

Against Miserablism

by Richard Burke

“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

—George Bernard Shaw

I was at a recent meeting of leftist activists. Someone offered the observation that the reason that the right is successful, and the left isn't, is because the right acts, while the left merely talks. Is this true? Sometimes it seems that the problem is actually “activism,” a prioritizing of activity over theorizing. Arguably the left is much more into activism than the right, and offers an unending succession of actions and activities, in response to any number of events, policies and situations offered by the ruling class and its politicians. Say the words “protest demonstration” and what is the immediate image—a group of conservatives out in the street, or a group of leftists?

Starting in 1999, we have had a number of large-scale demonstrations against globalization; against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the revolts of the Arab spring; the anti-austerity uprisings in Europe; the revolt against anti-union laws in Madison, Wisconsin; the Occupy Wall Street movement which spread throughout the country, and led to street battles between Occupiers and the police; and the recent anti-NATO events in Chicago 2012. Faced with the actual historical record, the idea that the left merely talks while the right acts seem to be easily refuted. The problem is not a lack of action, but the fact that these actions seem to be ineffectual, to have little effect on those in power or to spark a larger mass revolt against the capitalist world system. Perhaps the root of the left's problems is really miserablism instead.

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The term “miserablism” was coined by the surrealist poet and theoretician Andre Breton in a 1956 essay in his book *Surrealism and Painting*. The essay dealt with the state of art in France at the time, but since Breton was arguably one of the most politically revolutionary poets of the twentieth century, the term has a wider application. Miserablism is a pessimistic state of mind, the belief that no matter what we do the situation won't change. Miserablism is the opposite of utopianism, a dystopian mindset that believes we are all doomed.

Miserablism is a fatalistic belief that we have no choice but to submit to the reality imposed upon us by the wealthy and powerful, that “resistance is futile.” Gramsci may have spoken about “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will,” but miserablism is pessimism of the intellect, the imagination and, consequently, the will; miserablism demoralizes. Miserablism loves to (cont. p. 47)