

Unpacking My Library
By George Katsiaficas

Fro Alda, who loves books as much as I do

Today is January 23, 2016, my first-born's 31st birthday. Exactly one month ago, I arrived in Ocean Beach after leaving here 33 years ago and moving to Boston, where I had a distinguished career as a professor at Wentworth Institute of Technology. Having retired from my job with sufficient funds to move back to San Diego, I hired a moving company to transport what was left of my earthly possessions. After weeks of delay due to a broken axle in Kansas, a huge moving van finally arrived, delivering 5300 pounds of belongings to my door, more than half of which were books and bookcases, the remainder mainly papers and framed art.

The movers left after setting up my bookcases in the long hallway leading from my apartment entry door. I thought it would be an easy matter to unpack my books. Recalling with a smile Walter Benjamin's beloved essay, I happily began. A few exhausting days later, I had filled all my bookcases, 21 feet long by 7 feet high of them, but only a fraction of my books were unpacked. Fortunately, friends came to my assistance. In the process of unpacking and moving my boxes of books, I had developed a severe case of sciatica. David Zebra and Harold helped arrange the remaining boxes of books, creating a wall dividing my living room. As they effortlessly moved box after box, the barrier became so wide that I could not even get to my couch on the far wall.

The sheer quantity of books that I moved from Cambridge to Ocean Beach staggers my mind. And that does not include 700 books I donated to a university library in Guyana, the 475 books on Korea I donated to the Harvard's Yenching Library, or some 200 books on Vietnam I had put aside for the Vietnam vets center at UMass. I can still visualize the happy face of the person who came to pick up these books. As soon as he realized they were written by the "enemy" (members of the National Liberation Front in southern Vietnam and Foreign Languages Publishing House in Hanoi), he gasped and said "This is what we've been missing." My generosity even came to include my ex-wife, mother of my children, to whom I delivered several shelves of books about Palestine. In addition, I calmly gave at random many books to friends when they expressed interest in them or even when I saw their eyes light up as they encountered them – not to mention students who came to my office and found some source of

inspiration as they gazed at my collection. They left with smiles as they cradled their gifts. This society may be ridding itself of books, but there are still some of us holdouts who treasure them. Rather than hoarding them, keeping them in private, now is the time to share them, discuss their ideas, and inspire people to produce more.

Today, after Harold helped me assemble three new IKEA bookshelves—9 feet wide and 6 shelves high—I filled them quickly yet still, more than a few boxes remain unpacked. By now, you may have the impression that I have been overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of my books—and you would be right, although it would be more correct to say that the books possess me. My aching back has not yet returned to normal, and my life is still centered on completing the job of moving to San Diego one month to the day after I arrived. Some days ago I complained to one of my friends in Boston that although I had quit my job, I had less time than ever, in large part because I have not yet unpacked my library. And I thought I was going to have time—finally—to read many of the books I had not yet had the opportunity to enjoy.

Nonetheless as I gaze with wonder over my wonderful library (the only thing on earth that I missed as I circumnavigated planet earth twice from 2013 to 2015), I note that these books carry my experiences with them. Some of them were with me when I left Ocean Beach in 1983. They then accompanied me on my move to Boston and have returned with me. I'm think thinking particularly of several volumes by Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* and the unreadable *Philosophy of Modern Music*, both of which I stole from the bookstore at the University of California, San Diego. There is a story here. In 1974, I helped found a bookstore, the Left Bank, today a Starbucks on Newport Street in OB. We started the store as a communal enterprise with zero money, well next to zero money, in fact so close to zero money that it became my task to steal books from corporate bookstores to stock our shelves. Fortunately not all the books I put on display found willing buyers. These two remained behind, and I managed to keep them for myself. As I cradle Adorno in my hands, I remember with a smile how the workers at the university bookstore warned me, laden with more than half-a-dozen books hidden inside my clothes, that the police were coming to arrest me. They encouraged me to evacuate quickly, to avoid arrest, but also not to take all—only some—of their books so they would not continually have to reorder them.

On my next shelf, I spot my 19th-century edition of Hegel's *Philosophy of History*. Twice, I have enjoyed reading it slowly. I recall my

dilemma when I first discovered it in a used bookstore in San Diego. It was way over my price range. Although long since erased, the penciled price inside the cover still remains legible: \$6.50—an exorbitant sum for me in the 1970s. It would have been the easiest matter to conceal and take it, but my strong sense of ethics—only to take from corporate stores—held firm. I have never regretted spending the money on such a treasure.

A few books have even made trips with me from Berlin, where I lived from 1979 to 1981, to OB then to Boston and now back home to California. My five volumes of Rosa Luxemburg's *Collected Works* (unavailable in English) were successfully smuggled out of East Germany. My friend Reiner, with whom I had a standing arrangement to exchange books for blue jeans, then a scarce and valuable item in the East. The problem was to get my goods home. I could simply wear jeans and carry an extra pair or two in my suitcase, but getting books back across was a major endeavor. In his wisdom with border issues, Rainer had craftily inscribed them: "*zur Erinnerung an einen guten Freund, für eine beiderseitig gesehene Sache, um das Ziel des Sozialismus in der ganzen Welt durchzusetzen.*" ("In memory of a good friend, for a mutual vision, to achieve the goal of socialism in the whole world." And, of course, he dated it: July 6, 1980. I recall crossing the border on the East Berlin side of Checkpoint Charlie, where the guard stared for what seemed an hour at Rainer's inscription. He was trying to find a way to confiscate the books, yet somehow Reiner's phraseology succeeded in averting the guard's grasp.

One prize possession which traveled with me from East Coast to West Coast, then back to the East Coast and now again to Ocean Beach, is Wiktor Woroszylski's *The Life of Mayakovsky*. In 1972, I came down with dysentery while visiting Vermont. My friend Denise Levertov took me in so I could heal. Laid up for more than a week in her library, I discovered Mayakovsky—and much more. As I pull Woroszylski's thick volume down from the towering top shelf, Mayakovsky's slender volume, *How Are Verses Made?*, falls out with it. Inspired by that book, I penned a poem to my fallen comrade Ronnie Brazao in 1972. I still mourn his loss. I wonder, if he had used a larger caliber handgun, might it have been the heroin dealer, not Ronnie, who perished that morning? But Ronnie had no desire to kill anyone, only to rid the Bay Area of the dope that would be the scourge of the movement.

One of my most important sections of my library, one that I return to tie after time, is an entire shelf of books by my teacher and friend,

Herbert Marcuse. I smile as I spy the five new volumes of his selected works which Doug Kellner edited. Reading the papers and essays in them has brought me renewed energy and galvanized new ideas. Just below them is a shelf that I never could've imagined would exist: my own published books in English, more than 12 volumes in all, as well as six volumes in Korean, and one apiece in Greek, Spanish and Russian.

I pause to count boxes. So far I have I have unpacked 96 of them and only three remain. My fiend Jack Hipp, who packed them in Cambridge, labeled these last three George Lukács, Karl Marx, and MR, for Monthly Review School. Seeing them, I recall vividly when I was living at Red House and read *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács' masterpiece from 1923. I had purposely delved directly into the text before reading his infamous preface from 1966 in which, under pressure from Party orthodoxy, he recanted so many of his brilliant conclusions. Today however, in 2016, Lukács' importance to me—and not only to me—is a pale imitation of what it was.

At last I reach the box marked Marx. Inside I'm delighted to find my three volumes of *Capital* which also have made the trip from Ocean Beach to Cambridge and back to Ocean Beach. Heavy tomes, I perused them along with Rosa Luxemburg's *Accumulation of Capital*, in which she completed the missing pieces of Marx's systemization of the consequences of expanding capitalism. My good German friend Markus was staying with me in Cambridge one day when the couch where he slept fell off one corner. I am reminded of the sheer amazement on Markus's face when he discovered that I was using those three heavy volumes to replace the broken leg of the couch. "Georgie," he screamed, "you've discovered a use-value for *Capital*!"

Next, I encounter my 3-volume *Selected Works* of Lenin. These very books had accompanied me in 1970 as I sat in prison, where I graduated from MIT. They, too, have made many long journeys from Cambridge to Ocean Beach, back to Cambridge and then again to OB. They still bear the prison guard's handwritten entry of my inmate number, #42987. Holding Volume 2 in my hands, the memory of reading it in 1976 returns to me. I had set aside a block of time to study the two revolutions of 1917, and was engrossed with Lenin's threat to resign from the party Central committee if they did not call for the second insurrection. Suddenly three fellow activists arrived at Red House and immediately began to pressure me to go to the airport with them. They needed to rent four cars for a delegation to attend the Puerto Rican national convention in Chicago and were one driver short

to pick up the rentals. With only very seldom periods of time to read, I refused to leave my concentrated study of Lenin. They finally persuaded me by promising I could read at the airport. Once we arrived, they left me to read, and I stood using one of the high counters to support the heavy book. Out of nowhere, I suddenly felt a gun in the small of my back. "Move and you're dead" a low voice intoned. Not knowing if it was a joke, I turned to see two brown-shirted police handcuffing me as they arrested me for armed robbery.

The four of us were taken to El Cajon and held in jail overnight without even being permitted phone calls. I refused to cooperate at all with the police, especially with their continuing inquiries about the bank vault combination I had concealed in my wallet. It was the combination to the empty vault at the Left Bank bookstore, a meaningless set of numbers since the vault was empty except for the checkbook of our perpetually empty account. On principle, I refused to cooperate with my tormentors. The cells were cold, we were not given our constitutionally mandated phone calls, and I didn't appreciate being arrested for nothing more than reading a book at the airport. The jailers finally put me in the rubber room to try and persuade me to talk.

Years later, this apparently nonsensical set-up was clarified when we discovered that Bill Joyce, one of the local organizers of that convention, was a paid FBI informant. It was a sad discovery since along with it came the revelation that some of my "comrades" knew of his affiliation with the FBI, of how he and his wife were taking photos of everyone who entered and left Red House. These "comrades" had discussed the matter and decided not to tell us—the targets of the FBI surveillance—because we were "not working together." When I asked them what that meant, they remembered that our study group had discussed *Revolution and Evolution in the 20th Century* while theirs had focused on the Weather Underground's *Prairie Fire*. They had been told of the Joyce's FBI work by their older son, then a member of the Free School, who believed that if he told Frank, we in Red House (who were his pals), would know. What do children know that such finely educated "comrades" do not?

Eventually, I received some money for the false arrest in El Cajon. Although not a lot, it was enough to rent an apartment right on the water in Ocean Beach, where I lived happily for 2 years while I wrote my dissertation on the global movements of 1968. For the first time in my life, I was able to focus deeply.

The evening on which I sat in El Cajon jail's rubber room, Herbert had been expecting me as we had made an appointment for me to pick up his house guests from Paris, Andre and Doreen Gorz. Despite anything I subsequently explained to Herbert about my innocence, he remained upset. Even when I told him that Stanley Aronowitz had vouched for my presence in his seminar at the exact time when the bank robbery had taken place, which is how we were released, Herbert asked me twice if I was sure I had not robbed a bank.

My failure to show up or even call had infuriated him, so months later, when I had proof of the injustice done to me, I rushed to tell him we had won a suit for false arrest. When I told him I had received money from the court's decision, Herbert asked how much. He scoffed at what he considered the paltry sum I had received. "You've sold your rights cheaply," he said. As I recall the sum was \$750, not an considerable sum at the time since it allowed me to pay the first and last month's rent and security deposit to move into my own place.

Yes, I love these books, and not only for what the words and ideas inside them, not only for their valuable lessons and intelligence to pass on to future generations. Each volume brings with it the stamp of time of its place in my life. Each can rekindle long-forgotten memories, in a magic circle not only of acquisition but also of experience. Goethe's thought suddenly returns to me:

"Was ich besitze, sehe ich wie im Weiten.
Und was geschah, wird mir zur Wirklichkeiten!"

"What I possess, I see in the distance.
And what happened becomes reality!"