Optimism of intellect

A conversation with David Marcus

David Marcus, Roman Léandre Schmidt
30 January 2015

Thanks to a new wave of small intellectual magazines, an infectious buzz has returned to public debate in the United States. Roman Schmidt talks to David Marcus who, as a new editor at Dissent, is well placed to provide the lowdown what's driving this genuinely critical movement.

Roman Schmidt: A few years ago, it seemed like the genre of the American intellectual journal was to going to die, slowly and unnoticed, followed by a smaller and smaller flock whose average age gradually approached that of one of their most celebrated shepherds, Bob Silvers, now 84 and the editor of The New York Review of Books. But not so. In the past decade, a whole new set of journals has emerged, and all of them seem interested in establishing a space for critical debate outside of academia. n+1 just celebrated its 10th anniversary, which makes it (and its editors) oldies among the young crowd of the L.A. Review of Books, The New Inquiry, Triple Canopy and Jacobin. It would probably be too bold to say that people roam the book stores, waiting to see who’s on the cover of n+1 the way they did for Les Temps Modernes in 1950s Paris or for Kursbuch during the German student movement. But it definitely has become something again to publish “little magazines”. Dissent, a flagship of postwar democratic socialism, appears to also be a part of this resurgence – to the point in which they appointed someone from this younger generation co-editor. What has happened?

David Marcus: Well, I can’t explain the perhaps foolhardy reasons why Michael Kazin and the rest of the Dissenters asked me to become co-editor. But I do think you’re right that there is a renaissance of American little magazines right now. One could point to economic and sociological reasons. Jobs and writing opportunities at older intellectual magazines – ones with large circulations like the New York Review, The American Prospect and the New Republic – seemed to all but disappear after the crash of 2008. And I think a new cohort of intellectual journalists and critics – many of whom were to the left of these magazines anyway – felt they had to create new venues for their writing.

But there seem to be political reasons as well. Edmund Wilson once observed that the best political novels – novels like Dostoevsky’s The Possessed or Conrad’s The Secret
Agent – come after moments of failed liberalization. It’s the disappointment with institutional politics that leads novelists to examine radical politics. The same can be said of the intellectual Left; it thrives when more formal sites for political action seem to wane.

RS: And you see these new little magazines as a product of this disappointment?

DM: Yeah, I mean there’s been a lot of bad politics to go around the past decade and a half – first, with the Bush years; then, with the collapse of the economy; and now, with Obama’s tenure. It’s not that the intellectual Left has turned inward. We all still vote and worry about midterm elections. It’s just that we have come to realize that meaningful left-wing politics - at least, today - can only happen outside formal politics: in extra-parliamentary movements, in local labour activism and publicity campaigns, and, yes, in little magazines. This seems especially true in a moment after the Citizens United decision, when electoral politics seem to hinge so heavily on money and in which Democrats and Republicans are forced to compete for corporate sponsorship. One of the Left’s roles right now is to provide mainstream liberals their language of opposition – something little magazines like *Dissent*, *n+1* and *Jacobin* have always been good at doing.

RS: And yet at the same time, these magazines – the political ones like *Dissent* or *Jacobin* but also the more literary inclined like *n+1* – depend, as you point out, on their historical circumstances to clarify their role. This makes me think of the link between *Criticism and Crisis* as Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht would have called their journal had it come to pass in the early 1930s and in a moment of political crisis. In the current situation, it seems that the Occupy movement may have played a role in revitalizing many of the little magazines in the United States.

DM: Occupy certainly was an important moment for many people on the Left. There’s been a lot of recent talk about the failure of Occupy to achieve any longstanding gains. But I think one of its primary achievements was the way it not only mobilized a new generation of activists and writers but also socialized them. *n+1, Jacobin, New Inquiry* all were around before 2011; but they became, I think, something more as a result of those heady two months when New York was a cauldron of political organization and public conversation. I also think experiencing the aftermath of the 2008 crash was an eye-opening experience for many young people. All of a sudden Marxist and other more structuralist critiques of inequality began to take on a new currency in the United States.

RS: So how would you describe the current journal scene? Who’s who? Who does what?

DM: There is a really nice amount of political variety among the little magazines. *Jacobin* is probably the most Marxist and most committed to a kind of Second International or Popular Front programme. *n+1* is the most literary and engaged in Frankfurt School-inspired cultural analysis, though they also have recently been running a lot of smart radical feminist criticism. *The New Inquiry* is maybe the hardest to pin down – which I think is one of its many strengths – but some of its writers seem to lean toward anarchism and other non-socialist varieties of cultural and political radicalism.

*Dissent* is probably the most ecumenical politically. In part, this is because we’ve been around a lot longer. We are home to young and old feminists, extra-parliamentary
socialists and left-wing Democrats, committed trade unionists and reconstructed Marxists. What I think is held in common for the Dissent crowd is a commitment to both radical democratic and socialist concerns. This has caused our cultural and political criticism to often produce some rather intriguing syntheses. For example, several of our younger editors – people like Sarah Leonard, Sarah Jaffe and Madeleine Schwartz – have combined a radical feminist perspective with more Marx-inspired critiques of precarious labour and the intern economy; others, like Michael Walzer, have espoused distinctive visions of democratic socialism that draw as much from John Dewey as from Marx.

RS: And all of the magazines get along?

DM: I think so. There is some jockeying for position and certainly differences in political style and substance, but it seems to me that we’re all beneficiaries of the same larger political community. We all draw our writers from the same pool. We all go to each other’s launch parties and readings. When I first got to New York, back in 2006, being on the Left was a pretty dreary place to be as a young person. Now it’s fun.

RS: European socialism, at its best, seems to be about “making the petrified relations dance”, as Marx famously had it. But it doesn’t really seem to be about having fun while doing it. Or at least not to talk about it for fear of compromising your credibility. One of the more promising aspects of the recent renaissance of the intellectual journals, here in the United States, may be that at least people seem to enjoy what they are doing – the work of critique. One can sense a certain minimum of solidarity among authors and various journal-makers. I don’t mean to say that people are happy with their lives and with what they are seeing, but there is a certain assertiveness, a voice that is very different from the fatalism of the French intellectual left or the coyness of Germans to break with the Merkel consensus.

DM: Michael Walzer has always called us the “worried Left”. And I think this is still true. After all, there’s a lot to worry about: state violence, at home and abroad, an overreaching executive and the new security state, the breakdown of the Middle East, growing inequality. But I think as of late the younger divisions of the worried Left have taken on a more exuberant air. There is a certain assertiveness to our voices. This is perhaps more pronounced in places like Jacobin and the New Inquiry. But it’s infectious. These days, it seems like what we need is an optimism of intellect as well as one of will.

RS: When we talk about the current state of journal-making in America, we shouldn’t forget to touch on the subject of support infrastructure and money. It seems to me that several hallmark intellectual journals of the past 30 years – the later Partisan Review, Social Text, Constellations, Raritan, the recently launched Humanity – have operated as “academic journals in disguise”, funded by benevolent university departments. This doesn’t seem to be the case of the new wave of intellectual magazines. Can you say something about your support mechanisms and funding?

DM: You mean, how we survive? Well, to be honest, sometimes I wonder as well. Dissent is, as Michael Walzer has always called it, a mom-and-pop operation. There’s no trade union or political party subsidizing us. And the till seems to almost always be about to go empty. I suspect this is true for our younger sister little magazines as well. In decades past, we had a kind of parasitic relationship to the academy, in which our editors and
writers had day jobs as professors and then moonlit their editing and writing. This was true with the first generation of *Dissent* editors – people like Irving Howe and Lew Coser – and the second generation of editors – people like both of the Michaels. Today, things are a bit different. The academic labour market is pretty saturated and the few jobs that are out there are often reserved for people doing pretty highly specialized work.

I don’t think this is all bad. It has turned young academics – and I guess, I should count myself among them – toward more public and political matters: graduate and adjunct organizing, local protest movements, writing for more public venues and with less regard for an academic career. In fact, I would hazard to say that some of today’s best critics – people like Christine Smallwood, Nikil Saval, Elif Batuman – are all individuals who, after getting their PhDs, chose to make a career out of big and little magazine writing.

But it has meant there is a pretty felt sense of precarity out there – for writers and for magazines. *Dissent*, *n+1*, *The New Inquiry* all need to find other ways to make ends meet. We have a staff of three and a half – all paid and with health insurance – and an office. We pay our writers and interns and need lots of coffee. We cover around half of our expenses from the “thing-in-itself”; the rest comes from other sources – subsidiary rights, single issues sales, databases like Project Muse, and donations, which truth be told makes me a bit nervous because we don’t have that many rich friends. Michael Kazin has always observed that we have a budget the size of a law professor’s salary. Well, my hope is that a bunch of those left-leaning tenured law professors begin to start donating.

**RS:** Indeed, there is only so much you can fund through subs and launch parties… Is this maybe the limit of the otherwise exciting situation you pointed out earlier? True, there is now a young generation of highly talented writers that has broken from high circulation outlets. Of course, this is good for little magazines. But it also means that these authors now lack the resources to do reported pieces. Speaking about optimism of will and intellect, shouldn’t we start thinking more seriously about the possibilities for new “mid-sized” intellectual magazines in the United States and Europe?

**DM:** This would be wonderful but I am a bit sceptical about its possibilities. The print magazine market in America today seems so segmented – to the point, where magazines like *The American Prospect*, *The New Republic* and *Harpers* are all struggling to stay afloat and stay mid-sized. Sure, if given the resources, a magazine like *Dissent* or *n+1* could drive subs up with expensive direct-mail campaigns – the type of campaigns that subsidize the circulation numbers at these and almost every other “big magazine”. But I wouldn’t do this just so that we could end up more like them. Little magazines, I think, have a unique place in American culture. From *The Dial* on, they have centred their energies on criticism. This is, I think, their most effective medium – this slow and hard boring of holes, of slowly pushing public discourse to the Left. You saw something like this happen back in 2011 during Occupy, when the complaints about the 99% versus the 1% began to creep into speeches by mainstream liberals. And I think we’ll probably see a similar thing happen as an outcome of the protest movement emerging around police brutality and racism. Again, I don’t see this as hunkering down but the slow, steady oppositional work that has always been the purview of a Left committed to enacting social change through democratic means. Our hope is that one day our ideas trickle up.

**Published 30 January 2015**