since words that excite and thrill, and especially insult, are part of the columnist's intellectual capital. If our own intellectual lives are so barren that we seek the cheap fireworks that some writers provide their readers, we should blame ourselves, not the writer, who according to the most basic market principle is giving readers what they want. Perhaps this is a rhubarb at its worse. At its best, and we'll have some learning to do to reach this standard, a rhubarb has just enough sugar added to dilute some of the bitterness. The color of rhubarb is "pale-red" not flaming red, which I think is appropriate when launching ideas (not strafing planes) in public. In this new crisis epoch, when little can be taken for granted, it's better to be cautious, mindful of the possibility that one is badly mistaken, and respectful of listeners and readers who just might understand as well or much better than we do that the words "red" and "green," these days, are as problematical as they have ever been, if not more so.

More in-house news. This issue of *CNS* also introduces a new columnist, John Clark, who has been writing about, and engaged in, radical green politics for a long time. John's expertise is political theory and political philosophy and the focus of his column will be the critique of political ecology.

At night school long ago, I registered for a class on political theory taught by a visiting Canadian scholar. One night he talked about Harold Laski, the English political scientist, who had ended one of *his* lectures, on union strike movements during World War I, with the revelation that "So, you see, the state isn't sovereign, after all; the state told the workers to go back to work for the war effort, and they refused."

This was the first time I understood that concepts in social theory and social science can change, or be exploded by social movements and social struggles (including Marxist concepts, apropos the Rhubarb in this issue).

Especially since the 1960s, political science/political theory seems to have moved in two different directions. The scientism of economics (meaning that there is only one economics, every other kind being a

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sham) was adopted by some sociologists and also moved over to politics. For example, here is my favorite Marxist political theorist providing color for a local TV station reporting election returns: “Well, Bob, 55 percent of total precincts have reported, but half of those we haven’t heard from were Reagan democrats in 19zilch, but half of *them* have experienced high unemployment during the past two years, so....” Many multivariate analyses have been made out of less than that. By contrast, the same scholar wrote a book the thesis of which was that contemporary debates about political identity simply recapitulate Marx’s critique of the Left Hegelians. Nice. Equally nice is a new work to the effect that Machiavelli was really writing for the popular classes, exposing all the tricks of their rulers. John writes political theory that makes you think about the world in a different way, like the Laski scholar and the examples above. I feel a certain excitement that John will be a regular contributor, who will provide a critical but undogmatic political perspective to the core subject of political ecology.

Finally, we’re going to try something a little different with regard to the longer essays that usually introduce an issue of *CNS* — an innovation suggested a couple of years ago by Paul Buhle. The little difference is, when it’s feasible or when the subject matter permits, we’ll try to get a friendly rhubarb going, a discussion in the next or following issue of the ideas in the article. In this issue, the lead essay, is by Tim Lukes, who frequently writes for *CNS*. The more carefully you read this essay, the clearer it becomes that Tim is trying to open up his subject, not close it off. He skillfully explores his general topic not with the aim of making converts or “followers” but because he wants to have a conversation. What with the seeming triumph of global capital and all that, anti-sectarian and undogmatic left green theories and methods are essential to the project of taming or defeating “globalization” and neoliberalism. In Tim Lukes’ work, questions emerge from the theoretical line developed in his article and we’ll try to organize a rhubarb with the spotlight on these questions. We’ll invite a few people to comment on the piece, but we’re also making a general invitation to readers, authors, and editors to take a more active role in producing materials for the journal — in this case a thousand words or so that address one or more of the specific questions the author raises about his subject. — **James O’Connor**

Argentina in a Nutshell. An Argentine bankruptcy might trigger a world recession, so it is useful to ponder some facts and figures about that famed country (which most North Americans know only through

Evita). All countries are different, but Argentina is more different than most. The exceptional foodstuffs producing capacity of the pampas provided an economic surplus from which an oligarchy with illuministic overtones (1880-1916), a confusion of regimes exhibiting both middle class populism and protofascism (1916-1945) and an authoritarian and industrializing semi-welfare state (1946-1976) all profited. The country was for several decades an international success story: it attracted four million immigrants (almost half from Italy), and ended up, with Uruguay, with Latin America's most developed educational and communications infrastructures. 1976 was a cut-off point. With the excuse of defeating a guerrilla movement which was already on the wane, a murderous military with its neoliberal economists and a wink from the IMF introduced the following: international economic opening; deindustrialization, (to concentrate on food production for export and to reduce the political nuisance value of industrial workers); subsidization of the antics of financial capital; weakening of labor unions; decreases in popular purchasing power; and an explosion in foreign indebtedness. The original Argentinean ingredient was the exceptional savagery of the methods used (greater than those used in Chile, for example). Almost all deaths were carried out in a genocide mediated by previous "disappearances" and by torture, the sacking of houses, bank accounts and properties of "subversives;" and the kidnapping of their small children and the keeping alive of pregnant prisoners until they gave birth, when they were murdered and the newborns allocated to trustworthy Christian families, or sold.

The country returned to Democracy in 1983, after the inglorious end of the Malvinas war. The winning party, the "radicals," more or less center-left, carried out valuable initiatives in the cultural and legal fronts, including the trial of the most prominent war criminals (amnestied some years later), and a divorce law (in 1984). In economic terms, it was unable to stem the neoliberal tide, a half-hearted attempt to defer payment of the foreign debt and to limit the power of financial capital both having failed. The "radicals" were ejected from power in a "market coup d'état," the first of many, a term which is now current in the Argentinean political glossary. The "peronistas" won the next election, with Menem as president (now in jail) a personage who could hardly have been invented had he not existed. The foreign debt tripled, all state-owned assets sold at bargain prices, and the country became resolutely thirdworldish, with poverty and unemployment at four times 1975 levels, a foreign debt which has increased twenty-fold since then, and with colossal bribes and graft to lubricate the whole process, some of which are being made public these days.

The peronistas were replaced with the “alianza,” which ran on a social democratic platform, promptly reneged from it after a couple of market coups d’état, and have watched their political capital melt away after one year in office. This capital has not gone to the peronistas, however, and the country is now in a crisis of political legitimacy, perhaps its greatest ever. The latest renegotiation of the (ultimately unpayable) foreign debt has increased the current recession (worse than that of 1929), so that poverty keeps increasing, and eight percent of the population are too poor to purchase essential foodstuffs, in a country which is simultaneously setting records of foodstuffs production from the pampas.

Future scenarios point at the fact that interest on the debt is unpayable (forget about the principal), and traditional parties remain wholly unrepresentative. Strikes are again becoming more abundant, but the most usual confrontations are “road cuts” (the “piqueteros”) with no violence taken against them, for the time being. This goes back to Argentina as a special case. The country has reneged on the spectacular promise it gave at the beginning of the 20th century. It has been surpassed, in welfare terms, by its neighbors Chile and Uruguay, not only Canada, Australia or some Mediterranean European country, with which it had once been compared. National frustration is enormous, and all social and economic indicators point downwards. And yet, the country’s culture is thriving and lively, the crisis is being processed in a general leftward direction, neoliberalism has become a dirty word, scandals (seemingly one per day) keep unravelling...an interesting situation. Stay tuned. — **José Carlos Escudero**