My Telos: A Journal of No Illusions

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There are many Teloses, as many as there are readers. My Telos was the very first few issues, when I was a graduate student and becoming a theorist. This was the Telos of Paul Piccone's phenomenological Marxism, Enzo Paci, Karil Kosik, the early Russell Jacoby. I still have those issues and occasionally I dust them off and re-read them. As I discuss below, Piccone's article, "Phenomenological Marxism," is an important part of my auto-bibliography—the stuff I cite and on which I build. My intellectual formation depended on early Telos as I developed an un-American sensibility and opened myself to Europe.

Telos helped form me. I read it, and I pursued its many sources. It was, in effect, my bibliography in graduate school that saw me through much of the rest of my academic career. In reflecting on Telos' impact on me, I remember two things: Telos helped me understand why theory needed to be grounded in everyday life, the lifeworld. I never forget the lessons of existential phenomenology, even as I blended these with the work of the Frankfurt School and French theory. And Telos showed me by its example that distance and disaffiliation afford clarity of insight. I learned from the examples of Piccone, Jacoby and others that there is a real gulf between professional academics and intellectuals, and I knew I wanted to be an intellectual who ranges widely across diverse literatures. Telos made me mistrust disciplines and their usual narrow scope and methods. It also helped me distrust organizations, including academic ones.

And so my Telos helped me situate myself and my own writing around everyday life and it helped me feel comfortable as an academic outsider—somehow who lucked into a job, tenure, publishing opportunities. Sometimes, like Piccone and Jacoby, I was unlucky, losing jobs, friendly colleagues, institutional support. Telos toughened me up, much as Paul and Russell were tough, no-bullshit guys. But this toughness was set against the extraordinary bonds of friendship and nurturance that many people experienced in their contact with Telos. Paul, Russell and many others were wonderful mentors and, for all of their reputation as irascible and 'difficult,' they would come through in the clutch, much as my own graduate-school mentor John O'Neill would. I learned that the intellectual life must be lived rigorously, but also that, for all of us who were foot soldiers in the New Left and readers and writers for early Telos, we must put our money where our mouths were: we needed to live lives prefiguratively, treating our comrades well and refusing to postpone liberation to a distant future time. That was an invaluable lesson from early Telos, the French left existentialists and Marcuse.

The Lifeworld and the New Left

The gist of phenomenological Marxism, as I understand it, is that conceptual categories arise from everyday life, from people's struggles and experiences. As I grew up and read more widely, I realize that this is the core of Marxism and critical theory. Piccone's early essay on phenomenological Marxism complemented other reading I was doing in Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and the Frankfurt School. All of these people were, in their various ways, trying to explain why 'the revolution' had failed or simply never come to pass. Telos helped shift this discussion forward into the sixties, where 'the revolution' also arguably failed, or at least it was derailed by the hard right which has retained hegemony for nearly forty years. Telos fashioned itself, in its early years, as the self-consciousness of the New Left, much as the European lifeworld-oriented thinkers mentioned above were the self-consciousness of earlier European

social movements.

I came to social theory and social philosophy under the tutelage of John O'Neill, who was deeply affected by French existentialism and phenomenology. It seemed to me that Piccone's journal and the French theorists such as Merleau-Ponty were making many of the same points about how the analyses of social structures needed to be grounded in the lifeworld, both to ensure that the concepts were valid and useful and to preserve the person as the centerpiece of a liberating social theory. As I was reading through existentialism, phenomenology, critical theory and Hegelian Marxism under O'Neill's guidance, I was also traveling in western and eastern Europe and becoming affected by the Praxis group in the former Yugoslavia and by the Prague Spring. 1968 saw the May Movement, the Prague Spring and of course major upheaval in the United States, with a hardening of the anti-war movement after Chicago and the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. 1968 also saw the founding of Telos. In retrospect, these were not coincidences. A lifeworld-grounded critical theory was forged in the crucible of the social movements and psychic turmoil of the times.

This is not to say that Piccone was a big fan of the counterculture or even the more political wing of the New Left. Telos needed to be decoded for contemporary relevance. But it was obvious to me, even at that early stage in my reading and writing, that phenomenology helped place lived experience at the center of theory and its images of liberation. Telos was not a turning away from politics but a vital new way of viewing politics, both structural and personal, with resources from Europe. In this sense, reading Telos paralleled and enriched my European travels and studies as I immersed myself in non-Anglo-American approaches to philosophy and theory. Telos, like other reading I was doing in the French and Germans, helped ensure that I wouldn't remain a small-town boy.

Much of the reading was tough going. Nor is it to ignore the fact that Telos became its own subculture, with regular authors and a certain engaged approach to writing. This became quite personal for me when Piccone moved to Toronto for a few years and started a Toronto Telos group, to which I was briefly affiliated. We met with Paul and did reviewing of books and journals. Of course, Paul was a cyclone of energy and charisma! He fit in to the intellectual culture of Toronto, which, in the late sixties and seventies, was dominated by ex-patriot American intellectuals and by Europeans who taught at York and University of Toronto, where I got my degrees. Toronto, a most un-American city, was becoming my lifeworld and the University of Toronto library contained many of the books that were referenced in the pages of Telos. I remember struggling through the French version of History and Class Consciousness, before the Merlin translation came out in 1971, and integrating this reading into the work I was doing in my classes and with the Telos group.

It is no wonder that Telos over the years has been dominated by European authors and European issues. Piccone and other grad students at SUNY-Buffalo, where Marvin Farber taught phenomenology, started Telos to get beyond arid Anglo-American analytic philosophy, which dominated the academy then. It still does in many quarters, especially now that postmodernism is demonized by American and British academics uncomfortable with Derridean wordplay and seeming relativism. (See my commentaries on these aversions to theory [Agger 2008].) Intellectual work and authors' personal trajectories blend in my recollections of my intellectual younger years, and of my debt to Telos. In particular, I recall two early Telos articles and the fate of their authors (and the impact of that fate on my own work).

The first is Piccone's aforementioned "Phenomenological Marxism" (Telos 9, 1971, 3-31). The second is Russell Jacoby's commentary in early Telos entitled "A Falling Rate of Intelligence?" (Telos 27, 1976, 141-146, Jacoby's piece presaged his later (1987) book Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe. Both Piccone and Jacoby were public intellectuals. And both were effectively shut out of academia, demonstrating the validity of their own trenchant critiques of American intellectual life in the "age of academe." Piccone was turned down for tenure in sociology at Washington University in St. Louis. Jacoby never established a tenure-track career in history but moved from one impermanent appointment to another, but without developing a robust curriculum vitae full of timely critiques of public life and intellectual trends.

The two articles that had the most impact on me were written by academic outsiders, perhaps reflecting the fact that distance, in an Adornoian sense, sharpens one's critique. Or perhaps people with sharp critiques of the established state of affairs are not predisposed to play the game effectively enough to become insiders. It has been remarked that Piccone and Jacoby were "difficult" people. But anyone who knew them realized that they were charming and affable, if always rigorous and candid. We students in the Toronto Telos group could be certain that our youthful drafts would bring instant condemnation from Paul, who would smile broadly as he told us that our sentences were "bullshit"! Coming from him, this was a red badge of courage and it prompted us to rethink and

rewrite.

I remember composing a brief book review for Telos during Paul's Toronto stay. I was reviewing Lucio Colletti's Marxism and Hegel, as I recall. This fit into my emerging interest in Hegelian Marxism and its critics. I went through draft after draft, each marked up by Paul. The book review editor was Paul Breines at Boston College. Breines asked me if I wanted to stay on the "merry-go-round" of Piccone's incessant urging to redraft the brief review. Finally, the review was published, but with whole phrases italicized unintentionally. We had all lost track of the drafts, and Paul's underlining of my sentences found its way into italics. I learned from this that all versions, including the published one, are iterations, works in progress—a very valuable lesson for a young academic. Perhaps this lived experience of iterability prepared me later for Derrida, who also had a big impact on me as I developed a perspective on the sociology of science (and on scientific sociology) that stresses the inseparability of method and writing—a critique of positivism via the Frankfurt School and Derrida.

De-Institutionalized Intellectuals

The Piccone and Jacoby essays were important to me, both for what they said and for the eventual circumstances of their authors, which tells us much about the harsh nature of American academic life. My father, also an academic, taught me (in my words) that second-rate people frequently lord it over first-rate people, who are seen as threatening. My dad was a progressive political science who did not derive from theory but was active in sixties civil rights and anti-war movements. He was in the vanguard of the first generation of quantitative American political science, although his research took him to western and eastern Europe, where he also became un-American and indeed quite anti-American. He also lived in Toronto and met and liked Paul. My father's second wife was an Italian intellectual who published in Telos. I immediately saw the similarities between my father and Paul; they were irascible, charismatic and spoke truth to power. Paul could be puckish, while always grinning, in his relations with peers and students. But with my father he was straightforward and did not play any roles. Perhaps they recognized some of themselves in each other. Both taught me to be iconoclastic.

Toronto was one connection for me. Another was Buffalo, the site of Telos's founding and of Paul's graduate school years. I left the U.S. for Canada in 1969, for the obvious reason. I went to college and grad school in Toronto and began a short-lived teaching career up there. I joined a positivist sociology department at the University of Waterloo, a hundred miles from Toronto. But I lost my job in an apparent cost-cutting move (or internal reallocation or departmental politics or all of the above). I sat around unemployed for a year, tasting the bitter fruit of my early academic demise. But then I lucked into one of the few 'theory' jobs in American sociology at SUNY-Buffalo and returned to the U.S. in 1981.

During those twelve years away I had, like my father, become un-American and anti-American. I had spent a lot of time in Europe, reading, studying and becoming an intellectual flaneur. And I had been exposed to O'Neill's heady blend of existential phenomenology and Hegelian Marxism during my years at York in Toronto, before I went to University of Toronto for my PhD in political economy. Coming to Buffalo to teach brought me to a university that sponsored 'theory' and theorists in several prominent departments, largely outside the social sciences. Georg Iggers in History had an early influence on Jacoby. Rodolph Gasche and Henry Sussman taught in Comparative Literature, in which I had an affiliated appointment. It was as if the legacy of early Telos was still in the air.

During the mid-1980s a number of academic units sponsored a visit by Russell Jacoby, who gave four lectures, as I recall. I realized later that these lectures were prolegomena to his Last Intellectuals book, which was soon to appear in print. I chatted with him during his visit about ideas and about academic life. He was already a hero of mine, dating back to his piece in early Telos and to subsequent work such as his 1975 book Social Amnesia, an important Adornoian critique of 'conformist' psychology. By that stage of my career I had become quite cynical and resonated with Russell's experiences as an outsider. I was working in a quite mainstream/positivist sociology department. My closest friend in the department was Lionel S. Lewis, a prominent sociologist of higher education who published Scaling the Ivory Tower: The Role of Merit in Academic Careers. He provided ample evidence of what my father had told me about how heavy producers are resented by slower-paced writers. Jacoby cited Lewis in his Last Intellectuals book.

And I had almost been turned down for tenure at Buffalo. The university, like many others, was in a status-seeking phase, attempting to become a "major public research university" (its term). The university had just gained

membership in the prestigious AAU (American Association of Universities), and it was "on the make," busily measuring the prestige of its departments against the prestige rankings of departments at other universities (MPRUs, in the dreadful acronym of the time). And, of course, comparing our funded research dollars to the dollars amassed by other universities. Our tenure system had just acquired an Orwellian dimension: the outside evaluative letters on our junior professorial candidates for tenure needed to be written by scholars from a short list of these MPRUs— Illinois, Berkeley, Michigan and the like. My department had a chairperson who was not fully aware of this portentous institutional shift and so he sought letters on me from people who worked in my fields of critical theory. But theory has a strange topography: people who do critical work are dispersed off the beaten path, at the Arlingtons, Kansases, Wesleyans, Virginia Techs of the world. Most of us hook on with departments that do not boast many research dollars but are intellectually open-minded enough to hire us!

Anyway, my initial round of letters were largely from people at universities that did not "count" for Buffalo's status-seeking purposes. In addition, the letters from people at MPRUs needed to attest that Buffalo's junior people would receive tenure at the home institutions of the letter writers—the Berkeleys and Michigans on that short list of fifteen major public research universities. But instead of getting new letters on me, from the 'correct' universities, the highest-level university committee simply turned me down. (I had received support at prior levels of review in the Faculty of Social Sciences, including my own department.) I protested, and I succeeded in convincing the progressive provost at the time to seek new letters, from a whole new cohort of people. I ended up with 14 or 16 letters in total. Apparently, the people assembling my case took a chance and, on the second list of reviewers, included Martin Jay, an esteemed scholar of the Frankfurt School. This was risky, I was later told, because Marty works in History at Berkeley and not in Sociology. At the end of a long and stressful process, I—unlike Piccone and Jacoby—lucked into tenure, sliding in the backdoor and, of course, never forgetting the experience of being an outsider looking in.

Journal of No Illusions

Buffalo is a major part of my story. Telos started there; it offered me employment; it had a tradition of radicalism, which crested during the late sixties; it was a declining but still vibrant and interesting—off-beat—American city. It unofficially called itself The City of No Illusions. I loved living in a place that was the butt of jokes, especially when we insiders had the North Buffalo Food Co-op, Talking Leaves bookstore, Delaware Park, great neighborhoods and a relative absence of chain stores and restaurants and malls. Buffalo was real—as real as anything can be for a person who drinks deeply of Baudrillard and the Frankfurt School.

Piccone and Jacoby were also real. Perhaps you become this way when you are locked out of academia. Others (apologists for academia) blame their marginality on their unvarnished attitudes. After his mid-1980s talks, I tried to persuade a senior academic administrator at Buffalo to offer Jacoby employment. He read Last Intellectuals and sniffed that it would unfair to tempt him with academic employment.

I loved early Telos because it was a journal of no illusions. It was unashamedly political, European, heterodox. It didn't seek to be prosaic or professional. I now realize that Telos was a Buffalo journal—a journal of no illusions. Piccone couldn't have imagined that he would become famous or get rich editing and writing work on phenomenological Marxism. Jacoby must have seen the handwriting on the wall as he composed his work for the journal and later wrote Social Amnesia, a brilliant work of sheer iconoclasm.

Jacoby would have believed that Telos could be iconoclastic precisely because it was independent, unbound to a suffocating institution or professional association. Independence affords distance and hence perspective. Most of the original Frankfurt School members, although bourgeois in their background and sensibilities, had very little institutional support. They did not live on Easy Street or in Tenure Tract, even though some of them ended their careers with academic appointments. Telos in this sense was a vehicle of public intellectuality, although Jacoby intends that to include the ability or willingness to write sentences that could be understood by general, not only academic, readers. In this sense, his Last Intellectuals was self-criticism, indicting his own Adornoian phase for its cryptic formulations. I'm not sure that one cannot be Adorno-like and also a public intellectual if by the latter we are referring less to writing style than to one's grounding in a public, and willingness to address vital public issues.

The early Telos guys were radicals—digging at the roots of institutional philosophy and also embracing much of the New Left project. This is not to ignore their ambivalence about the counterculture and the Weatherman phases. Piccone and his brethren derived from European Marxism and, like the Frankfurt School during the late sixties,

must have been highly ambivalent about the direction of Weatherman, the Panthers, the drug culture. As Marcuse argued in Counterrevolution and Revolt, the late-sixties radicals were not radical enough, insufficiently grounded in European left theories and too spontaneist. Early Telos sought to be the theoretical self-consciousness of the New Left, although much of the early issues and for that matter even some of the later issues did not comment directly on topical events or trends but approached the world through textual explication and a kind of grand theorizing. Piccone's "Phenomenological Marxism" could be read as a companion piece to Marcuse's 1969 Essay on Liberation which attempted to ground radical New Left change, via situationism, in the lived experience of the sixties "new sensibility."

Digging at the roots for early Telos meant digging down to the person and her everyday life. It also meant going back to the original European sources, which had been suppressed by Anglo-American analytic philosophy. Much of Telos was a translation project—translating other languages into English and then translating complicated concepts for uninitiated readers. This was why Telos mattered so much to a whole generation of post-1960s graduate students who were leaving the moribund New Left for academia and trying to stay in touch with the transformational politics of the sixties. We were political radicals somewhat disenchanted with late-1960s politics as well as with mainstream philosophy and social theory. Returning to Europe for intellectual rejuvenation meant sense in that context.

Although Piccone started from academic philosophy and Jacoby from academic history, they and virtually all of the Telos writers and many readers were multi-disciplinary. They were intellectuals, difficult to hem in. Piccone worked in a sociology department at Wash U, which may have been one of his problems, given the reigning positivism of the time in U.S. sociology. Telos crossed boundaries in the same way that Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and the Frankfurt School crossed boundaries; disciplines, with their vouchsafed methodologies and limited topics, were disciplining. All of us viewed ourselves as critical social theorists (see Agger 2007) not moored to disciplines and departments traditionally defined.

This was a strength and a weakness. It helped us read and write globally, but it prevented many of us from earning a living. Piccone and Jacoby were extreme examples—guys who couldn't or wouldn't hold down tenure-track jobs. Everyone knew that this was a cruel joke; they were 'better' in narrow terms of academic productivism than almost everyone else. But people like us were not likely to finish first in job searches or secure enough votes from tenure committees. We were out of bounds and out of step with the growing professionalism and the narrowing divisions of academic labor in post-sixties American universities. This is precisely Jacoby's point in Last Intellectuals, a book that is widely read but frequently condemned by ex-sixties radicals offended by Jacoby's implication that they have become professional and not public intellectuals.

In evaluating Telos's lasting impact, it is a mistake to ignore the journal's institutional independence or the marginal careers of many of its authors, from the top down. Uneven academic careers were the price paid for independence. Those of us among the Telos generation who were lucky enough to have tenured academic jobs are widely dispersed through the hinterlands of American higher education, in the Arlingtons and Blacksburgs and not the Berkeleys or Ann Arbors. Of course, paying the bills is what matters. And in the Internet age, it matters little where one offices. Finally, being off the beaten path is a safe bet, allowing one to avoid the nuclear first strikes from established academics in the major institutional power centers who jealously defend their disciplines' scope and method.

As I have been saying, early Telos brought attention to the lifeworld (Piccone) and to the decline of discourse (Jacoby). Academia is everyday life, too. Within it, power is transacted through the nucleic language games of publishing, teaching, conferencing, editing. Discourse has declined in Fast Capitalism for reasons that Jacoby and I (Agger 1990) have explored: the decline of independent bookstores; the demise of heroic literary individualism and independence; the electronic media; academic professionalization; the commodification of publishing; sheer failure of nerve. Telos was a non-traditional intellectual lifeworld in which what Habermas calls the power of the strongest argument held sway. Piccone spoke truth to power, and heard truth, too. The no-bullshit guys and women involved in Telos were opposed to hierarchy, as most of the New Left was. One's letterhead mattered less than the quality of one's writing and the incisiveness of one's critique. Indeed, I often thought that institutional and personal prestige varied inversely with intellectual rigor and risk-taking. Only the conformists establish successful careers, as Mills (1959) noted in The Sociological Imagination.

And so I read early Telos as a New Left project, attentive to 'everyday life' in general and to intellectual everyday lives in particular. I also read early Telos as a counterforce to the post-sixties bureaucratization and professionalization of American academic life, which has proceeded unchecked. The Reagan and Thatcher years have fundamentally

changed the relationship between the state and universities, with an academic capitalism both abetting the state through applied research and turning academic researchers into paying customers responsible for funding their own salaries through grants. As Telos ripened through the years, its relentless independence and anti-bureaucratic ethos stood in ever-starker contrast to the privatization and professionalization of academic life. Indeed, Telos, although widely known, is not much of a factor in the lifeworlds of most academics. It is not refereed in the usual sense; it is not supported by a professional association's dues; its political project is out of step with the times.

The legacy of Telos, to me, is both personal and generational. It helped me become who and what I am, and it affected others like me who were foot soldiers in the New Left and who decamped to universities after the civil rights movement and Vietnam war ended. It put everyday life on the agenda, and it helped us think about the relationship between our own writing and larger societal trends. Telos tried to reverse the tendency of the 'rate of intelligence' to decline as it provided a model of intellectual engagement nearly totally missing from mainstream academia.

Although I was never a Telos insider, only knowing Piccone for a short time and publishing merely one review in it, I considered myself to be a fellow traveler. Perhaps because I was never on the inside in the beginning, I was not disaffected by Paul's later turn and the journal's changing intellectual priorities such as the interest in the work of Carl Schmitt. These never struck me as betrayals because I was never on board with any Telos orthodoxy. I'm sure that Telos had its share of interpersonal politics. But these politics surely pale by comparison to the intensity of departmental politics in mainstream academia, where people hate, envy and resent each other.

Eventually, I and Tim Luke started our own electronic journal, Fast Capitalism (www.fastcapitalism.com), which, I'm sure we both understand, is our version of Telos. I doubt that either of us would have conceived this without having had Telos as our example. Indeed, one of the proudest moments of my intellectual life is to publish this special issue/book on the legacy of Telos in a collaboration between Fast Capitalism and Telos Press. This is a closing of the circle that opened for me when I got my hands on the first issues of Telos back in Toronto and then moved to Buffalo, where it all began. I'll never lose those issues, nor forget their imprint on me.