

Class, Race and Corporate Power

Volume 9 | Issue 2

Article 7

2021

Louis Proyect: a Fierce and Uncompromising Spirit

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Recommended Citation

St. Clair, Jeffrey (2021) "Louis Proyect: a Fierce and Uncompromising Spirit," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol9/iss2/7>

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Louis Proyect: a Fierce and Uncompromising Spirit

Abstract

This is a tribute to Louis Proyect by Jeffrey St. Clair, published originally in *Counterpunch*, August 30, 2021. Louis contributed film reviews to this journal, with his usual wit, flair and unadorned appreciation for works of art that have a political and artistic passion. We had the pleasure of conversing with Louis on social media. He will be missed.

Keywords

Louis Proyect

Cover Page Footnote

Jeffrey St. Clair is editor of "CounterPunch". His most recent books are "Bernie and the Sandernistas: Field Notes From a Failed Revolution" and "The Big Heat: Earth on the Brink" (with Joshua Frank).

Editor's Note: This is a tribute to Louis Proyect by Jeffrey St. Clair, published originally in *Counterpunch*, August 30, 2021. Louis contributed film reviews to this journal, with his usual wit, flair and unadorned appreciation for works of art that have a political and artistic passion. We had the pleasure of conversing with Louis on social media. He will be missed.



I knew it was coming, knew it could be any day or any hour. But the news of Lou Proyect's death still hit hard. Lou was my friend for nearly 30 years. He was combative, passionate, funny, acerbic, smart, tender to his friends and still totally smitten with his wife Mine. He consumed films, jazz & Scandnavian noir. He wore his Marxism on his sleeve, a people-oriented Marxism, outraged by injustice, not bound by the abstract restraints of pure theory.

Lou was a fighter and we had our fights over the years and I enjoyed most of them, even though he bloodied me up a couple of times. Usually they were fights about important things. Lou didn't tolerate "beliefs", he demanded ideas and he wanted proofs.

Alexander Cockburn used to tweak Lou mercilessly in his columns, as the last Trotskyist. And Lou took it good-naturedly. In part because he idolized Alex and admired his writing. In part because it meant that his ideas were important enough to be debated, even parodied, at that level. Lou had his passions, Syria, being one, which often put him on the wrong side of many doctrinaire anti-Imperialists. He had his reasons, some very personal ones, but he didn't flinch.

As a writer, I admired how much and how clearly Lou wrote. Many writers, especially on the Left, have adopted an ornate, even opaque, rhetorical style. That wasn't Lou. He valued clarity. And he worked hard at it. You would never mistake where Lou was coming from. That clarity of prose and ideas often made him an open target, especially by those who were made uncomfortable by his assertions.

Lou and I only met once in NYC and that briefly, though we talked often across the years and exchanged emails two or three times a day, until the cancer made him too weak. For years, I'd save a spot for Lou's Friday film column, trenchant reviews of independent and international films. I've watched a lot of films in my life, but Lou devoured them. He'd seen six or seven a week and write compellingly about most of them.

Lou went to Bard, a fact he brought up often in our talks, not for academic boasting but for the opportunity it gave him to brought jazz musicians to campus, another mutual passion that deepened our friendship.

He hated war and injustice and the perversions of history, the twisting of the record of events to suit political ideology. He wanted to see history straight, whether it was the Soviet Union under Stalinism or the Comanche under the murderous thugs who claimed Texas as their own.

There was a time when Louis stopped writing for CounterPunch. It happened after I gently suggested that he rewrite a particularly incendiary piece on Syria. In my own mind, I was thinking of the hostile reaction it was certain to spark from many CounterPunch readers. I convinced myself that I was making the editorial suggests to protect Lou from the anticipated incoming barrage. It was a bad call on my part. I should have let the arrows fly. Lou thrived on such interactions. So Lou decamped for a year, until I lured him back, saying CounterPunch had become dull and predictable without him. He consented, but said he'd stick to film reviews. I encouraged him to write about whatever he wanted and eventually he did.

Even on Syria, in pieces that sometimes got under my skin. But what's the point of only reading writers that you agree with? That's to surrender to a kind of intellectual narcissism. I like reading writers who can effectively challenge every assumption and bias that I've developed. I'm not talking about the professional contrarians like Christopher Hitchens, who devolved into a parody of his former self. But writers like Gore Vidal and Alex Cockburn, Edward Said and Ishmael Reed who could zero in on the soft spots of your argument and provoke you into coming up with

a better one or force you to abandon it all together. That's the mark of a good writer and a lively thinker. Lou was both.

Like Cockburn, Lou didn't want people to know he was sick. He didn't want that distraction from the work he wanted to do in the last months of his life. He was a revolutionary in spirit, who never surrendered to pessimism, even as his own life started to flicker. The work was to make our lives better, to ease the suffering, to end needless deaths, to value all life and defend it. Well done, pal.