

Guest editorial

Magical Marxism

One of the weirdest of all the weird scenes that cram Gabriel García Márquez's great raving masterpiece, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, is the insomnia plague that afflicts inhabitants of his supernatural town Macondo. The insomnia plague meant nobody could sleep, nor, when the plague struck, did anybody ever need to sleep. Everyone is happy in this jetlagged, hallucinogenic state and no one is alarmed because there was always so much work to do and barely enough time to do it. The people of Macondo traipse about busying themselves with all sorts of inane activity and converse endlessly with each other, fidgeting around and telling the same old jokes over and over again, jokes that nobody seems to remember had already been told many times over, sometimes just minutes ago. So it goes for a while, until there are a few in Macondo who slowly begin to yearn for sleep again. Not so much because they need sleep, nor out of fatigue: more from a desperate nostalgia for dreams. They miss the power of dreams, together with the ability to remember the past. And yet, with the insomnia plague, very slowly, bit by bit, ever so progressively and subtly, you forget about dreaming and, in the end, the expert insomniac loses his or her memory entirely. All that pervades is an eternal present, a contaminated present, a disguised illness, a repressive situation accepted as a perfectly natural reality, as the only reality.

It's over forty years since *One Hundred Years of Solitude* debuted in bookstores and became a dazzling international bestseller, a Latin American *Don Quixote*, helping kick-start a new literary genre that quickly bore the name "Magical Realism". Magical Realism draws its artistic sustenance directly from reality, yet converts this often-stark reality into fantasy, into fantastic and phantasmal subjective visions that soon become more real than objective reality itself. In a sense, these visions become lies that bizarrely tell the truth, that invent new truths, that lay bare truths we somehow relate to, almost instinctively, almost without being able to really see them. Indeed, few Magical Realist truths are measurable or quantifiable. Who could believe that people are born with tails or are followed around by dainty yellow butterflies? And who levitates up to heaven or habitually lives to well over a hundred?

The insomnia plague is one such magical construct invented in the mind of a master storyteller. But it's an invention that seems to capture with startling exactitude a reality we ourselves have been living out for almost two decades now. In Macondo the insomnia plague was transmitted by mouth, by contaminated food and drink, and there's a sense in which processed food is doing the same today, deadening our ability to remember where anything comes from, offering us instant salty and sugary stimulation that maintains us in a state of soporific awakensness. Meanwhile, mass media disinformation has us almost irrevocably sink into a quicksand of forgetfulness, turning us into decrepit people well before we've grown old, into people who no longer remember even the recent past or have any capacity to see beyond what immediately is, what exists right in front of our noses, often on some banal, two-dimensional, high-tech screen.

To be sure, we've always had our own José Arcadio Buendias and Aureliano Buendias who, inspired by strange gypsies, have been hell bent on staving off the insomnia plague. So, too, have we had some who have upheld the power of dreams, dreams of a new future, new Macondos arising out of damp swampland, who have glimpsed buried treasure in long-forgotten sunken galleons. Nonetheless, the insomnia

plague has been persistent and recalcitrant and perhaps it's only now, only quite recently, in this crisis-ridden age, when the plague is beginning to wear off, when, in fact, we're prepared to fight against our memory loss and our inability to dream of the future. Perhaps our forty-year-old solitude is giving way, and we're on the cusp of a new era in which people remember and even dream again, and maybe, just maybe, this era might be a magical one?

It's in this context that Magical Marxism comes into its own, stakes out the contours of a new, imaginative, dream-like reality, one that becomes true. A materialist fantasy, a fantastic materialism, a Marxism that still hears voices from the past while uttering sighs of disenchantment with the present; yet, above all, affirms the most tenacious nostalgia for dreams of the future, for offsetting the solitude of the wide-awake world. Here Magical Marxism, like Magical Realism, doesn't so much abandon materialism as move on from it, shift gears, accelerate from its moorings to advocate more free-floating and ethereal political visions, more phantasmal and mystical radical ideas, new idealist tools that become fresh building blocks for a more advanced realism.⁽¹⁾ With Magical Marxism, imagination is ahead of the formalist game; it drafts a rawer, positive conception of life that ups the ante of mere critique and analysis, of yet another research project and study showing how crappy and messed up our world is, how exploitative and degenerative its ruling class, how grotesque its economic system. All this can surely be taken as given nowadays, all that gloom and oppression and pathos we know to be the world, our everyday world.

Magical Marxism would embrace the realm of the normative, the utopian, the heady subcontinent of dream, and would take to flight and fight like a latterday Colonel Aureliano Buendia—who, remember, asserted to the death, with a supernatural lucidity, a magical liberal cause. Thus, the moment is now ripe for Marxism to get magical, to invent and to change—to invent change, including a change within itself. Marxism has prodigious magical powers to invent, to create its own values and ethics—ethics higher, better and more durable than the hollow values that insist upon the sacrosanctity of free-market individualism. Marxism, in short, has at its disposal the power of struggle, the power of struggling to invent what Marx (1963, page 18), in *The 18th Brumaire*, deemed a new “poetry of the future”.

The emphasis on *poetry* is a crucial one, not least because Magical Marxism's best adherents are perhaps lyric poets, people who don't necessarily write poetry but who somehow lead *poetic lives*, who literally *become-poets*, as Deleuze might have said, who internalize powerful feelings and poetic values, spontaneous values with no holds barred. The key point here is that Marxists make life a poem, adopt a creative attitude towards living.⁽²⁾ Poetry, accordingly, becomes something ontological for Magical Marxists, a state of Being-in-the-world, the invention of life and the shrugging off of tyrannical forces that wield over that life. Poetic lives destabilize accepted notions of order and respectability, of cool rationality and restraint. Magical Marxism would have no restraint and would proclaim what André Breton and the Surrealists proclaimed in the 1920s: the power of absolute nonconformity, of glorious irresponsibility, of marvelous unreality. Plato, that ancient Greek ideologue, was the first to recognize

⁽¹⁾ Perhaps we ought to add here “magical urbanism”, Mike Davis's (2000) sister concept, which fuses barbarism with sensual dreams, grittiest fact with wildest fantasy in its affirmation of Latinos inventing a more exuberant American urban culture and feistier political realism (cf Merrifield, 2000).

⁽²⁾ In *Living to Tell the Tale*, the first volume of García Márquez's memoirs, he poses a related question: why is a thinker like Frederick Engels only taught as a boring political-economist rather than inspiring lyric poet? García Márquez refers to Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, and suggests that it's really an “epic poem of a beautiful human adventure” (García Márquez, 2003, page 192).

the danger of dreamy poets in our midst, disrupting the dignified harmony of a “naturally ordered” society. In Book Ten of *The Republic* (1935 edition) he rightly reminds us how poets arouse the part of the spirit that destroys good reason, implanting an “evil constitution in the soul of each individual”, terribly debilitating if it reaches audiences in the public square, since there it can incite mass disorder and civic disobedience. What are basic ingredients for Magical Marxists—desire, dream, and pleasure—thus have no place in any Platonic republic: “If you receive the pleasure-seasoned Muse of song and epic, pleasure and pain will be kings in your city instead of law” (pages 305–306).

Magical Marxist poetry would find its muse in a strange mélange of nighttime and daylight, of fire and brimstone, basking in bright sunshine while disappearing into dark, brooding shadows. The Magical Marxist tradition perhaps already has a few early pioneers and ambassadors: take those mystical nomads Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin, and the Faustian duo Henri Lefebvre and Guy Debord. In the 1930s, as Nazi flames engulfed continental Europe, Bloch undertook a mammoth study of that most Magical Marxist spirit, perhaps our most creative and indefatigable political impulse: *the principle of hope* (Bloch, 1995). In our own war-torn times, Bloch bequeaths us “wishful images” of the past and the future, and a lot of what he wrote sounds like a great Homeric epic poem, a delirious siesta in a Márquezian hammock, full of Eldorados and Edens, of Münchhausen Macondos from a distant planet we call the earth-to-come, the one we’ve never yet had. (Bloch loved to juggle with utopian ideas of the “Not-Yet-Conscious”.) Bloch’s magical mystery tour emphasizes invention, riding the sorceress’s broomstick, engineering new concepts rather than discovering them, inventing a new world in which the “anticipatory element” guarantees its eventual realization. Ditto Benjamin (1979), for whom there was nothing as magical as the “profane illumination”, as thinking about a new ideal, as dreaming in an ecstatically sober state; a “dialectical fairytale”, Benjamin called it, something which disrupts “sclerotic ideals of freedom” and pushes the poetic life to its utmost limits of possibility—which is to say, towards a *poetic politics*.

Lefebvre, for his part, revels in a poetic politics of the butterfly, and, like García Márquez’s apprentice mechanic Mauricio Babilonia, seemed to be followed all his life by butterflies. As a wayward youth, he collected butterflies in Pyrenean meadows; as an apprentice dreamer he came to their rescue. Butterflies are as flighty and frivolous as Lefebvre himself, so light and breezy as to float away, to flit from flower to flower, to pollinate and come alive in mid-summer. Lefebvre (1959, page 428) recalls one incident from his military service in 1926, out on an early summer morning’s infantry exercise:

“I glimpsed ten steps ahead of me, at the side of the lane, a lovely butterfly whose rose wings were damp; this prevented him from flying. I hastened myself, took him as delicately as possible and placed him down on the embankment.”

Three seconds later, a corporal sticks a rifle butt in Henri’s back. The captain on horseback shouts: “*Chasseur Lefebvre!* 8 days in police detention.” “This lad announces himself as a dangerous subversive element ... a soft dreamer, a savior of butterflies ... an intellectual anarchist ...”⁽³⁾

⁽³⁾ Lefebvre’s Magical Marxist poetry is even more evident in the recent *Le Coeur Ouvert* [The open heart] (2007), a fascinating collection of Lefebvrian verse dating from the Stalinist 1950s, prefaced by his wife Catherine and published by the Cercle Historique de l’Arrière, a Navarrenx-based historical society. Included in the text is also a cosmic, almost-New-Age photo of Lefebvre himself, musing at his desk, reproduced from a painting by Georges Lassalle.

And then, on the other hand, comes Gilles Debord, the prince of darkness, the owl of Minerva, whose self-knowledge and Marxist powers came only at the fall of dusk. “In the midwinter nights of 1988, in Paris’s Square des Missions Étrangères”, as Debord drafted his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*,

“an owl would obstinately repeat his calls... And this unusual run of encounters with the bird of Minerva, its air of surprise and indignation, did not in the least seem to constitute an allusion to the imprudent conduct or various aberrations of my life” (Debord, 1991, page 51).

Debord liked owls and seemed to identify himself with them. Their secrecy, their mysterious wisdom, their nocturnal qualities, their melancholy, their consecration by Hegel, all somehow inspired him as he sat and drank in a house that opened directly out onto the Milky Way.

The spirit of the night owl and wandering butterfly, of the mystic and the nomad, negate and create, are both pessimistic and optimistic, the moon and the sun; they’re sudden, profane illuminations that swirl in the debris of the storm of progress. In their dialectical antithesis they express the constructive powers of Magical Marxism itself, wish-fulfillments rising out of the ruins of bourgeois crises and breakdowns—a radiant utopia based upon a rotten capitalist dystopia. “What acceptable paradise can we extract from so many ruins”, an adolescent Debord once asked, “without falling into them?” (2004, page 57). Like García Márquez, Lefebvre thrived in the sunshine, from heat, from tropical primary colors. He relished the dawn of a new day just as Debord anticipated the dusk, the security of nightfall. Debord knew that banishing the nocturnal underworld, the subconscious continent of the dream, is to dilute the inventive potion of Magical Marxism. Ruling powers always want to send away darkness, to condemn it as ‘evil’, as an axis of evil, or to flood it with artificial light and climatized air. But to forget natural light, to ignore the butterfly, the will-o’-the-wisp, to downplay frivolity and warmth and desire, is to condemn the Marxist life-spirit, is to deny its ability to create and engineer photosynthesis, and to concoct a Magical Marxism and genuine community of Magical Marxists.

This community of Magical Marxists would struggle for a *terra nova*, for a magical geography, perhaps even for a Magical Geography; one gets the impression that pockets of light are beginning to spring up in different parts of the globe out of this collective struggle, that people are coming together in their desire to create new concepts about how to live and function in our neo-Dark Age. And already we are glimpsing the appearance of new ‘undergrounds’, which did exist in the Dark Ages of yesteryear, new “reserves”, as the mystical Surrealist André Gregory puts it in the film *My Dinner with André*, “islands of safety where history can be remembered and the human being can continue to dream and function.”⁽⁴⁾ “You see”, explains Gregory (Shawn and Gregory, 1981, page 95),

“I keep thinking that we need a new language, a language of the heart, a language where language isn’t needed—some kind of language between people that is a new kind of poetry, that is the poetry of the dancing bee, that tells us where the honey is. And I think that in order to create that language we’re going to have to learn how you can go through a looking-glass into another kind of perception, in which you have that sense of being united to all things, and suddenly you understand everything.”

⁽⁴⁾ Louis Malle’s brilliantly intelligent cinematic set piece has a romantic dreamer and realist skeptic dialogue over dinner in a New York restaurant. The screenplay is available in book form and warrants close scrutiny. See Wallace Shawn and André Gregory (1981).

Out of a trinity of hope, imagination, and determination, new looking-glass perceptions are emerging and merging, forging alternative lingua francas amongst men and woman—amongst ordinary men and women—who have had enough with what the labor market and supermarket offer them, and they're achieving amazing things in lonely, abandoned rural spaces as well as in teeming, overpriced urban places, reappropriating and rebuilding worn-out properties, inventing life anew sometimes from breezeblock and out of the decaying jetsam of everyday life. Practical mobilization is invariably inspired by dream, by the normative desire for something different, something more autonomous, beyond the mainstream, outside the repressive domain of law and order and capitalist consumerism.

New looking-glass perceptions are ubiquitous in France's Auvergne region, where ecocommunities and velvet undergrounds, pioneered by smart young people tellingly class-conscious and universally anticapitalist, have staked out social change from the bottom upwards, rehabbing ancient cottages and farms, growing their own food, reenergizing old bars and restaurants, and participating in community affairs. In many instances they have changed traditional community affairs by transforming the whole political geography of the commune, giving it a modern leftwing bent, as well as a convivial atmosphere of resistance.⁽⁵⁾ Their unwitting Marxist stance is magical to the degree that it is fed up with merely interpreting the world, that it is global in its localism, practical in its defiance of the world market, and poetic in its yearnings for the future. Meanwhile, these *altermondialistes* (rather than *antimondialistes*) make the imaginative leap from the narrow confines of a 'political' revolution that Marx critiqued to the broader 'social' revolution that he endorsed.

Scholars and theoreticians have never really taken seriously the role of the magical.⁽⁶⁾ Over the years we have let the spirit of Descartes crush that of Rabelais. Perhaps more than ever do we need a new magic potion for stirring up our concepts, for fermenting our radical moonshine, for making us practically intoxicated. We need the dream-like again, and the desire to dream in our political and intellectual life. We need a new Macondo of the mind, a new poetry of the dancing bee. We need, in a nutshell, "to call upon the magician", as Caribbean Marxist Aimé Césaire (1996, page 122) suggested in 1944, to ensure a "great mad sweep of renewal". "True civilizations," Césaire said (pages 119–120), "are poetic shocks: the shock of the stars, of the sun, the plant, the animal, the shock of the round globe, of the rain, of the light, the shock of life, the shock of death."

⁽⁵⁾ In the village of Tarnac, in the neighboring Limousin region, this past November the repressive arm of Sarkozy's government cracked down on 'subversives' who have transformed a moribund locality into a livable community, equipping it with a new bar, restaurant, cinema, and mobile library: "FUN IS A VITAL NEED!" "LESS POSSESSIONS, MORE CONNECTIONS!" are two of its denizens' clarion calls. "Rural village or terrorist hub?" wondered *The Guardian* (3 January 2009), as riot police wearing balaclavas and armed to the teeth made a sweeping dawn raid on the sleepy village, amid barking dogs, nonplussed goats, and terrified chickens, arresting nine humans. Accused of sabotaging a French train, as well as illicit political activity, the so-called Tarnac Nine, including a Swiss sitcom actor, two university graduates, and a distinguished clarinetist, now face terrorist charges in a Paris court.

⁽⁶⁾ One exception within more orthodox Marxist camps came in the journal *Historical Materialism*, which once devoted a special edition to fantasy. Although there is no mention of magic or Magical Realism, included are essays on utopianism and film, the absurd, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Rabelais, Burroughs, and Adorno, and Benjamin's 'magical' urbanism. China Miéville's (2002) introduction attempts to convince a loyal cadre why Marxists should care about the fantastic and encourages them to conjure a bit more with their concepts and politics. Despite predictable heckles, Miéville notes (page 48): "no matter how commodified and domesticated the fantastic in its various forms might be, we need fantasy to think about the world, and to change it."

Politics more than anything else needs the magical touch of dream and desire, needs the shock of the poetic; left to professional career politicians, the political is always destined to feel stifled and lifeless and *apolitical*; it's always destined to induce a jetlagged, deadening insomnia, just as Fred Engels does in the hands of those earnest political-economists—assuming there are any still about who read Engels. One wonders if we can ever create in life the magic of the pages of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or the magical everyday of that mad dystopic utopia Macondo? Returning to the utopian question years later, in 1982, at his Nobel lecture, García Márquez had this to say to those of us who assume that our solitude is preordained and forever:

“we, the inventors of tales, who will believe anything, feel entitled to believe that it is not yet too late to engage in the creation of a new and sweeping utopia of life, where no one will be able to decide for others how they die, where love will prove true and happiness be possible, and where peoples condemned to one hundred years of solitude will have, at last and forever, a second opportunity on earth.”

As our second millennium insomnia plague begins to dissipate, this is one dream-state I'd happily toast and cradle in my sleep—in a hammock, somewhere warm and sunny, amid the yellow butterflies and little gold fishes ...

Andy Merrifield,
andy.merrifield@aliceadsl.fr

Acknowledgements. A big thanks to Stuart Elden and his team of anonymous reviewers for making this piece better than it was in my hands alone.

References

- Benjamin W, 1979, “Surrealism: the last snapshot of the European intelligentsia”, in *One-way Street* (Verso, London) pp ...
- Bloch E, 1995 *The Principle of Hope* 3 volumes (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA)
- Césaire A, 1996, “Calling the magician: a few words for a Caribbean civilization,” in *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* Ed. M Richardson (Verso, London) pp ...
- Davis M, 2000 *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US Big City* (Verso, London)
- Debord G, 1991 *Panegyrique—Volume 1* (Verso, London)
- Debord G., 2004 *Le marquis de Sade a des yeux de fille* (Librairie Arthème Fayard, Paris)
- Lefebvre H, 1959 *La Somme et le Reste—Tome II* (La Nef de Paris, Paris)
- Lefebvre H, 2007 *Le Cœur Ouvert* (Cercle Historique de l'Arribère, Navarrenx)
- Márquez G G, 1978 *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Picador, London)
- Márquez G G, 1982, “The Solitude of Latin America”, Nobel Prize for Literature Lecture, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1982/marquez-lecture.html
- Márquez G G, 2003 *Living to Tell the Tale* (Alfred Knopf, New York)
- Marx K, 1963 *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (International Publishers, New York)
- Merrifield A, 2000, “Chronicle of a city foretold” *New Left Review* November/December, pp 155 – 160
- Miéville C, 2002, “Editorial introduction: Symposium on Marxism and fantasy” *Historical Materialism* 10(4) 39 – 49
- Plato, 1935 *The Republic* (Everyman Books, New York)
- Shawn W, Gregory A, 1981 *My Dinner with André* (Grove Press, New York)