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Cooperation Has a Meaning

François Maspero and Monthly Review

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In 1970, the French left-wing filmmaker Chris Marker made a twenty-minute documentary about the French left-wing publisher François Maspero. Shot in grainy black and white and interspersed with images of words torn from a dictionary, *Les mots ont un sens* (Words Have a Meaning) has a raw *nouvelle vague* feel to it. Marker's hand-held camera follows a thirty-something Maspero pacing Paris's Latin Quarter streets, darting through its crowds, headed toward La joie de lire (The Joy of Reading), his bookstore along Rue Saint-Séverin, seat of Éditions Maspero. Sporting glasses and a neat tweed jacket, Maspero looks every inch the serious intellectual he was, a man with a radical mission. His deadpan demeanor lightens only for a brief instant when he stops, stares directly into Marker's camera, and gives it a big Cheshire Cat grin. (Later in life, Maspero would appear more proletarian, dressing in denim work shirts and doffing a trademark seaman's cap.)

Maspero launched his bookstore in 1955, at the tender age of 23. Four years on, as anticolonial struggles raged in Algeria, he founded his press. Still, Maspero tells Marker how he hates adjectives like *engaged*, *courageous*, even *revolutionary*, because he knows that books and a press alone don't make a revolution. But they do offer curious people the chance to read material and hear opinions they probably never would have otherwise. La joie de lire was important as a site of physical encounter: kindred mingled there, discovered dissident ideas, heard *counter*-information. Bookstore and press corrected implicit bourgeois bias, stocked and published literature at once anticolonialist and anti-Stalinist, militantly *gauchiste* and independent, poetical as well as political. Rosa Luxemburg shared shelf-space with Charles Baudelaire, Che with Marguerite Duras, Fidel Castro with Georges Perec, Frantz Fanon with Boris Vian, and Louis Althusser with Julio Cortázar.

Between June 1959 and May 1982, Éditions Maspero published around 1,300 titles across thirty collections. Yet it faced a constant barrage of state

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censorship (book confiscation and fines) and fascist violence. In the early 1960s, the bookstore was repeatedly bombed by the Organisation Armée Secrète, a secret far-right paramilitary organization, and Maspero was shot in the back, in broad daylight, in a cowardly act that seriously injured him. (He recovered.) Maybe for good reason did Marker's film flag, at the beginning, Antonio Gramsci's famous citation: "pessimism of the intellect obliges an optimism of the will." Maspero seems instinctively to internalize Gramsci's maxim, telling Marker: "I'm happy to see these piles of books published, because if I didn't exist many of them wouldn't exist."

Revolutionary struggles across the globe—in Cuba and Algeria, Congo and Angola, French factories and U.S. inner cities—figure every day in national newspapers; but their story, Maspero says, gets told from the standpoint of nonrevolutionaries, is seen exclusively through the colonizer's eyes. Here, at his bookstore, he says, you learn things "from inside the head of a Cuban revolutionary or militant Black American." Maspero is proud to have published Fanon, both *Les damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961) and *L'an V de la révolution algérienne* (*A Dying Colonialism*, 1959), the latter having the greatest honor at the house: it was the first Maspero book to be banned.

As we listen to Maspero's voiceover, Marker's lens focuses on browsers at La joie de lire, homing in on what pages they're turning over, what they're tuning into. Then it zooms out, scanning the stacks. Fleetingly, we catch a glimpse of two publications pinned side by side on one wall, seemingly granted special placement: a copy of *The Black Panther* newspaper and a *Monthly Review*. We can't see the date of the latter but its leader stands out: "THE OLD LEFT AND THE NEW." Hardly surprising is this prominence: Maspero's relationship with *Monthly Review* was always fraternal, both interfaced with one another, shared lists. Monthly Review Press lost as little time as possible getting Éditions Maspero into English, and vice versa. Together, they helped define what that *New* in the Left would mean.

Early hits in both camps were Régis Debray's *Révolution dans la révolution?* (*Revolution in the Revolution?*)—from 1967, featured in its entirety as a special issue of *Monthly Review* (July–August 1967), with the book following hot on its heels—Charles Bettleheim's *Transition vers l'économie socialiste* (Maspero, 1968), appearing as *On the Transition to Socialism* (Monthly Review Press, 1971); and Arghiri Emmanuel's *L'Échange inégal* (1969), which became Monthly Review Press's *Unequal Exchange* in 1972. On the other flank, Paul Baran's pioneering *Political Economy of Growth* (Monthly Review Press, 1957) moved into Éditions Maspero in 1967; Baran and Paul Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital* (Monthly Review Press, 1966) did likewise in 1970; André Gunder Frank's "The Development of Underdevelopment" (*Monthly Review*, September 1966) and

Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America (Monthly Review Press, 1967) found themselves chez Maspero in 1969 and 1972 respectively; and, a little later, Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Monthly Review Press, 1974) entered Maspero's list in 1976, as did Harry Magdoff's *The Age of Imperialism* (Monthly Review Press, 1969) in 1979, in its "Cahiers Libres" series.

Monthly Review's "The Old Left and the New" was Sweezy and Magdoff's Review of the Month for May 1969. (The issue also contained several informative pieces on Fanon's "evolution as a revolutionary.") The Sweezy and Magdoff piece likely caught Maspero's eye because it was pinpointing an important interregnum in left politics, not only an emerging generational rift, but also one responding to a mutation within postwar capitalism. Both rift and mutation ushered in radical opportunities as well as daunting threats. Gramsci anticipated these threats with another famous observation: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old world is dying and the new cannot be born; and in this interregnum monsters surge." Sweezy and Magdoff were afraid of monsters, as we should be. In 1969, though, there were glimmers of light, too, as a New Left struggled to impose its own hegemony.

Things might not have been ideal then, but they were better, Sweezy and Magdoff say, than the previous two decades when *Monthly Review* started out. In those days, redbaiting was just about to set off on its long crusade. During the 1950s, hammer blows rained on the popular movement: left unions were expelled from the Congress of Industrial Organizations, Communist Party leaders convicted under the Smith Act (1940), the Rosenbergs executed, and Joseph McCarthy unleashed fire and brimstone on liberals everywhere. Meantime, U.S. capitalism was changing its economic and ideological spots, developing its manipulative armory, promising workers and unions the good life if only they played the game. Wages rose and full-employment policies didn't appear the red herrings they'd become. The Cold War became a handy political tool for ensuing compliance at home while preserving U.S. military investments abroad.

And yet, for all that, say Sweezy and Magdoff, "to understand the transformation which took place during the 1960s one must stress not the manipulative ability of the ruling class but the limits of that manipulative ability." Spending billions of dollars on armaments staved off economic stagnation and extended the nonsocialist reach of the United States across the globe, but it couldn't control the consequences of such a Cold War. Neither could it prevent capital accumulation from exercising its "normal polarizing effect," producing ever-increasing wealth at the top with grinding poverty at the bottom. And last but not least, "the manipulation and systematic efforts at debasement of the public mind" tend

"sooner or later to generate a revolt among those who become conscious of their cultural and spiritual deprivation." Thus, capitalism in the 1950s had, by the 1960s, engineered its own negation. And as part of this negation, a "New Left" was busy being born, "wholly different from that Old Left which was shattered two decades ago."

Many of this New Left stood browsing at Maspero's bookstore. They'd become conscious of global inequities as well as their own cultural and spiritual deprivation, revolting in their heads and out on the streets. They were discovering new heroes and heroines in far-off lands, with different skin colors. The Old Left was reformist by comparison, Sweezy and Magdoff say, more willing to achieve its aims *within* the framework of existing capitalist society. Not so with the New Left, which better understood the necessity of revolution, knowing that, for the foreseeable future, "whites and blacks must organize separately while struggling together." It's a powerful insight, even today—especially today—when a loosely affiliated Black Lives Matter movement struggles to find its collective voice.

But Sweezy and Magdoff think it an error to overstate what is significantly new here. After all, like its "Old" counterpart, the New Left is rather *small*, "hardly touching the masses of blue- and white-collar workers, and where it has, the reaction tends to be negative rather than positive." And despite all the clamor of revolt, "many people have no clear idea of what a revolution implies and no one knows how a revolution is going to be made in a country like ours." "As the magazine enters its third decade," Sweezy and Magdoff sign off, "the editors re-dedicate themselves to this task, asking as they have many times before for the aid and advice and cooperation of our readers."

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The central theme of this commentary is *cooperation*, already witnessed in *Monthly Review*'s own relationship with Maspero, already implicit in much of the communal impulse of the New Left, whose grievances with capitalist society, remember, lay precisely in the latter's competitive monomania, in its running roughshod over any selfless collective life—pitting nation against nation, rich against poor, white against Black, colonizer against colonized. Contest and self-interest underwrite capitalism's long-wave meta-narrative; its history is branded with blood and fury. In 1969, Sweezy and Magdoff sought to problematize "cooperation on the Left," using, as their platform, a *Monthly Review* article from almost twenty years prior: "Better Smaller but Better" by Historicus.

Throughout the McCarthy era, *Historicus* was Paul Baran's protective pen name, and what Baran lamented in July 1950 was a lack of political

cooperation on the left, simply because, he said, "there is no politics on the Left." Only a stark void prevailed, made less stark by "clarity, courage, patience, and faith in the spontaneity of rational and socialist tendencies in society." Baran himself was responding to a *Monthly Review* editorial from the previous March, "Cooperation on the Left," penned by Leo Huberman and Sweezy. Reading this editorial today, seventy odd years down the line, its message still sounds incredibly smart, is still full of remarkable insights about the principle and tactics of left cooperation. Its tone, too, is a good deal more upbeat than Historicus's. Indeed, at a time when the U.S. left was in bad shape, in worse shape than it is now, cooperation, Huberman and Sweezy insist, has to have a meaning.

Monthly Review's establishment, the duo say, is rooted in left setback and stagnation. Despair isn't unfamiliar to leftists. Yet the magazine intended to engage with setback and despair, was there to take stock, is still there taking stock, trying to overcome splintering and factional bitterness within the left, still wrestling with a ruling class as it wrestles with itself. How to consolidate the flimsy terrain on which the left seems permanently to stand? How to move forward? One answer, Huberman and Sweezy suggest, is "cooperation on a dozen fronts at once…bringing the whole Left into a unified and disciplined struggle for a better world." "How to achieve such cooperation, therefore, seems to us to be the most important question facing the Left today." Perhaps it still is.

A prerequisite for radical cooperation is for broad and open public discussion, about past failings and present undertakings, about how to build bridges into the future. "There are enormous stores of energy and creative ability in the American people," Huberman and Sweezy say. "Capitalist society is crushing them or diverting them into purely destructive channels. This is the Left's reason for being and also its greatest opportunity, and to this end nothing is more important at the present time than the organization and promotion of public discussion on the widest possible scale."

Another prerequisite is "a measure of humility all around." "There must be at least a certain minimum willingness to face facts, to accept criticism, to admit mistakes, and to try new methods. Otherwise, there is no vitality, no capacity for adaptation, no power to grow." What is worth remembering is that "cooperation and unity are entirely different things." Unity implies holding political ends in common; cooperation implies "the holding of diverse as well as common ends and a willingness to work together for those which are held in common." Unity, we might say, is a thing; cooperation a process, a dialogue.

Unity operates around sameness and exists *within* groups; cooperation upholds difference because it takes place *between* groups. Karl Marx af-

firms cooperation as core to his vision of democracy. Even when he writes about it in *Capital*, in the rather odd chapter 13 of volume one, speaking about how capitalism abuses cooperating workers, he knows that cooperation never implies everyone doing the same activity, never meant thinking the same thing, never necessitated homogeneity. Rather, cooperation meant discovering commonality as a route toward expanding individual difference. This, says Marx, is the means through which people "have hands and eyes both in the front and behind, and can be said to be a certain extent omnipresent." When we cooperate in a planned way with others, Marx says, "we develop the capabilities of our species."

The United States is characterized by an infinite number of progressive groups and organizations, say Huberman and Sweezy, varying in size, ranging in efficacy. "The most that can be done—though, of course, it is a lot—is to organize an ever-increasing degree of cooperation for common ends—especially for the preservation of peace and the defense of civil liberties. In the process, the number and scope of common ends can be expected to grow until eventually organizational unity becomes a realistic goal." Cooperation, from this standpoint, requires that each group respects the right of others to exist and manage their own affairs. Of course, any group may and should try to win over other groups to its principles, yet "only through open and above-board discussion." To that degree, cooperation "presupposes decent manners among cooperators." "It is impossible to cooperate with a person and at the same time vilify them."

Cooperation hinges not only on groups reaching agreement, but also on a readiness to find agreement in a spirit of meeting each other halfway. One group can't dominate all others. If cooperative rules break down, antagonism or mistrust ensues. Sometimes antagonism can't be avoided. Sometimes it shouldn't be avoided. Nevertheless, conflict isn't the same as cooperation, Huberman and Sweezy argue, and collective ventures tend to work best when antagonism is worked through, engaged with before it festers. Neither does cooperation mean socialists must shelve socialist ideals. Quite the contrary: "it is fatal for them to do so," Huberman and Sweezy warn. "Serious socialists believe that in the long run the only possible way out of the present muddle lies in the attainment of world socialism. Believing this, they can be politically principled and effective only to the extent that they relate their activities to the realization of the socialist goal."

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If the New Left failed to realize such a socialist goal, it succeeded admirably in transforming and enriching the culture of radicalism, enlarging the whole repertoire of progressive agendas, developing a new panoply of

identity politics and concerns around lifestyle and ecology. The array of progressive causes that Huberman and Sweezy identified in 1950 expanded and diversified dramatically throughout the 1960s; and ever since has expanded and diversified into something vaster again—into an infinite number of groups united only by their relative marginalization from the mainstream, and by their frequent separation from one another. Though we shouldn't forget their other point of convergence: all encounter tremendous onslaught from the reactionary right.

At the same time, these groups face obstacles within and between themselves, divided often by those whose causes can be affected inside capitalism, and those who can find resolution only outside it, beyond capitalism. Yet, as Huberman and Sweezy put it long ago, these groups "have plenty in common—especially in the fight for civil liberties and peace, both of which are in deadly danger from American reaction—and it is obviously as much in the interest of one as of the other to work together for aims which they both approve." The sentence could have been written yesterday, or else be our thought for the day, tomorrow.

Watching Marker's *Les mots ont un sens* in 2021, it's hard not to feel a tinge of nostalgia for those yesteryears, when *Monthly Review* was pinned so vividly on Maspero's wall, and when everything seemed fresher—the progressive ideas, the newness of the books, hot off the press, the vitality of the kids reading them, their hopes, their passionate embrace of the future, their innocence. Even Marker's New Wave moviemaking seemed fresh and radical, something that not only documented the changing times but itself helped shape those changing times.

This may be a nostalgia for Maspero's vocation as a publisher and bookstore owner, knowing that rents were cheaper then, that bottom-line commerce hadn't yet invaded all aspects of life—that all was permissible whereas today it would be impossible, unaffordable, inconceivable. But then again, Maspero, who passed away in 2015, always mistrusted nostalgia, as we should mistrust it, and warned that his venture was never really possible, even then. You had to struggle to make it work, that there were always obstacles to overcome; you were forever on the brink of economic collapse, in danger of being blown up or shot in the back. Why believe it was any easier in those days than it would be now, in our own desperate times? Times have always been desperate for the left!

Running a bookstore and becoming a militant is a "continual contradiction," Maspero says in *Les mots ont un sens*, a continual contradiction like left struggle itself, within and against capitalism. You're always trying to push through bourgeois society, always trying to betray it, he says, always trying to perfect this act of betrayal. Publishing books is unavoidably im-

perfect: no sooner is a book off the press than you notice the first *coquille*, Maspero says, the first misprint. Ditto with left politics: always imperfect, always unfinished, even if that striving for perfection, that desire for the flawless book, for some beautiful collective cooperation, remains a valid yearning, a fantasy worthy of any dream-image.

Half a century ago, in "The Old Left and the New," the "New" was still sprightly if rather battle worn from 1968. Nowadays, the "New Left" has a lot of gray and white hairs, has become, as Marshall Berman liked to joke, the "Used Left," and we await what a cooperating New, New Left might look like, a global movement taking to heart Huberman and Sweezy's old adage: that unity and cooperation aren't necessarily the same thing, that cooperation doesn't imply complete agreement, and that it is possible to achieve real practical ends through incomplete means. Much like old times, the left is now confronted with a familiar problem: How do we overcome another generational rift at another interregnum, at a moment when we've just gotten rid of one monster? How do we act when the old world hasn't died off and a new era has yet to be born?

One of Maspero's favorite images for radicals comes from one of his finest published works, a book he wrote himself: *Les abeilles et la guêpe* (*The Bees and the Wasp*)—a memoir from 2002.[1] As its epigraph, it takes Jean Paulhan's 1944 evocation of the Resistance movement: "You can squeeze a bee in your hand until it suffocates. But before it suffocates it will sting you. That's not a big thing, you say. Yes, it's not much. But if it didn't sting, soon enough there wouldn't be anymore bees." Defiance, in other words, always has to renew itself, always has to reinvent itself through ongoing struggle, through new means of defiance, regardless of whether this defiance battles for a lost cause. It's to hope against hope that later generations of bees continue to cooperate together, continue to rebuild their collective hives—continue to sting all those who try to suffocate them.

Notes

1. After Maspero's bookstore closed in 1974 and his press morphed into Éditions La découverte in 1982, he began work as a translator (especially from Spanish), taking to the pen himself, even while he voyaged throughout the globe, writing acclaimed novels *Le sourire du chat* (1984), *Le figuier* (1988), and *La plage noire* (1995), as well as offbeat travelogues, homages to hidden minority worlds in *Les passagers du Roissy-Express* (1990) and *Balkans-Transit* (1997). When Éditions Maspero passed the baton over to La découverte, they retained Maspero's house emblem: *un crieur de journaux*–a newspaper boy on a street corner, crying out the daily news; only in this case, it is news seldom reported in the standard press. When the independent online newspaper *Mediapart* went live in 2008, under ex-*Le monde* editor Edwy Plenel's watch, they too adopted Maspero's *crieur* as their logo, keeping a Maspero-inspired left voice circulating across the airwaves.