**Modify Your Criticism, Please**

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Left-wing generationalism is on display on the pages of this month’s Jacobin as editor Peter Frase responds to Baffler contributor Thomas Frank’s criticism of the ethos of the Occupy movement.

The Baffler is a colorful journal of anti-neoliberal polemic that hit its stride in the 1990s after Frank founded it in the late ’80s. Critic, editor and historian John Summers recently revived the magazine under the aegis of MIT Press. Jacobin is one of the next generation’s theory-heavy attempts to update cultural criticism and deliver itself from beneath the heavy shadow of predecessors.

As is considered proper in polite society, before raising his gun, Frase takes pains to acknowledge his cultural and intellectual debt to The Baffler. Writing of the two book collections that came out of the magazine’s initial run, he gives a review that should make any committed dissident blush: “Clear-eyed, angry, and free of jargon, the essays in “Commodify Your Dissent” exposed the fatuity of “alternative” culture and its corporatized rebellion, while those in “Boob Jubilee” tackled a dominant neoliberal populism that praised the market as democracy’s purest form.” A trenchant response to the conventions of the age, Frase writes, The Baffler was a necessary stop on the evolutionary road that produced Jacobin, and whatever will follow.

But Frase’s praise for the magazine and its founding voice ends there.

In the latest issue of The Baffler, Frank was critical of Occupy Wall Street. The movement is precious to those who were involved, and although it has mostly disappeared from the public eye, it is still churning in classrooms, Brooklyn flats, editorial offices and low-income neighborhoods devastated by hurricanes. Those who continue to work to honor its goals are put off when middle-aged men with secure paychecks merely tally the group’s weaknesses in print.

Frase does not like Frank’s characterization of the movement, which says the use of impenetrable language and the group’s unwavering commitment to nothing-happens-till-we-all-agree democracy stand as testament to “the lazy, reflexive libertarianism that suffuses our idea of protest these days.”

“This demonstrates the limitations of the curmudgeonly politics that he pioneered with The Baffler,” Frase responds. OWS is composed mostly of disenfranchised young people who are trying to spark a widespread social recovery 30 years into the life of a society lulled into consumer confusion by neoliberalism. The agitators don’t know what they’re doing; they’re learning by doing. Their movements are awkward and some of their beliefs mistaken. Shouldn’t this be understood by Frank, a member of the old guard? “Here,” says Frase, “the laziness and reflexivity is Frank’s.

“Frank is unwilling to see the strains of thought in existing protest movements as raw material for something more effective, and treats them only as self-defeating dead ends,” Frase continues. “Perhaps this is why he seems to have no prospective vision whatsoever, beyond staging historical reenactments of the protest movements of the past. His essay ends by enjoining activists to ‘reenact Flint, Michigan, circa 1937,’ or even ‘Omaha, 1892.’ ”

—Posted by Alexander Reed Kelly.

Peter Frase at Jacobin:

The inability to empathize with the people who produced Occupy leads Frank to set himself up as a fun-loathing scold. He makes much of Slavoj Zizek’s injunction that Occupy needed to guard against falling in love with itself, because “carnivals come cheap.” The carnival is portrayed as a distraction from the real work of politics. But while the carnival was insufficient, it was not meaningless. The collective ecstasy of ows ’s “carnival” is something that needs to be part of the Left, even if it can’t be the whole of it. This is the point Audrea Lim makes in the last issue of Jacobin, and that Barbara Ehrenreich makes, about revolutionary joy more generally, in Dancing in the Streets.

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Tiffanie Tran

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