

# weekly worker



**Yevgeny Prigozhin: from chef to payback. The rise and predictable death of Wagner's public face**

- Letters and debate
- Communist University
- David Miller dispute
- Nature polemic

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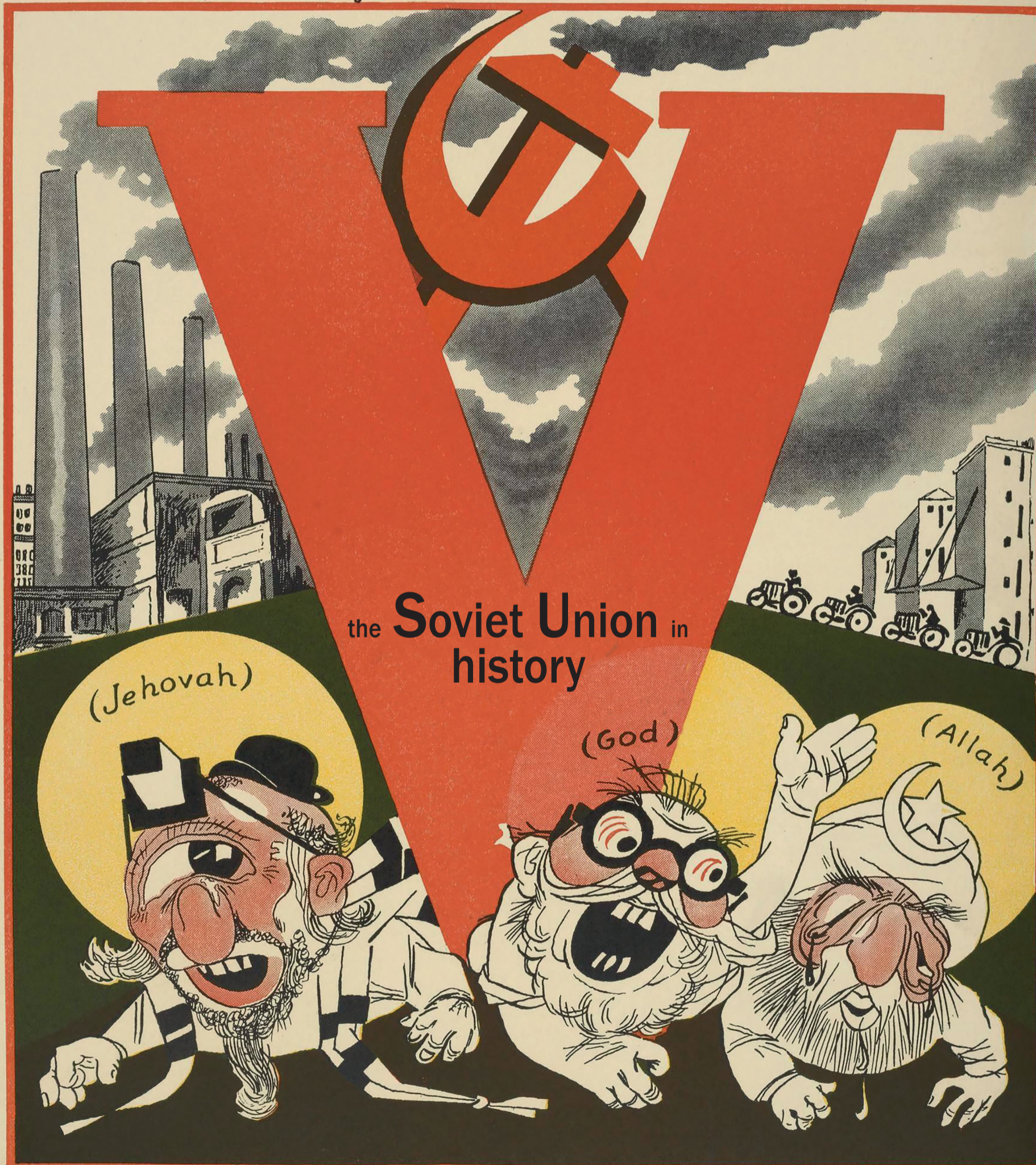
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the **Soviet Union** in history

*Long live the Five Year Plan!* Да здравствует пятилетка!

Cover of Bezbozhnik: magazine of the Society of the Godless (1929)



# LETTERS



Letters may have been shortened because of space. Some names may have been changed

## USSR positives

I'd like to add a few words to Yasmine Mather's report of the *Critique* journal's 50th anniversary meeting ('Fifty years of socialist theory', July 20).

Over these five decades, *Critique* has published some pioneering analyses. Hillel Ticktin elaborated the most convincing analysis of the Soviet Union, describing how it emerged as a specific socio-economic formation during the first five-year plan of 1929-32. He was able to explain the dynamics of the Soviet Union far more convincingly than either the rival theories on the left or the voluminous, yet unanalytical, works of the western Sovietology school. Similarly, Mick Cox's analysis of the cold war remains a far superior explanation of east-west relations than the hackneyed ideas of the establishment analysts.

Where I differ from Hillel is that he sees the Stalinist experience as utterly barren. It is true that the human and material costs of Stalinism were enormous, and the ideological damage it inflicted on the socialist project was and remains immeasurable. However, whilst endorsing Hillel's analysis, I think we might be able to elaborate a rather different conclusion as to the historical role of the Soviet socio-economic formation.

One very noticeable feature of the capitalist era has been the tendency for the law of value to be distorted, as capitalism has developed. Marx wrote in *Capital* that capitalism bent its own laws when it suppressed competition by way of joint-stock companies and monopolies; Engels and subsequent Marxist theoreticians extended the discussion by investigating the steady increase of state intervention into the economy and then into broader aspects of society with the rise of étatisation. This tendency continued with the development of imperialism in the 20th century - particularly during the two world wars, during which the entire economy of each belligerent country was mobilised by the state - and is still continuing today. The course of development in the Soviet Union and China fits in with this global tendency towards increasing state intervention, étatisation and the ensuing distortion of the law of value.

Stalinism had arisen as the unintended result of the isolation of the Soviet republic, the rise of the Soviet party-state apparatus above the working class, the adoption of the theory of 'socialism in one country', and the transformation of the party-state apparatus into a nationalist proto-élite, as Stalin's faction defeated the Left Opposition and other dissident currents. The first five-year plan was almost stumbled into - a panic response by the Stalinist leadership to the grain crisis and the slowness of industrial development, and to the need rapidly and thoroughly to modernise the country in the face of external threats. Such was the dynamic of the state-led, top-down crash industrialisation and collectivisation drives under the first five-year plan that the market relations, which had been in operation during the New Economic Policy, were abandoned and the law of value was suppressed. Without value relations and the need for production to be profitable, a tremendous social transformation could be achieved - if at great cost in terms of both human suffering and misuse and waste of material resources.

Stalinism permitted the Soviet bureaucracy to engage in a massive, state-led programme of national

development, and under the initial five-year plans the state mobilised the entire resources of the Soviet Union in order to build a huge industrial sector, to collectivise agriculture, and generally to bring about urbanisation and modernisation of society, thereby establishing itself as a fully-fledged ruling elite with a firm social base within the new state sector.

This process required the suppression of the market. A similar process occurred in China after Mao's victory in 1949. *This was not the establishment of the economic basis of a socialist society, but the paralleling of the industrial revolutions that occurred in the original capitalist countries.* Such a process of primary accumulation could not have been carried out under the production relations of capitalism, with their underlying criterion of profitability: it required not so much the distortion of the law of value as its actual suppression.

What existed in the Soviet Union and China was a form of *non-capitalist development*, transforming an underdeveloped country that was endowed with vast material and human resources and possessing a national leadership that was willing and able to assume total political control and to launch a programme of primary accumulation, implementing in a forceful and ruthless manner a process of modernisation of agriculture and industry and indeed of society itself, within the general context of a capitalist world and to a large degree in opposition to the leading capitalist powers.

Despite the far-reaching nature of the modernisation process that Stalin and Mao put into practice and with which their heirs continued, in hindsight it is clear that this non-capitalist form of development relatively soon reached its limits, and the ruling élites were obliged to return to a market economy in order to stay in power and continue the process of accumulation. The Soviet bureaucracy left this far too late: had it implemented market reforms in the 1960s, it may have avoided the stagnation of the 1970s and the fatal stasis of the 1980s. On the other hand, the Chinese bureaucracy, no doubt determined to avoid Moscow's sorry fate, timed its return to the market with considerable skill and good effect.

Looking back from today, with the Soviet bloc having dissolved and its constituent parts having lurched at varying speeds and with varying degrees of success back into the capitalist world, and with China's ruling Communist Party overseeing a remarkably successful capitalist economy, it is fair to conclude that the Stalinist socio-economic formation was not by any means an historically viable society able to reproduce itself - be it, as Stalinists claimed, socialism or, as some Marxists claimed, state capitalism or an entirely new mode of production, such as bureaucratic collectivism. Rather, Stalinism was a temporary phenomenon - a non-capitalist means of modernising a large, underdeveloped country within very specific conditions - *a short-lived parallel to capitalism which at some point would be forced to return to the market, if the ruling elite was to maintain its ascendancy.*

Stalinism and the Soviet socio-economic formation therefore should be seen within the general trend of capitalist development, drawing out the tendencies towards state intervention and the distortion of the law of value to the point at which society was étatised and value relations suppressed, thus resulting in a non-capitalist economy. It was, as indicated above, the product of an historical accident - the marooning of a backward society under a degenerating communist

leadership, which was forced by circumstances into introducing a coercive non-market form of socio-economic modernisation, albeit an historically temporary one.

And just like the process of capitalist development in the advanced bourgeois states, this process of state-led modernisation in both the Soviet Union and China laid the material basis for a further, genuinely socialist form of development. So by way of this process of modernisation, and despite its many appalling features, the Soviet socio-economic formation did therefore play an historical role that was not entirely negative, and Hillel's wholesale dismissal of Stalinism is perhaps rather one-sided.

**Paul Flowers**  
email

## Party question

I very much liked the actual content of Paul B Smith's letter (August 10), in which he in effect set out what a world socialist plan, democratically determined by the working class itself, might look like and how it might ensure solutions for the current climate crisis, "establishing a world of free, clean energy, water and air".

However, I think he somewhat failed his own exam question, which was to somehow link technological solutions to the climate crisis and how to form the working class into a political party (presumably a mass Communist Party, although PBS does not state this), and then to overthrow capitalism and establish worldwide socialism.

What he writes is very much a programme for *after* worldwide socialism has been established. It does not address *how* to form the working class and working masses into a political party and movement, nor does it cover *how* the working masses led by such a mass Communist Party might actually carry out the socialist revolution itself.

I would accept that having some detail of how a future world socialist society might address the climate crisis in the political programme of a present-day Communist Party might help that party attract some more members, but really the basic question and challenge of our time - as PBS himself states - of *how* to organise the working class into a political party and a movement to overthrow capitalism is left completely unanswered. I suspect his omission of the term 'Communist Party' is significant.

Any present-day Communist Party needs to be quite cautious in its programme about what a socialist or communist society might look like in practice, as it will almost certainly be newer generations of working people who will actually determine and shape this - maybe generations not yet born.

In any case, as well as having a very clear ultimate objective of establishing a socialist and then communist society, a real, present-day Communist Party *must* have a comprehensive set of *immediate* aims and objectives, which are aimed at meeting the immediate needs of the working class and at the expense of the monopoly capitalist class. As the *Weekly Worker* has pointed out in the past, these demands should not be limited by what capitalism or the capitalists say are "realistic" or "affordable".

By raising such demands - which can only be delivered by making deep inroads into the wealth and power of the capitalist class, challenging the very logic and priorities of capitalism - the Communist Party can make really clear links between the immediate needs of the working class and how these can ultimately be satisfied on a sustainable and stable basis: ie, through the establishment of socialism.

Of course to get from the here and

now to socialism, we need a socialist revolution to place the working class in a position of state, political and economic power, and therefore to be able to massively restructure and reorganise the economy and society to meet its needs. The Communist Party programme is therefore also a *strategy* for bringing about socialist revolution and the establishment of socialism. But PBS has leapfrogged all these current tasks and gone straight into a proposed plan for a fully established world socialist society!

How do we achieve such a mass Communist Party and a mass movement for socialism? Well, certainly not through sniping at existing communist parties from the far-distant sidelines or personal websites, or claiming that 'groups' of one or two, or even 20 individuals are going to provide the essential core of any such party.

It is also not going to happen via some 'lash-up' of the most significant Trotskyist groups such as the Socialist Party, the Socialist Workers Party, Counterfire, Socialist Appeal, Socialist Alternative, Alliance for Workers' Liberty, etc (all of whom hate each other nearly as much as they hate communist and workers' parties!), plus, naturally, the *Weekly Worker* group.

It seems almost too obvious for words, but if we want a mass Communist Party, then we must build and grow *the* Communist Party. Not everyone can or would want to actually join the Communist Party - those happy in their sects of one, two or 20 probably least of all!

However, there are already tens of thousands of people who variously call themselves communists, Marxists, socialists, leftists, anarchists, liberationists, revolutionary democrats, radical greens, etc, etc, who can and should help support the growth of a genuine Communist Party in a range of different ways. They don't have to agree with everything it says or does, but they recognise the importance of the concept of the Communist Party and by being part of the mass movement they can influence it as well.

With regard to the mass movement, the famous quote from Karl Marx in *The German ideology* is helpful here: "We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence."

So we have to engage with the movement as it really is, not as we would wish it to be. We have to engage in workplaces and in working class communities as they actually are. We have to be able to communicate effectively using normal, everyday language with ordinary, normal working people, who may well be depoliticised, stressed, shattered even from work and life. As Nadezhda Krupskaya said, we have to recognise that all working people have their own hopes, fears, sufferings, hopes for happiness, and we have to be able to *engage programmatically* with those.

We need to organise, focus and direct all of our efforts through a *Communist Party* - ideally, yes, a mass Communist Party - and employing and applying the science of Marxism-Leninism. Yes, a Marxism-Leninism updated and relevant to the 21st century, but a Marxism-Leninism nonetheless. Certainly not one of the 57 bastardised versions created by anti-socialist, viciously sectarian Trotskyism, most deeply antagonistic to each other and most based on worship of some sect leader.

Both the mass Communist Party and the mass working class movement, of which it is part, will constantly interact, enrich and grow each other.

They are organically part of each other. They fully respect and value each other. They work together to identify and produce the main lines of march for the working class as a whole.

Unfortunately, we do have to do all these things long before we will be in a position to actually implement PBS's grand climate change plan in a world socialist society!

**Andrew Northall**  
Kettering

## Oil, coal and gas

Eddie Ford in his ongoing catastrophist series makes mention of the colossal clash between the National Union of Mineworkers and Margaret Thatcher ('Land, sea and air records', August 6). Her vision was of smashing the NUM as a strategy in the class war. But the miners were far too strong and crucial to energy, steel and much else. Worse, they were far too political, with an alternative vision for the whole of society - which didn't ultimately include capitalism, let alone the Tories.

We had known since the birth of the industrial revolution about the harmful effects of uncontrolled emissions and we had as a union enthusiastically supported clean air zones, smokeless fuel, as well as combined heat and fuel systems since the 1950s. Clean coal technologies were being developed since the early 70s to combat acid rain and pollution. But Thatcher wanted none of that - she didn't want clean-coal technology: she wanted to break the back of the miners' union by cutting the industry to basically a backup technology. To do that a propaganda war on fossil fuel in general and coal in particular was launched.

She greeted the developing carbon capture and storage (CCS) systems and clean-burn power stations with contempt and pulled the plug - she didn't want them to work. We have seen much the same reaction to CCS plans in Scotland and Humberside by Labour and the Greens just recently. They don't want to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from gas any more than Thatcher wanted to from coal, because that is the main bogeyman in the play.

The plan since 1977 was to end the coal industry and move rapidly to nuclear power. The Ministers Committee on Economic Strategy confirmed in 1979: "A nuclear programme would have the advantage of removing a substantial portion of electricity generation from the dangers of disruption by industrial action by miners or transport workers." The problem for Maggie and her drive to a nuclear Britain with all the red-ragging miners on the scrapheap was that nuclear was deeply unpopular. Following various disasters and decades of anti-nuclear campaigning, the mass of the population - even Greenpeace at that time - preferred coal to nukes. It was in order to do a greenwash job on nuclear and set the anti-coal horror story panic loose that she started banging the CO<sub>2</sub> catastrophe drum, in the process helping to set up the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and groom the UN and various international committees for the purpose. George Monbiot, the one-time born-again environmentalist saviour, is now *de facto* minister for the promotion of nuclear power and hater of all things fossil fuel.

The sad truth is, were the miners' strike to be happening now, most of our skin-deep comrades on the left would not only not support us: they would, given a few weasel words about 'just transition', be supporting the plan to close us down - destroying the industry, our skills, our traditions, aspirations and union.

We know this because this is what has happened with the absurd plan to stop the development of oil and gas and close down the industry,



throwing more than 350,000 people onto the scrapheap, where the mining communities are now. Of course, we heard the chorus of the liberal, middle class left about 'green jobs' which don't exist - not only pie in the sky, but those alleged green 'pies' haven't even entered the atmosphere yet (nor will they).

I simply cannot credit the demand to 'just stop oil'. It begs the question, 'And just do what?' Every single aspect of our lives is punctuated, fuelled and facilitated by oil and gas (and coal, of course - just not ours). It's not even a demand to stop using the stuff: it's a demand that Britain stop mining it, but allowing anyone else to mine it for us to use. I'm a vegan: I not only do not buy meat, fish, dairy or animal produce; I don't actually consume it, even if someone else does my shopping and brings it to the door. Would those who cry 'just stop oil' were as principled, it might make sense.

It reminds me of a crowd watching a man on a burning building and they cry, 'Jump!' (We don't know how to catch you before you hit the street, but we're sure something will turn up before you get there.)

Before my colliery (the second last in the country to close) shut down, we were selling coal to Drax at £34 per tonne. With the closure of all British mines, taking 180 million tonnes off the market, the international spot market price now trades at £150 per tonne - a 400% increase. Is the idea of Just Stop (British) Oil to take all that oil and gas off the market, so as to deliberately drive up the international price, so that the majority of people who live here can afford less and less of it and therefore buy less and less of it? Is that the idea - to price oil and gas out of the reach of working class people, impoverish our lives, restrict our freedoms, crash our living standards in a kind of puritan, anti-consumption tyranny? I can think of no other reason for the otherwise absurd demand. With 'communists' like you lot, who needs Tories? What do you think the workers on the rigs and their families think of 'communist' demands to shut them down, while the Tories throw them a lifeline? You really need to check which side of the class line you're standing on.

If you oppose oil, gas and coal, stop using them. Don't demand we don't mine them, but then import them - what on earth is the sense in that? There are no 'renewables' without coal to make them, and oil to run them. You can stick your fingers in your ears and shout 'la, la, la', but it will still be a fact when you stop being silly.

Humanity adapts to the environment; we have actually massively reduced the number of deaths, injuries and destruction wrought by natural disasters over the last centuries and decades. Not because the disasters are not happening in similar numbers as they have from time to time, but because of science and technology and being prepared and forewarned.

I'm not going to argue the toss as to how much of the current climate change is natural and how much man-made. The truth is, we have to deal with it, whatever the cause.

**David John Douglass**  
South Shields

## State interests

Daniel Lazare sets out how the US state has been out to get Trump ('Closer to the brink', August 10). It has. But Daniel seems to think that that state simply works for the electoral benefits of the Democrats, rather than being what it is - the state of the US ruling class, working for its interests.

That in turn explains why it has been out to get Trump - pretty much for the same reasons that the British state sought to frustrate Brexit: ie, both Trump and Brexit represent the interests of a reactionary petty bourgeoisie. These are interests that

are antagonistic and contradictory to those of large-scale industrial capital, and more specifically the interests of the ruling class - which is a global class, resting upon its ownership of fictitious capital (global shares, bonds, property).

So it's impossible to fathom why, having so far attempted to get Trump, that state would, following a new Trump election victory, suddenly become a weapon in his hands, in the way he describes - the police being unleashed, and so on - unless you accept the liberal view that the state simply acts in accordance with the wishes of the government of the day! It's far more likely that, if the state's current attempts to stop Trump fail, more direct means would be used. The US has a long history of political assassinations, for example, or, as Liz Truss found out, the ruling class can quickly destabilise not only leftwing governments, but also rightwing, petty-bourgeois governments that threaten its interests too.

If it looked like Trump might win, the dollar would be likely to take a nosedive, and the ruling class would simply press keys on their computers - shifting their highly portable wealth (in the form of that fictitious capital) at an instant, to some other location.

If all else fails, and a Trump presidency really did threaten the interests of the global ruling class, in the way he suggests, there is still the possibility, even for the US, of taking the 'Chile option', with an actual coup, palace or otherwise, as against the farce of January 6.

**Arthur Bough**  
email

## Free speech

Freedom of expression is a principle worth defending: its advantages far outweigh its disadvantages and it is the only reliable tool we have for discovering the truth. Since all social progress depends on spreading true opinions, and diminishing the number of false ones, *freedom of expression is a fundamental part of promoting human happiness.*

One group that has taken up the noble cause of freedom of expression is the Free Speech Union. The FSU was founded in 2020 by Tory columnist Toby Young. According to its website, the FSU is "a non-partisan, mass-membership public interest body that stands up for the speech rights of its members and campaigns for free speech more widely". This is wrong; in reality the FSU makes no effort to hide its partisanship.

The FSU's leadership consists mostly of rightwing figures: Toby Young, Nigel Biggar and Douglas Murray are three of its four directors. FSU advisors include Andrew Doyle of GB News, rightwing professors Matthew Goodwin and Eric Kaufmann, rightwing columnists Julia Hartley-Brewer and Allison Pearson, and rightwing historians Andrew Roberts and David Starkey.

Apart from its personnel, its statements on free speech make its concerns clear: "We believe that free speech is currently under assault across the Anglosphere, particularly in those areas where it matters most, such as schools, universities, the arts, the entertainment industry and the media." The objective of the FSU is not so much to curb government authority - particularly Tory government authority - over speech: it is to curb the censoriousness of the liberal left in some institutions. Hence the FSU tells us, "If you're no-platformed by a university - a feminist professor who challenges trans orthodoxy, for instance - we'll encourage you to fight back and members of our advisory councils may be able to tell you what remedies are available to you."

It is true, and lamentable, that leftwing activists often try to prevent the expression of views they dislike. But it is ridiculous to consider leftwing

activists a greater threat to free speech than a Tory government which has passed strict anti-protest legislation and openly assaulted our liberties. The FSU has been absent from the fight for the freedom to protest.

Indeed, the FSU is curiously silent about several matters that should interest an organisation that "stands for freedom of speech, of conscience and of intellectual enquiry". Julian Assange, famed for exposing US war crimes, is confined to a cell in Belmarsh prison, while the US government seeks his extradition to face espionage charges.

The FSU's attitude represents a wider problem. The majority of people on all sides of politics do not care about free speech in principle. The most common approach is to support free speech for opinions you like, and to censor or otherwise suppress opinions you dislike. This approach is shared by most of the left and the right. Only a handful of people on both sides are dedicated to free speech in principle - that is, they believe in free speech as much for their political opponents as for themselves.

The socialist left should support the right to express opinions that it hates - not just in cases of attacks on liberties by the state, but in society generally. Free speech should be supported in most of our institutions. It is right to defend free speech because of its utility; but it is also politically wise. In capitalist society, the socialist left has no choice but to vigorously criticise the powerful: free speech is fundamental to this effort. A partisan attitude to free speech undermines both the socialist cause and the struggle for liberty in general.

**Talal Hangari**  
email

## George Shaw

I would like, if I may, to add a few points to Marie Lynam's letter (August 10) on the passing of George Shaw (1936-2023) after an 18-year struggle with prostate cancer.

In 1965, George, when working at Vauxhall Motors Luton plant, joined the 'Solidarity' group, which had been founded by Chris Pallis (Maurice Brinton) and Ken Weller in the late 1950s. He remained a member of that group until the mid-1970s.

In 2004 he joined the British Marxist-Humanists affiliated to the US group *News and Letters* (whose conference in Chicago he attended in 2004). He contributed an important account of his time in Solidarity for the British Marxist-Humanist journal, *Hobgoblin*, in which he wrote:

"Solidarity played a part in supporting us in a number of strikes in Luton and particularly when we were attempting to link up shop stewards in the industry. The Oxford Shop Stewards Conference was aborted by the sectarian and vanguardist efforts of Gerry Healy's Socialist Labour League and we walked out. The regret is that we didn't link up effectively with the Ellesmere Port Vauxhall stewards; we could have posed GM a big problem. Solidarity really helped us to crystallise our view of the union's role in impeding the progress of the independent shop stewards movement which was fighting speed-up (we at Vauxhall were not on piecework incentives like Coventry and Birmingham)."

George remained an active member of the British Marxist-Humanists until 2014, when he rejected our support for Ukrainian self-determination and our hostility to political Islam. He never formally resigned, or discussed his differences with us. He continued to send us £5 a month by standing order. This was not simply an oversight - when phoned about it last year, he told us he wished to continue.

A man of contradictions, then, but one of the best.

**David Black**  
London

# ACTION

## Stand up for choice

**Saturday September 2, 1pm:** Counter-protest. Assemble at the Millicent Fawcett statue, Parliament Square, London SW1. Oppose anti-abortion groups and stand up for the right to choose. Organised by Abortion Rights: [www.facebook.com/Abortionrightsuk](http://www.facebook.com/Abortionrightsuk).

## Remember Burston strike school

**Sunday September 3, 10.30am to 4pm:** Rally, Diss Road, Burston, Norfolk IP22. Commemorate the longest strike in history. Free entry. Organised by Unite the Union and the TUC: [burstonstrikeschool.wordpress.com/2023-rally](http://burstonstrikeschool.wordpress.com/2023-rally).

## Stop the DSEI arms fair

**Saturday September 5, 6pm:** Vigil, Cundy Park, Prince Regents Lane, London E13. DSEI facilitates the sale of weapons to Israel for use against Palestinians. Join artists and activists in opposing this. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [www.palestinecampaign.org/events/stop-the-dsei-arms-fair-vigil](http://www.palestinecampaign.org/events/stop-the-dsei-arms-fair-vigil).

## Pushing for peace at the TUC

**Tuesday September 5, 6pm:** Online rally. Why trade unionists should oppose the Tory-backed escalation in Ukraine, and defeat the GMB resolution supporting the west's war efforts. Speakers include Andrew Murray (Stop the War), Louise Regan (NEU) and Sean Vernell (UCU). Organised by Stop the War Coalition: [www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=677642744389305](http://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=677642744389305).

## Wigan Diggers Festival

**Saturday September 9, 11.30am to 9.30pm:** Open-air free festival, The Wiend, Wigan WN1. Commemorating Gerrard Winstanley and the 17th century Diggers movement with music and political stalls. Organised by Wigan Diggers Festival: [www.facebook.com/WiganDiggersFestival](http://www.facebook.com/WiganDiggersFestival).

## Abolition Now! DSEI, policing and prisons

**Sunday September 10:** All-day event outside DSEI arms fair, Western entrance, ExCeL London Exhibition Centre, 1 Western Gateway, Royal Victoria Dock, London E16. Exploring the violence of policing and prisons, and their relationships to the arms fair. Includes speakers and training. Organised by Stop the Arms Fair: [stopthearmsfair.org.uk/events/abolition-now-dsei-policing-and-prisons](http://stopthearmsfair.org.uk/events/abolition-now-dsei-policing-and-prisons).

## Fight Tory anti-union laws - lobby the TUC

**Sunday September 10, 1pm:** Eve-of-TUC rally, Premier Meetings, Albert Dock, Liverpool L3. If workers take action together, the Tories and their anti-union attack can be beaten. Speakers include Sharon Graham (Unite) and Sarah Woolley (BFAWU). Organised by National Shop Stewards Network: [www.facebook.com/ShopStewardsNetwork](http://www.facebook.com/ShopStewardsNetwork).

## Why peace is a trade union issue

**Monday September 11, 6.30pm:** TUC fringe meeting, Holiday Inn Express, Albert Dock, Liverpool L3. Wages, not war. Speakers include Lindsey German (Stop the War) and Alex Gordon (RMT). Organised by Stop the War Coalition: [www.stopwar.org.uk/events](http://www.stopwar.org.uk/events).

## From Sylhet to Spitalfields

**Friday September 15, 6.30pm:** Book event, Bookmarks, 1 Bloomsbury Street, London WC1. Author Shabna Begum explores the hidden history of the Bengali East London squatters' movement in the 1970s, which took over entire streets and estates. Free registration. Organised by Bookmarks, the socialist bookshop: [www.facebook.com/events/943871050046594](http://www.facebook.com/events/943871050046594).

## What it means to be human

**Tuesday September 19, 6.30pm:** Talks on social and biological anthropology. Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviton Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1 and online. This meeting: 'Can indigenous and western perspectives see eye-to-eye? The value of two-eyed seeing'. Speaker: Chris Knight. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: [www.facebook.com/events/1910619279319847](http://www.facebook.com/events/1910619279319847).

## Barclays: don't bank on apartheid

**Saturday September 23:** Day of action outside Barclays Bank branches nationwide. Demand the bank stops investing in companies that supply Israel with weapons and military technology used to assault Palestinians. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: [www.facebook.com/events/9714385958636351](http://www.facebook.com/events/9714385958636351).

## Workers' summit

**Saturday September 23, 2pm:** Conference, Bishopsgate Institute, 230 Bishopsgate London EC2. Link the fights; reject bad deals; fight to win. Speakers from NHS Workers Say NO!, UCU Solidarity Movement, Amazon strikers and St Mungo's strikers. Registration £11.55 (£6.13). Organised by Strike Map: [www.facebook.com/events/1948514978839160](http://www.facebook.com/events/1948514978839160).

## The Cramlington train wreckers

**Friday September 29, 7.30pm:** Illustrated talk, Harton and Westoe Miners' Welfare, Low Lane, South Shields NE34. During the 1926 general strike, miners who derailed a passenger train were jailed for eight years. Narrated by Ed Waugh with songs by Jamie Brown. Tickets £2. Organised by Harton and Westoe Miners' Banner Group: [eventbrite.com/e/the-cramlington-train-wreckers-tickets-686461864917](http://eventbrite.com/e/the-cramlington-train-wreckers-tickets-686461864917).

## Protest at Tory Party conference

**Saturday October 1, 12 noon:** National demonstration. Assemble near Manchester Museum, Oxford Road, Manchester M13. Oppose this vile, vicious and corrupt government. Resist their austerity, privatisation, profiteering, deregulation and attacks on democratic rights. Then prepare to hold the next government to account. Organised by the People's Assembly Against Austerity: [www.facebook.com/events/772136577575237](http://www.facebook.com/events/772136577575237).

## CPGB wills

Remember the CPGB and keep the struggle going. Put our party's name and address, together with the amount you wish to leave, in your will. If you need further help, do not hesitate to contact us.



## CU

# Past, present and future

Scott Evans reports on a week of debate, engagement and thinking through the crucial questions of our time

Communist University, August 12-19, is unlike many of the other events hosted on the left, in that we give at least equal - often more - time to contributions from the floor after the opening talk, which we see more as an informed introduction to a topic than a speaker's chance to say what they think and leave it at that. The annual event is a fantastic opportunity for all comrades to engage in insightful political debate - but especially younger comrades and those newer to the organisation and its perspectives.

It is impossible to do justice to the talks and discussions within one article, and we encourage comrades to listen to the archive recordings for the full picture.<sup>1</sup>

Rather pertinently, there were three talks on the climate crisis. Tam Dean Burn gave a theatrical piece, centred on the growth of a sapling to its death as a tree. You had to be there to get the full effect! He stressed above all else the urgency of the situation, but the question is what vision we have for addressing it and what social force can carry that vision through to reality. Comrades agreed on the key role of culture in provoking imagination around *the possible*, both in terms of future utopias and dystopias.

Mike Macnair's talk looked at ecological destruction in the ancient world. This is a feature of larger-scale human society, which until communism also means class society. However, under capitalism, there has been a phase change, where climatic shifts and ecological destruction are reaching levels at which we are approaching a tipping point, beyond which we enter into a fundamentally different world climate system.

Jack Conrad meanwhile brought us up to the present day, looking at where we currently are with the climate crisis and the woeful inability of the capitalist order to deal with it to any necessary degree. There is more than enough awareness and radical feeling on the question, so what we principled communists now need to do is convince the workers' and socialist movements of the necessity of the struggle for a Communist Party and the longer-term communist transformation of the world. The trajectory of the existing activist climate groups is escalation into minority acts of terrorism, as a *strategy* for producing radical societal rupture, which Marxists have been polemising against since the 19th century.

## Socialist

Lars T Lih opened CU with a presentation of some new research he has been pursuing. His talk was focused on the notion of power and legitimacy and revolved around five key themes, four of which comrade Lih discussed in his *Weekly Worker* supplement on Vladimir Nevsky.<sup>2</sup>

Colin Turner of Communist Platform in the Netherlands<sup>3</sup> spoke on the pro-war left, summarising the debate in *De Socialisten* and between CP and the CPGB up till now. Jack Conrad, from the floor, took issue with painting social-imperialism as "just another form of opportunism". The CP comrades who responded said that they disagree with us on concrete tactical approaches to drawing lines between principled communists and social-imperialists within an organisation, and the minutiae of the history of what has occurred within the *De Socialisten* unity project.

Continuing the international debate, Joseph Perez gave a report



Auguste Rodin 'The Gates of Hell' (1880-1917)

on the recent Democratic Socialists of America convention, where the Marxist Unity Group won two of the 16 seats on the DSA's national political committee. Their immediate aim, among other things, is to transform the DSA into a Communist Party united by a minimum-maximum programme and organised according to democratic centralism.

Rounding out the discussions of the historical and international left, Yasmine Mather discussed its sorry state in Iran. The final days of this year's CU happened to coincide with the 60-year anniversary of the overthrow of Mosaddegh - a joint venture of the USA and UK, ending with the dictatorial power of the shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi - and roughly the first anniversary of the killing of Mahsa Amini by the morality police. This sparked the still-ongoing protests all across Iran, where the demands of women for the right to unveil has combined with protests against mass unemployment, inflation and so on.

Jack Conrad's talk on the Russia-Ukraine war highlighted how war produces so much confusion on the left, but for those principled communists it can be very useful for clarifying whose politics can hold the line against the collapse before militarism and the capitalist state. Social-imperialism and social-pacifism must be resisted.

Lawrence Parker discussed the first few decades after the founding of the CPGB in 1920, which, despite all its flaws, the comrade considers the most advanced political achievement of the working class. Meanwhile, Kevin Bean dedicated his session to the Labour left and post-Corbynism. He explained that the compromising and cowardice of the official Labour left, especially in response to the anti-Semitism smear campaign, was not just a result of Corbyn and co being "too nice", but that politically Corbynism is rotten at its core - enmeshed in the labour bureaucracy and loyal to capitalism and Labourism as a strategy for 'socialism'.

Mike Macnair addressed the question of communist unity - a topic absolutely central to what we stand for

as an organisation - and his key themes will be familiar to regular readers. Originally this session was intended to be a debate between the CPGB and Socialist Appeal, but the latter simply refused to take part. Some of the more probing questions from the floor asked how we can ourselves intervene to help bring about conditions more favourable to communist unity beyond polemic, so as to not appear to be passively 'waiting for objective conditions to ripen'.

## Key

Other debates centred on the growth of the far right and the women's question. On the former, David Broder outlined how the far right in Italy, represented by current prime minister Giorgia Meloni, was part of the post-fascist milieu<sup>4</sup> and represented a general trend in Europe. Notable about this wave is that it does not reject the EU, Nato and most democratic norms, and to the extent that it ever has, as with Le Pen in France, this has been significantly reduced in recent years. How can one tackle the far right, then?

Esen Uslu spoke on how *not* to combat it in relation to Turkey. After going over the legacy of Kemal Atatürk and subsequent Kemalist ideology, comrade Uslu explained that the left in Turkey has come up with little else despite varieties of popular-frontist ideas, sectism and oppositional politics without any clear programme for international socialist transformation.

Edmund Griffiths's talk was one which a number of comrades particularly enjoyed for its engaging narrative structure and informative content, where he spoke on the unique nature of far-right, red-brown politics in post-Soviet Russia.<sup>5</sup>

Turning to the women's question, Ben Lewis discussed the politics of Clara Zetkin,<sup>6</sup> an outstanding German Marxist. It is particularly important to correct the historical record on Zetkin, her politics, and her life, given the instrumentalised and distorted use of her legacy by the German Democratic Republic after her death. Comrade Lewis emphasised Zetkin's leading role in theorising the need for a *clean break* between the socialist and

bourgeois women's movement.

Anne McShane talked about the need to demand free access to abortion on demand as a central working class political demand, locating it in the history of the women's movement, especially in relation to the Zhenotdel in Soviet Russia. Legalisation is not enough.

Marc Mulholland's talk on socialism and bourgeois feminism began with a discussion on whether private property emerged out of patriarchy or vice versa.

## Other

Chris Knight of the Radical Anthropology Group, discussed human nature in relation to the revolutionary origins of language. He argued that language must be explained as part of a complete theory on the human way of life. It is necessary to combine this conception with a full understanding of the human kinship system - especially in how it developed out of an early revolution in sexual relations between men and women.

Yasmine Mather discussed the question of artificial intelligence. Machine learning has come on in leaps and bounds in recent decades, leading to very flexible pattern-recognition systems for interpreting diverse kinds of data. Generative models have led to a new round of excitement and panic about AI across society. In terms of politics, clearly one of the most impactful would be a proliferation of autonomous vehicles, not least because of their potential deployment in war or to replace human-manned transportation of goods. AI does put some kinds of professional jobs under threat, and we will likely see further proletarianisation and increasingly precarious employment as a result of AI.

For his part, Moshé Machover presented a more accessible overview of the recent book *How labor powers the global economy: a labor theory of capitalism* (New York 2022) by Emmanuel Farjourn, Moshé Machover and David Zachariah.<sup>7</sup> Beginning with the idea of *labour content*, they argue that one can use ideas from statistical mechanics, including the basic idea of a statistical variable, and one can construct an economic theory like Marx's which

bypasses the transformation problem. The discussion helped clarify some aspects, including the authors' rejection of the notion of the division between simple and complex labour among other things. Also raised were interesting questions about whether or how the theory accounts for economic rents and interest rates.

Michael Roberts discussed his and Guglielmo Carchedi's recent book *Capitalism in the 21st century: through the prism of value* (London 2022), intended to tackle recent crises and contradictions in capitalism, including the ecological crises and developments in AI, from the perspective of value theory. But what is value, anyway?

Later Ian Wright spoke on the spooky nature of value in capitalism, comparing Marx's labour theory of value to the methodology of field theories, such as that of Michael Faraday. Comrade Wright contends that value as a dynamic attractor for price (competing with other forces which pull price away from value) is a useful conception for both popular understanding and further development.

If these debates sound interesting, you will soon be able to hear each of the talks (see note 1 below). Better still, do yourself a favour and join us for this year's winter CU or next year's summer CU! ●

## Notes

1. These will all be available very soon at [communistuniversity.uk](http://communistuniversity.uk).
2. [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1450/supplement-back-to-nevsky](http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1450/supplement-back-to-nevsky).
3. Communist Platform was founded as a faction of the Socialist Party in 2014 before being expelled from 2020 onwards. The comrades argue in favour of forming a Marxist party in the Netherlands united by a programme for achieving communism: [communisme.nu](http://communisme.nu).
4. See also comrade Broder's book *Mussolini's grandchildren: fascism in contemporary Italy* (London 2023).
5. See also his recent book *Aleksandr Prokhanov and post-Soviet esotericism* (New York 2023).
6. See comrade Lewis's recent article, 'Clean breaks and clear principles' (*Weekly Worker* August 3: [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1454/clean-breaks-and-clear-principles](http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1454/clean-breaks-and-clear-principles)) and the new pamphlet *Clara Zetkin: the women's and women workers' question of our time*, translated and introduced by Ben Lewis.
7. See also comrade Machover's article, 'L-content and price' (*Weekly Worker* July 13: [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1451/l-content-and-price](http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1451/l-content-and-price)).

## Summer Offensive

### We did it!

When I last reported to you on August 10 the total raised towards our Summer Offensive stood at £13,484, leaving us with some £7,000 to raise before the end of the month. I was confident that our members and supporters could do it, especially given the levels we had raised already. Moreover, with our Communist University, it was clear that there would be plenty of opportunities for comrades to add to our totals, with contributions and donations. So, as we went into the last stage of the campaign, I was certain that we could do it.

The result was that, when the campaign closed, we had actually raised £28,335 - well over £8,000 above the original target! Well done, comrades - I knew you wouldn't let me down!

As ever, thanks go to everyone

who made a contribution, whether large or small.

We had a few really big donations this year and they're always welcome, but we can't rely on that sort of generosity, especially given the cost-of-living pressure that all comrades are facing at the moment. While we can be very pleased with the amounts that have been raised, we won't sit back on our laurels: we will not only review what worked well, but also think what we need to do to improve aspects of our fundraising, given how important the Summer Offensive is for our political work.

So thanks to all comrades and supporters of the *Weekly Worker* for your efforts this year and let's work on how next year's campaign can be even better ●

James Harvey



# USSR



# The Soviet Union in history

Is there progress? There seems to be, in nature and likewise in society. But, argues Jack Conrad, there is retrogression, mutual exhaustion and extinction too

Contra Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Leo Tolstoy, Oswald Spengler *et al.*, there are good reasons, albeit with various reservations, to accept the idea of progress - defined as advance, development, a forward or onward movement, improvement, etc.

Admittedly, Enlightenment claims of spiritual, moral and artistic progress are inherently problematic. Exact measurement is impossible: we have to rely on subjective criteria and inevitably results are inconclusive.

The animist religion of original communism was unwritten, but functioned as a popular science. Nowadays, science is a multidisciplinary, specialist undertaking - a productive force in its own right. However, the Abrahamic religions of the book - each of which is proclaimed to be god's final word - amount to pure ideological mystification. Whereas the rulers of ancient Egypt, Assyria and China boasted of torturing, mutilating and massacring war captives, modern states are pledged to abide by the terms of the Geneva convention. Nevertheless, the 20th century saw industrialised warfare, Nazi death camps and the nuclear bomb. Individual artists perfect their techniques and on occasion invent new styles. But does anyone seriously think that Damien Hirst is better than Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci or Pablo Picasso?

## Nature

When it comes to nature, things are perhaps more straightforward.

We are as sure as need be to call it a fact that the big bang happened some 13.8 billion years ago and produced *known* space-time. Quite conceivably though, our universe erupted out of some sort of multiverse and is one of an endless number of parallel universes. Theoretical physics is

full of such 'before' debates<sup>1</sup> ... and Marxism would, philosophically, be inclined to expect not a *Genesis*-like moment of creation, but the ceaseless transformation and retransformation of matter.

According to the standard model of cosmology, one hundredth of a second after the big bang the temperature of our rapidly expanding universe plunges from the "infinite" down to "a mere 10,000 million degrees Kelvin".<sup>2</sup> As our universe further inflates and further cools, transition temperatures are crossed. Gravity, electromagnetism, and the strong and weak nuclear forces separate. Quarks and anti-quarks form. Depending on their colour - ±blue, ±green or ±red - quarks either repel or attract. Quarks annihilate anti-quarks and produce electrons. Within the first second following the big bang, quarks have combined to form hadron particles - the most stable being protons and neutrons.

After about three minutes protons and neutrons combine to form nuclei - held together by the effect of the strong nuclear force, which more than offsets the opposing electromagnetic force. As temperatures continue to fall, things move at a somewhat slower pace. It took 700,000 years for electrons to become trapped into orbits around nuclei, thereby forming the first "stable atoms": in the main helium and hydrogen.<sup>3</sup> The nuclei of atoms are positively charged, electrons negatively charged - another unity of opposites.

Around about 100 million years after the big bang the first stars appear. They bring light to what had been the dark cosmos. These supermassive population III stars, a hundred to a thousand times the mass of our sun, convert a portion of the original hydrogen into carbon, oxygen and iron. A billion years later, one by one, they begin to go supernova.

**The VAZ plant in Tolyatti relied on imported Italian technology and trialled many of the new automation systems that Fiat was planning to introduce in its own factories. Production reached a peak of 750,000 cars a year in 1975, making the plant the third-most productive in the world**

**Bacteria: around for well over 3 billion years and very successful. Picture shows carbapenem-resistant *Klebsiella pneumoniae***



The resulting debris provides the raw material that goes towards forming new stars and planets, including our solar system - which is about five billion years old.

Life on our planet appeared some 3.7 billion years ago. It too undergoes a series of "major transitions".<sup>4</sup> A single-celled eukaryotic species - whose origins lie some 2.1-1.6 billion years ago - led to multicellular organisms: fungi, plants and animals. Sexual reproduction - in spite of its high costs - evolved 1.2 billion years ago. Shrew-like synapsids gave rise to mammals 225 million years ago. Anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* have been around for roughly 300,000 years.<sup>5</sup> The human brain is famously credited with being the 'most complex object in the universe'. Since the renaissance and Copernicus, scientific knowledge has grown in leaps and bounds. As a result, "the universe is becoming conscious of itself, able to understand something of its past history and its possible future" (Julian Huxley).<sup>6</sup> Hence, we can confidently say that in nature there is the transformation of lower into qualitatively higher forms (as well as a dialectical interpenetration of opposites and the negation of the negation).<sup>7</sup>

Progress does not, however, constitute a universal law - a law driving nature, in all its aspects, forward to some "greater perfection" (the contention of Herbert Spencer<sup>8</sup>). Take biology. The adaptation of species to changing environmental conditions is dictated by reproductive success: it has nothing to do with achieving ever greater speed, dexterity, beauty or intelligence. Fossil evidence reveals many species taking an evolutionary pathway towards less complex, less energetically costly, forms: eg, "parasites tend to be much simpler than their free-living ancestors".<sup>9</sup> Moreover, extreme complexity,

occupying a very narrow ecological niche, might well risk ending up in an "evolutionary dead end".<sup>10</sup> There are countless examples of species extinction.

It should be added that in the far-distant future our universe will quite possibly expand to the point where it reaches heat death. As shown by redshift measurements, ever growing distances separate the galaxies. They fly apart. At some point, according to the well founded prediction, the dust and gases needed for star formation reach insufficiency. Red giants and black dwarfs come to dominate the cosmos. Galaxies undergo dynamic relaxation. Stellar remnants escape their gravitational pull. Even black holes shrink and ultimately disappear due to the emission of Hawking radiation. Finally, say in a hundred trillion years, temperatures even out, as the arrow of time finally reaches entropy.<sup>11</sup> Other end of our universe theories have been presented, such as the 'big crunch'. Then there is the idea of the "big bounce"<sup>12</sup>: the theory of *endlessly* repeated big bangs and big crunches has appealed to many cosmologists - including, briefly, Albert Einstein in 1930 - as an alternative to the singularity of the big bang. Though there are theoretical ways to surmount the problem, increased entropy probably discounts such an endlessly repeated pattern. What is certain though, as agreed by all modern physicists, is that planet Earth, our sun, our solar system, our galaxy are finite. Surely that applies to *our* universe too. Everything that comes into existence must go out of existence.

## Society

What about human society? It sees progress, but also retrogression. Nonetheless, as our sketch will attempt to show, the overall tendency, certainly when it comes to the forces



# USSR

of production, is progress. Tools get better, machines more sophisticated, communications faster and more reliable. Necessary labour is thereby reduced, as productivity rises. Such progress makes it feasible to transform the relations of production. But enhancing, perfecting and augmenting the forces of production does not automatically translate into progress in the relations of production. Only under optimal conditions do the forces of production and the relations of production stand in harmony.

This is how Marx's frequently misused statement that the "hand-mill gives you society with a feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist" is best understood.<sup>13</sup> He was not suggesting that the forces of production constitute the sole social determinate. As Engels insisted, any such proposition would be a "meaningless, abstract, ridiculous piece of jargon".<sup>14</sup> The application of Marxism to any particular historical period would amount to nothing more than adding one and one together to make two. Needless to say, Marxism is rather more sophisticated.

It is, for example, vital to recognise the different tempos shown by the forces of production - sometimes extraordinarily dynamic - and the relations of production. Once entrenched, the relations of production are slow-moving, sticky, tenaciously conservative. When there are changes *within* the existing relations of production, they are more than often brought about with the sole intention of sustaining the old order: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change" (Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa).<sup>15</sup>

What, in fact, brings about the shift from one socio-economic formation to another, is the always complex interrelationship between the forces of production and the sometimes hidden, sometimes open struggle of classes: slave-owner and slave, patrician and plebeian, landholder and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, capitalist and wage-worker. And, in the prophetic words of the *Communist manifesto*, the struggle ends "either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes".<sup>16</sup>

By definition oppressors exploit the oppressed. Surplus product is extracted and, as we know, part of that, in the form of tithes, tribute or taxes, goes towards maintaining the conditions needed, if exploitation is going to continue. A government machine, armed forces, law courts, spies, officially sanctioned religion - all serve to keep those below oppressed. Needless to say, being human, the oppressed strive on a daily basis to maintain or better their immediate conditions. And ideas that demand a social levelling, a reconstitution of society from below, constantly well up and gain a wide hearing.

According to radical anthropologists, "anti-hierarchical" politics date back to our very origins as a species.<sup>17</sup> Indeed the anti-hierarchical politics of our distant ancestors are what allowed language, cosmology, art, medicine, etc to flower.<sup>18</sup> Humans are rightly called "ultrasocial".<sup>19</sup> Hence evolved human nature surely explains why we instinctively find oppression (of ourselves, naturally, but also of others) hateful, galling, distressing, unacceptable. Tellingly, oppressors have to resort to all manner of elaborate ideological justifications to excuse themselves to themselves.

Original communism is remembered in the myths of the golden age (Eden, Arcadia, etc). Characteristically, therefore, people in the past believed that conditions had changed ... for the worse. The decline of original communism certainly culminates in the Neolithic counterrevolution, the oppression of women, the patriarchal family, private

property and eventually slavery. The slave is available in their entirety to be used by another - a relationship based on the undisguised threat of violence.

Although slave labour was sufficiently productive to allow a small minority to devote their time to war, philosophy, geometry, politics, poetry, pleasure, etc, the average slave is unmotivated, always resentful and more than prone to steal away in a desperate bid for freedom. Slaves have to be supervised, chained, guarded, terrorised - a costly overhead.

We can perhaps talk about a slave mode of production. However, the majority of the population in classical antiquity were land-owning peasant farmers, tenants or common labourers who had to hire themselves out (incidentally, the feudal or capitalist modes of production do not appear in a pure form either). It should be added that in republican Rome independent peasant farmers constituted the backbone of the army's legions - a fearsome military force. However, with the growth of aristocratic wealth the class of peasant citizens decays. Small farms are remorselessly eaten up by the *latifundia*. Slave labour replaces free labour. No doubt that affected the fighting capacity of the imperial army. We know that territorial expansion ceased: protecting border regions along the Rhine and the Danube became the priority and the army increasingly relied on recruiting Germanic *foederati*.

Slave labour, especially in the western Roman empire, was essential for the reproduction of the ruling class. Hence, when slaves have to be purchased from outsiders - that or bred internally - as opposed to being obtained far more cheaply through punishment raids and wars of conquest, the reproduction of the relations of production come to be ever more problematic. Trade declines. Self-sufficiency becomes a necessary virtue. Villas are abandoned. There is urban depopulation. Piece by piece the empire falls to Germanic invaders. What remains is fought over by mercenary armies headed by this or that would-be caesar.

Inevitably the old order uses every means at its disposal in the attempt to reverse the decline. The currency is debased. Taxes are hiked. The army and bureaucracy is doubled in size. Draconian measures of internal control are imposed. Surveillance becomes ubiquitous, along with the arbitrary seizure of property. A whole range of occupations are made hereditary. Meanwhile, lands are granted to Germanic incomers in return for military service. Emperors thereby preside over intermediate social forms. They also encourage the Vandal, Ostrogoth, Visigoth, Lombard and Burgundy kingdoms to buy into the Christianity, diplomatic etiquette and urban glamour of the Roman elite.<sup>20</sup> There is a degree of cultural absorption and on occasion substantial reconquests. But, finally, in 476, the western empire falls. Odoacer, a *foederati* general, becomes the first king of Italy.

The transition from one mode of production to another is, in fact, always long, contested and painful. Nonetheless, the feudal relations of production that emerge from the wreckage of the western Roman empire exhibit both higher levels of labour productivity and - intimately bound up with that - a greater degree of personal freedom for the oppressed. Serfs are exploited, of course, but, leave aside being tied to the land and the compulsory labour days, they work at their own volition. Moreover, the instruments of labour - horses, ploughs, scythes, flails - belong to the serf.

Capitalism delivers the legal equality between buyers of labour-power (oppressors) and sellers of labour-power (oppressed). That

equality is, of course, illusory. Yet wage workers are both freer and more productive than serfs. Indeed through assuming global proportions, through socialising labour, through relentlessly introducing one innovation after another, modern capitalism is responsible for levels of productivity which vastly surpass anything achieved in the past. True, at huge cost. Capitalism criminally despoils nature, superexploits subject nations and brings premature death to generation after generation of proletarians through overwork, below subsistence wages, slum housing, new diseases and dreadful water and air pollution. However, the strength of the working class grows in leaps and bounds and that puts socialism firmly on the historic agenda.

## Socialism

October 1917 announces the mortality of capitalism. But with the failure of revolutions in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Finland and other European countries, with white counterrevolution, with wars of intervention, with imperialist sanctions, Russia is left isolated and suffering appalling privation, chaos and famine. To suggest that Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin or Stalin should be blamed for this would be perverse. Such individuals commanded huge political influence, however, in the last analysis, labour productivity set the limit on their actions. Russia was a poor, culturally backward country, its capitalism was locked into a typically peripheral course of development and, as a result, there were only islands of industry amidst the agricultural sea. Crucially, the mass of the population were peasants who were subject to both the vagaries of the world market and semi-feudal forms of exploitation.

Applied in a mechanical way, this could lead, of course, to the conclusion that the Bolshevik regime was historically premature, an aberration and "would soon, very soon, collapse".<sup>21</sup> Hence, the Mensheviks roundly condemned the appalling privation, chaos and famine ... as if it were the fault of the Bolsheviks. But, though still speaking the language of Marxism, what they actually promoted amounted to counterrevolution.

Right Mensheviks, such as Irakli Tsereteli and Fyodor Dan, supported coalition governments with bourgeois parties in the attempt to restore capitalist stability. As for left Mensheviks, not least Julius Martov, they instinctively cleaved to Karl Kautsky, Rudolph Hilferding, Arthur Crispin and Wilhelm Dittman: ie, the German centrists who opposed the Independent Social Democratic Party affiliating to the Third International.<sup>22</sup> By 1922 this rump had crept back into unity with the official SDP: I hate social revolution like "I hate sin" said its leader, and the German republic's first chancellor, Friedrich Ebert.<sup>23</sup>

Menshevism became a self-fulfilling prophesy. With their help the majority of European workers stayed loyal to social democracy. Alongside the promise of a gradualistic road to socialism there was widespread fear of sharing Russia's fate. Attempts to make revolution in the west were thereby condemned to be hopeless minoritarian bids ... Russia was left isolated.

For the Bolsheviks, it should be noted once again that Russia was not ready for socialism (which, here, we can take as leaving behind commodity production and the transition to a system based on "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs"). No, it was Europe that was ready for socialism. Russia would, though, carry through a 1789-type democratic revolution and, with the aid of Europe, go *uninterruptedly* to socialism by

way of their revolutionary democratic (majority) dictatorship (rule) of the proletariat and peasantry. And life, in the shape of the 1917 February revolution, and then the resulting dual-power situation, ensured that this formula took concrete form. The Bolsheviks called for all power - ie, sovereign power - for the workers', peasants' and soldiers' soviets ... and thereafter Russia taking the first steps "towards socialism" (Lenin).<sup>24</sup>

The Bolsheviks thought they could cement an enduring worker-peasant regime ... committed, through proletarian hegemony, to promoting socialism in Europe. By contrast, Menshevism - or at least its main factions - were committed to a people's revolution in Russia ... and then allowing, even pushing, the liberal bourgeoisie into establishing a democratic, parliamentary republic. The expectation being something like a Cadet-Right Socialist Revolutionary coalition government. Once tsarism had been successfully overthrown (stage one), there would follow steady capitalist development (stage two), till eventually the working class became the majority and socialism (stage three) came onto the agenda. A mechanical perspective, which made the Mensheviks more than prone to act as a brake, when it came to both expectations and events.

Compounding their *false* strategic perspectives, the Mensheviks, but crucially their allies in the west, having abandoned agreed Second International resolutions to turn imperialist war into a fight for socialism, went on to constitute themselves the main social prop for the bourgeois order ... and thereby readied the ground for false strategic perspectives to come *true*. Social democratic parties formed governments in Germany, Austria, Britain, France, Norway and Sweden ... all of which introduced relatively substantive reforms within capitalism.

True, the actual course of history can be cited as proof that the self-fulfilling prophesy was right and correct from the very start. Eg, seen through the prism of the 1950s-60s long boom, this made a certain kind of sense. Fascism, the 1929 crash, the Nazi holocaust, Hiroshima, could be explained away as an unfortunate detour from an otherwise straight road to an era of "undreamed of living standards and the possibility of leisure ultimately on an unbelievable scale" (Harold Wilson).<sup>25</sup> Fabians, Bernsteinians and Gaiskellites claimed vindication. However, as the boom petered out, the spurious validity of the self-fulfilling prophesy led to a vision of the future that shrunk to the point where it amounted to nothing more than a capitalism that works in the interest of "the many, not the few".<sup>26</sup>

## Catching up

From a Marxist perspective, the burgeoning Soviet bureaucracy had no worth, had no right to an historical existence - except, maybe as a substitute: first for the proletariat and then for the bourgeoisie.<sup>27</sup> Shortly after the October Revolution there was a standing-in for a working class that could not rule. Economic collapse and war left little choice. True, the doctrine of 'socialism in one country' symbolically severed the bureaucracy from the global working class. However, the launch of the first five-year plan saw the bureaucracy reduce workers and peasants to a disempowered, atomised, exploited mass, while it took up the tasks of the bourgeoisie with a frantic determination - tasks summed up by Marx as forcing the "human race to produce for production's sake".<sup>28</sup>

Incidentally, Marxism, as a "model for development of Russia's backward economy", might have budded with Peter Struve,<sup>29</sup> but it came to full fruition with Stalin.

Indeed, the Soviet Union soon gained an enviable reputation internationally. After all, in the midst of capitalism's great depression, here was a remarkable success story. While industrial production in the capitalist world slumped by 30% in the 1929-33 period, in the Soviet Union it purportedly grew by 300%.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, unemployment was abolished, health services expanded, schools built and millions more taught to read and write. The first five-year plan emphatically answered what was widely seen as capitalism's terminal crisis. Militant trade unionists, anti-fascists, even high reformists found their beacon of hope. George Bernard Shaw, Margaret Cole and the Webbs enthused over the Union of Socialist Fabian Republics.<sup>31</sup>

Fabian socialism was, of course, always elitist, technocratic and fundamentally undemocratic. Fabians explained the laying of thousands of miles of railtrack, the construction of huge iron and steel works, the opening of new mines, power stations and oilfields, not by the additional surplus labour squeezed from workers and peasants. True to form, they cited the country's "elaborate organisation" and the "vocation of leadership" shown by its highest officials, crucially, the "alleged dictator", Stalin.<sup>32</sup> "Alleged" because he did not have the right character to play such a wicked role. The same formula applied to the establishment of a powerful military-industrial complex. Nothing to do with the surplus-labour extracted through the universalisation of piece work, the denial of legal rights and turning trade unions into tame organs of management. No, it was credited to those possessing the necessary "vocation of leadership".

The Fabians felt a genuine, if lofty, pity for the masses, but simultaneously considered them dumb, ignorant and in urgent need of scientifically trained educators. Naturally, they believed that they themselves possessed those qualifications in spades. As for Soviet workers, they should be eternally grateful. They were being raised from the depths of Asiatic barbarism by those possessing the necessary "vocation of leadership". Conceptually the exploitation of workers through the wage form had already been explicitly ruled out by Fabian doctrine.<sup>33</sup> Individual workers got the going rate through the differential rent commanded by their efforts, innate abilities, skills, etc. The administrators of capital and the directors of industry were equally deemed "productive classes".<sup>34</sup> The only exploitation admitted by the Fabians was by "leisured classes", such as the landlords (eliminated in the Soviet Union).

Anyway, by the time of the CPSU's 22nd Congress in 1961 the country had been radically transformed, compared with 1917. There can be no doubt about that. Not only was the Soviet Union the second superpower militarily. In terms of steel, coal, hydro-electricity, gas, oil, machine tools, etc, it led the world. Housing, food consumption and general living standards were noticeably better too. So was healthcare. Life expectancy for newborns rose significantly - from 44.4 years in 1926-27 to 68.6 years in 1958-59. What had been a largely illiterate population now completed secondary education as a matter of routine and increasingly went on to higher education. Moreover, in the physical sciences, engineering and mathematics, Soviet citizens were counted in the front rank. Nobel prizes were won in chemistry and physics. In space the Soviet Union notched up many spectacular triumphs: first artificial satellite, first manned flight, first space walk, first woman, first lunar orbiter, etc.

Such a transformation would have been impossible without taking a non-



capitalist course. The Soviet Union's version of original accumulation mimicked capitalism, but must be counted as a distinct phenomenon. And remember the Soviet Union did not benefit from the \$13.3 billion Marshall aid programme that saved western Europe for capitalism or the cheap credits and generous trade terms which allowed South Korea to make the transition to being a first world country. Nor was the Soviet Union accepted into the World Trade Organisation - as was the case with China. Nor was it granted Most Favoured Nation status by the US - again as was China. No, by contrast, the Soviet Union faced an almost unremitting hostility from the world's dominant powers. If it had relied on the market, the law of value, wage labour and the profit motive, the Soviet Union would probably have found itself reduced to a mere semi-colony of the capitalist west. Moshé Machover and John Fantham were undoubtedly right on that score.<sup>35</sup>

Carried away by what appeared to be an inexorable rise, Nikita Khrushchev boasted of catching up with the United States by 1970 and reaching communism by 1980. Obviously stupid. In fact, the end was already in sight. The Soviet Union proved capable of overseeing one revolution in the means of production ... and that most characteristically through opening new factories. And even when equipped with the latest German or American technology, Soviet factories were noticeably less productive than in the west. Workers' negative control, managerial lies, waste, unrealistic targets, a shortage of inputs and poor quality were all law-given features of the system. Surplus labour power had long before been used up. Hence without revolutionising productivity, stagnation always beckoned. Every general secretary knew it.

Even before World War II, Stalin was toying with various market nostrums, spells and recipes. After the publication of his *Economic problems*

(1952) the law of value, profit and commodity production suddenly reappeared in official texts - phantoms conjured up in desperation. But till Gorbachev and Yeltsin the turn to the market never happened. Growth rates steadily declined ... and in the 1980s became negative. Social relations had become an absolute fetter on the productive forces.

The *actuality* of the market turn, saw, though, not renewed growth, a rise to Canadian levels of agricultural productivity and Swedish levels of social security (as promised by the western advocates of 'reform' such as *Times* editor William Rees-Mogg). No, utterly predictably, the result was a catastrophic collapse.<sup>36</sup> Estimates are that GDP fell by around 40%. Unemployment, hunger, disease and homelessness returned with a vengeance. Life expectancy crashed too.

Nevertheless, for a thin layer of the apparatus, the turn to the market resulted in an exchange of salaries worth a few thousand roubles per month for riches beyond Croesus. Entry into the international elite beckoned. What happened in Russia was in essence repeated in other former Soviet republics. *Nomenklatura* oligarchs are tolerated by the state ... that or they seize the state: Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, etc. Hence the Soviet Union tumbles *backwards* ... and, for sure, 'new Russia' represents another historic dead end.

### Strange turns

Marx, it should be remembered, "expressly limited" his original communism-slave-feudal ladder to "the countries of western Europe".<sup>37</sup> This particular historical course led to the conditions upon which industrial capitalism eventually came to dominance. And it was *this* capitalism that demanded his attention. Marx entertained no encyclopaedist project to arrange modes of production into some universal sequence.

Biologists find all manner of

answers to the human condition through anatomical, genetical and behavioural studies of the gorilla, bonobo and the chimpanzee: less so with the earth worm, the basking shark and the death cap mushroom. Marx approached western slavery and western feudalism in the same manner - looking back from his main object of investigation. That did not mean he was ignorant of the Asiatic mode of production and other possible courses history could take (eg, Marx speculated that Russia, through the peasant *mir*, could conceivably embark on a road that eventually arrived at the "collective production on a nationwide scale": a destination that need not go through the "frightful misfortunes" of capitalism - see his final letter to Vera Zasulich in 1881 ... but, especially, the much more interesting drafts<sup>38</sup>).

Capitalism was important, for Marx, not just because it was the first world system (that is a system which genuinely unites the world into a single metabolism). Capitalism provides the material foundations which allow for the transition to communist social relations. Marx, needless to say, never laid down a doctrine whereby humanity had been deemed to have evolved, or was preordained to evolve, through four of five distinct stages, as was the case with August Comte and his various and many followers. No, as Shakespeare's prince Hamlet damningly remarked, "There are more things in heaven and earth ... than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (act 1, scene 5).

We are obliged to ask whether history really consists of a series of linear steps. No, surely, the evidence shows that, within the broad spiral of progress, "the most diverse" social forms should be expected (Marx).<sup>39</sup> Life is hugely complex. Neither the hunter-gatherer neolithic temple complex of Göbekli Tepe nor the ancient farmer-town of Jericho, nor the military socialism of Sparta, nor the mercantile Arabs, nor the Inca, Mayan and Aztec Amerindian civilisations, nor the absolutist monarchies of 16th and 17th century Europe neatly match into one of the 'classic' modes of production.

There have been all manner of failed transitions too.<sup>40</sup> The proto-feudal Vandal, Ostrogoth, Visigoth, Lombard and Burgundy kingdoms - all Arian, not Catholic - took over much of the western Roman empire, but, while they lasted, reverted to a modified version of the old order. So did the Venetian, Neapolitan and Genoan proto-capitalist city states. The Dutch republic can be mentioned in this context too. Because of the failure to sustain its position as the capitalist hegemon - defeated by English capitalism - beggarly proletarians and peasants were forced live on an "austere" diet of bread, potatoes and Calvinistic homilies.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, the elite had to survive on the rather richer takings that came from banking and brokering.

Then there are the strange turns produced by the decay of classical and feudal societies. The ancient Dorian colony on the Lipari Islands amounted to an heroic experiment in communism. Half the population were allocated to piracy, the other half to agriculture. Everyone got equal shares. But the expanding power of imperial Rome eventually finished it off.<sup>42</sup> Doubtless Spartacus would have founded something similar, if he had managed to escape from Italy.

The Hussite-Taborite ideology of 15th-century Bohemia became a real force because its apostles successfully mobilised peasants and the urban poor. The promise was of a millenarian communism. After scoring a string of brilliant military victories, its army finally went down to the combined forces of feudal Europe. The 17th-

century Jesuit reductions in Paraguay established a Catholic-communistic republic, but it too was doomed, once the Spanish monarch, Charles III, announced his decree ordering the expulsion of the Jesuit order from his realms in 1767. As for a declining capitalism, it too shows the widest variations: Bonapartist France, Nazi Germany, apartheid South Africa and social democratic Sweden. Each, in their own way, being a manifestation of the failure of the working class to take power and make the transition to communism.

The writings of Marx and Engels contain some wonderfully perceptive references to the danger of the communist revolution happening prematurely.<sup>43</sup> They also issued warnings about the communist revolution being stopped short or being limited to one country. Unless the revolution was the simultaneous act of "the dominant peoples" the Marx-Engels team insisted it could not survive ... sharing out poverty being a recipe for a police state.<sup>44</sup> But not to survive does not mean an immediate return to capitalism.

The cot death of working class domination in Soviet Russia saw the rise of something new, something entirely unexpected, something that has to be studied in its own right ●

### Notes

1. For a popular account, see B Greene *The hidden reality: parallel universes and the deep laws of physics* London 2011.
2. S Weinburg *The first three minutes: a modern view of the origins of the universe* London 1993, pp102-03.
3. *Ibid* p112.
4. J Maynard Smith and E Szathmáry *The major transitions in evolution* Oxford 2010, p6.
5. J Hublin et al, 'New fossils from Jebel Irhoud, Morocco and the pan-African origin of homo sapiens' *Nature* June 8 2017.
6. J Huxley *New bottles for new wine* London 1957, p13.
7. See K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 25, London 1987, p356ff.
8. H Spencer *Illustrations of universal progress: a series of discussions* New York 1864.
9. SJ Gould *Full house: the spread of excellence from Plato to Darwin* New York 1996, p174. Gould's book is a sustained polemic against the common assumption that the main determinant behind biological evolution is the drive towards perfection. Gould argues that bacteria are fantastically successful because of their very simplicity and should not be considered biologically inferior to fish, dinosaurs, sabre-tooth cats or *homo sapiens*.
10. For the arguments about "evolutionary dead-ends", see [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2730552](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2730552).
11. See [wikipedia.org/wiki/Future\\_of\\_an\\_expanding\\_universe](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Future_of_an_expanding_universe).
12. See IL Rozental *Big bang, big bounce: how particles and fields drive cosmic evolution* London 2011. Iosif Rozental worked in Moscow's Space Research Institute and his book was first published in 1984, under a different title.
13. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 6, New York 1976, p166.
14. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 49, New York 2001, p34.
15. GT di Lampedusa *The leopard* London 2007, p19.
16. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 6, New York 1976, p482.
17. C Boehm *Hierarchy in the forest: the evolution of egalitarian behaviour* Cambridge MA 2001, p12.
18. See the work of Chris Knight - especially *Blood relations* (1991) and *The evolution of culture* (1999).
19. See K Jensen, A Vaish and MFH Schmidt at [www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00822/full](http://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00822/full); E Szathmáry and J Maynard Smith, 'The major evolutionary transitions' *Nature* No374, March 16 1995, pp227-32; K Hill, M Barton and AM Hurtado, 'The emergence of human uniqueness: characters underlying behavioural modernity' *Evolutionary Anthropology* October 26 2009, pp187-200.
20. See CM Cusack *Conversion among the Germanic peoples* London 1998, chapter 2.
21. [www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1965/mensheviks-debasement.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1965/mensheviks-debasement.htm).
22. See B Lewis and LT Lih *Head to head in Halle* London 2011.
23. Quoted in W Lange Hans Paasche: militant pacifist in imperial Germany Oxford 2005, p230.
24. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 24, Moscow 1977, pp73-74.
25. Quoted in D Freeman *Television policies of the Labour Party: 1951-2001* London 2003, p41.
26. Jeremy Corbyn's 2017 Labour Party manifesto - [labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/labour-manifesto-2017.pdf](http://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/labour-manifesto-2017.pdf).
27. A thesis, in essence, upheld by the left communist, Amadeo Bordiga (1889-1970): he argued that the Soviet Union, under both Lenin and Stalin, "tends" towards and "aims" at capitalism (A Bordiga *The science and passion of communism* Leiden 2020, p277).
28. K Marx *Capital* Vol 1, Moscow 1970, p592.
29. V Autonomov and H Hagemann (eds) *Russian and western economic thought: mutual influences and transfer of ideas* G Chaloupek and N Nienovsky 'Peter B Struve as economist: philosophical foundations of economics and development theory' New York NY 2022, p101.
30. Official figures taken from Eugene Varga's *The great crisis and its political consequences* London 1934, p103.
31. See preface to GB Shaw *Farfetched fables* (1950): [web.archive.org/web/20170314140058/http://wikilivres.ca/wiki/Farfetched\\_Fables](http://web.archive.org/web/20170314140058/http://wikilivres.ca/wiki/Farfetched_Fables).
32. Quotes in this paragraph taken from S Webb and B Webb *Soviet communism: a new civilisation?* London 1935, pp339, 431.
33. The Fabians contended that Marx's labour theory of value was "incorrect". They wanted workers and capitalists to join together against the "leisured class" of landlords and other such parasites (G Foote *The Labour Party's political thought - a history* London 1985, pp26-27).
34. MA Briar *Fabian socialism and English politics: 1884-1918* Cambridge 1962, p38n.
35. M Machover and J Fantham *The century of the unexpected* London 1979. See [bigflameuk.files.wordpress.com/2009/12/expected-sec1.pdf](http://bigflameuk.files.wordpress.com/2009/12/expected-sec1.pdf). A thesis discussed in J Conrad, 'Other theories, other labels' *Weekly Worker* August 10 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1455/other-theories-other-labels).
36. See - J Conrad *From October to August* London 1992.
37. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 24, London 1989, p360.
38. See T Shanin (ed) *Late Marx and the Russian road* London 1984.
39. K Marx *Capital* Vol 3, Moscow 1971, p593.
40. Marx pointed out that "epochs in the history of society are no more separated from each other by hard and fast lines of demarcation, than are geological epochs" - K Marx *Capital* Vol 1, Moscow 1970, p371.
41. See J de Vries and A van der Woude *The first modern economy: success, failure, and perseverance of the Dutch economy, 1500-1815* Cambridge 1997.
42. In the 6th century BCE, Dorian Greeks colonised the Lipari Islands in the Tyrrhenian Sea. Faced with Etruscan pirates, they adopted a system of "complete communism". They divided themselves into two groups: the first cultivated the land of the islands which had been made the common property of all; the second lived according to a system of public messes (syssitia) and manned the fleet. Later the Cnidians of the Lipara Islands themselves turned to piracy: "Their socialism was a highway socialism, and naturally vanished when the helmet of the Roman policeman appeared on the horizon" - MM Austin and P Vidal-Naquet *Economic and social history of ancient Greece* London 1977, pp237-38.
43. Here it is apposite to quote a passage from Engels' *Peasant war in Germany*. Generalising from the experience of Thomas Munzer and the 1525 peasant revolution in Germany, he says: "The worst thing that can befall a leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to take over a government at a time when the movement is not yet ripe for the domination of the class which he represents and for the realisation of the measures which that domination would imply. What he can do depends not upon his will but upon the sharpness of the clash of interests between the various classes, and upon the degree of development of the material means of existence, the relations of production and means of communication upon which the clash of interests of the classes is based every time. What he ought to do, what his party demands of him, again depends not upon him, or upon the degree of development of the class struggle and its conditions. He is bound to his doctrines and the demands hitherto propounded which do not emanate from the interrelations of the social classes at a given moment, or from the more or less accidental level of relations of production and means of communication, but from the more or less penetrating insight into the general result of the social and political movement. Thus, he necessarily finds himself in a dilemma. What he can do is in contrast to all his actions as hitherto practised, to all his principles, and to the present interests of his party; what he ought to do cannot be achieved. In a word, he is compelled to represent not his party or his class, but the class for whom conditions are ripe for domination. In the interests of the movement itself, he is compelled to defend the interests of an alien class, and to feed his own class with phrases and promises, with the assertion that the interests of that alien class are their own interests. Whoever puts himself in this awkward position is irrevocably lost" (F Engels *The peasant War in Germany*, Abstract from chapter six: The peasant war in Thuringia, Alsace and Austria: [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/hist-man/peas-wg.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/hist-man/peas-wg.htm)).
44. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 5, Moscow 1976, p49.

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## RUSSIA

# From chef to payback

Eddie Ford gives his thoughts on the predictable death of Wagner's public face and the likely culprit

**Y**evgeny Prigozhin's abrupt demise surprised no-one. Indeed, a few weeks ago the *Weekly Worker* advised the Wagner chief to be very careful when going near any high windows, while CIA director William Burns gave similar advice. Given that Putin is "the ultimate apostle of payback", he recommended that Prigozhin does not fire his food taster.

Prigozhin might well have done these things - even arranged for extra bodyguards - but he made the fatal mistake when he got into his private jet that crashed en route from Moscow to St Petersburg on August 23 - killing all 10 on board. Something that was officially confirmed four days later by the Investigative Committee of Russia, following DNA analysis of remains recovered from the wreckage.

Among the charred bodies was that of Dmitry Utkin, Prigozhin's deputy and Wagner's founder. An avowed admirer of Nazi Germany, supposedly Utkin named the mercenary group after Richard Wagner, who Adolph Hitler admired so much. He greeted subordinates by saying 'Heil!' - wearing a Wehrmacht field cap around Wagner training grounds. This should surely puncture the idea on the pro-Kremlin left that the 'special military operation' was designed to de-Nazify Ukraine.

Of course, there are plenty of fascists in Ukraine - above all the Bandlerite Azov Brigade. But you have the same thing on the other side as well. The Russian right is certainly full of Slavophile blood-and-soil nationalists - Vladimir Putin is one for sure. Not that he is a fascist - he continues to *rule in the old way*. The so-called oligarchs are now firmly under the state thumb and the working class presents no immediate challenge - the 'democracy' that is permitted is highly controlled. We know what the result of an election will be before a single vote is cast: a convincing Putin victory.

A Wagner-associated Telegram channel claimed that Prigozhin's jet was shot down by Russian air defences over Tver Oblast, but there seems little evidence for this. Flightradar24 data indicates that the aircraft was flying too high to be hit by a short-range, man-portable air-defence system, while a hit from a more potent medium-range SAM would have caused much more severe and readily identifiable damage. Rather, experts have said that the large debris field - with the fuselage being found some two miles away from the actual tail assembly - indicated that the aircraft sustained a catastrophic structural failure that could not be explained by a simple mechanical problem. In other words, an intentional explosion caused the airplane to crash, whether due to a bomb or some other form of sabotage.

## Then and now

The story of Yevgeny Prigozhin is strange, but instructive. Having emerged from a prison stretch he found himself amidst the post-Soviet chaos of robber capitalism - actively encouraged by the victorious west - Prigozhin sold hotdogs with his mother and stepfather in a local street market. He later became involved in the grocery business, getting appointed by a schoolmate to the position of managing director of St Petersburg's first chain of supermarkets.

Always having an eye for a



Impromptu memorial to Wagner's two dead leaders

quick buck, he entered the lucrative gambling business and became acquainted with Vladimir Putin, who was then head of the supervisory board for casinos in the city. By 2002 Prigozhin was a multimillionaire entrepreneur, with investments in restaurants, supermarkets and construction - the embodiment of the Russian dream. When George W Bush visited Russia that year, Putin invited his American guest to dine in a luxury, floating restaurant on the River Neva that Prigozhin owned. Prigozhin was filmed personally serving both presidents and their wives - hence earning the nickname 'Putin's chef'.

He then got involved in the even more lucrative mercenary business, joining the private military company, Wagner - which doubtless began life as a private security firm, but quickly morphed into a deniable and highly useful extension of Russian foreign policy. Wagner was used to some considerable effect in Syria, Libya and Mali, and more than proved its worth in Ukraine - both after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion.

Throwing wave after wave of human cannon fodder at enemy lines - initially with grunts recruited straight from Russia's penal colonies - Wagner took the symbolically important town of Bakhmut: in this way Prigozhin became an instant hero not only amongst the nationalist far right, but also the regular army rank and file too. They admired his humble origins and blunt language. In the meantime, Prigozhin reportedly amassed a personal fortune worth at least \$1 billion.

But, with the story getting stranger, here is a man who was awarded the title, 'Hero of the Russian Federation', in June 2022 and once proclaimed his political credo as 'Motherland and Putin'. Yet a year later, after a constant battle with the Russian high command - especially defence minister Sergei Shoigu - he attempted a coup against the Russian president after severely criticising the invasion of Ukraine as being based on lies: an incendiary accusation, given that it is illegal to "discredit the armed forces". His Wagner group took control of Russia's southern military headquarters in Rostov-on-Don, the official command centre of the invasion, and demanded the resignation of the defence minister and the chief of staff, Valery Gerasimov.

Then, remarkably, he sent a column of troops and tanks up the main highway towards Moscow - which was attacked by helicopters loyal to Putin. Wagner troops shot

down an Ilyushin Il-22M airborne command post plane and several military helicopters - at least 13 Russian military personnel were killed. Moments later, Putin addressed the nation, denouncing Wagner's actions as "treason" and vowed to take "harsh steps" to suppress the rebellion - stating that the situation threatened the existence of Russia itself, which may have had some truth to it. Furthermore, Putin made an appeal to the Wagner forces, stating that "by deceit or threats" they had been "dragged" into participating in the rebellion. In reply, Prigozhin said that Russia's president was "mistaken", and Wagner fighters are "patriots, not traitors: we have been fighting for our country and continue to fight".

Yet within hours a deal was struck, in which Prigozhin called off his mutiny in the name of avoiding more bloodshed that could have led to civil war. His men were allowed to return to their camps in Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine, while he was promised immunity from prosecution and safe passage to exile in Belarus. Putin said the Wagner forces were being spared punishment because of their "heroic role" in the fighting in Ukraine - words that were never entirely convincing. Nobody believed that Putin would let bygones be bygones and not move against those who tried to depose him - it would merely be a question of timing.

Well, at the end of June, Prigozhin did turn up for the Russian-African summit in St Petersburg. He was seen shaking hands with ambassador Freddy Mapouka, a presidential advisor in the Central African Republic - a picture that was posted on Facebook by Dmitri Syty, who reportedly manages Wagner's operations in the CAR and was the first confirmed sighting of the Wagner boss since the failed mutiny. There are several hundred Wagner mercenaries in the diamond-rich CAR, helping the government fight various rebel groups, and over the past few years Wagner has deployed several thousand troops in at least five African countries, propping up local autocratic regimes. All clearly done with the permission of Vladimir Putin.

The last images of Yevgeny Prigozhin were on August 21 from a video address that appeared to be shot in Africa, possibly Mali. He said he was going to sort out al-Qa'eda and Isis - "making Russia even greater on all continents, and Africa even more free". He confidently added that Wagner is recruiting people and the group "will fulfil the

tasks that were set."

Forty-eight hours later his Embraer Legacy 600 jet plummeted out of the air.

## Responsibility

So who killed Prigozhin? The question is similar to asking who blew up Nord Stream 2 or who assassinated Darya Dugina, daughter of Putin's rightwing ally, Alexander Dugin. Obviously, we do not absolutely know the truth. But it is always sensible to start with the principle of going for the obvious. It is very likely indeed that Putin is responsible for the destruction of Prigozhin's aircraft (or the Salisbury poisonings), that America did in Nord Stream 2, and Ukraine was behind the car bomb that killed Darya Dugina.

What is the future for Wagner? Here it is important to flag up that Wagner actually took its business model from the United States: Blackstone, Xe, Academi, KBR, MVM Inc, etc. These companies were used in US operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. That is, Wagner was a

copy of the US turn to mercenary outfits. Then you had the very extensive privatisation of the war in Iraq. But, similar to Wagner, these American mercenaries from the 1980s onwards were not just in it for the money: they had a definite ideological character too - rolling back 'global communism', and so on. This is a tradition, as it were, going straight back to the Pinkerton men in America, who were strike-breakers out of thuggish political conviction.

Anyway, regarding Wagner, we should expect a name change in the relatively near future. It is unlikely, though, that we will see a repeat of a mercenary outfit playing a lead role in the fighting in Ukraine. After all, following Prigozhin's death, Putin signed a decree ordering Wagner fighters and all other private military companies to swear an oath of allegiance to the Russian state.

More to the point, the latest news about some sort of Ukrainian breakthrough in the south is probably pure hype. What we are seeing is a war of attrition, a more or less static front. We should not expect to see the Ukrainian army going all the way to the Azov Sea, splitting Russian held Ukraine into two clear parts. Instead, expect the fighting to slowly grind to a halt in the autumn as the rains set in - with Russia digging in again and reinforcing its defence lines.

Rather, look to changes in high politics. Like the elections next year in the US, with a possible Donald Trump victory, and change in Ukraine too - particularly following the failure of the so-called 'spring offensive', which in reality happened in summer ... and was not much of an offensive anyway. Perhaps some sort of change could occur in the Kremlin too. All of those scenarios are quite possible - a lot more likely than a dramatic breakthrough in the battlefields of Ukraine itself ●

eddie.ford@weeklyworker.co.uk

## Fighting fund

# Target exceeded

**Y**ou did it! Despite the fact that I wasn't nagging you every week because of our two-week summer break, we've now exceeded our £2,250 monthly fighting fund target! With, as I write, one day to go before the end of August, we now have £2,304 in the kitty - thanks very much to all those who helped us out.

There have been some very hefty donations over the last three weeks, but also lots of smaller - and very useful, of course - contributions. Starting with the large ones, there were no less than five three-figure bank transfers or standing orders. Thanks go to PM, SK, KB, AM and GB for those fantastic donations of over £100 each!

Other very welcome amounts came from MM (£75), TR (£40), GT (£35), JT (£25), OG (£24), DG, JS and DR (£20 each), SS (£15), and BH, CC, JL (£10 each), plus £6 from TT. Then there was a £5 standing order from AR, who as usual, augmented that with another fiver via PayPal!

Other PayPal donors were

MH (£100), RL, PM and DB (£50 each), AC (£30) and one of our keenest supporters in Italy, MZ (£10). Finally comrades Hassan (£5) and LM (£20) made their usual cash donations.

All that came to £1,592 received over the last three weeks, taking us to just over £50 above the target with a day left. A very much needed excess, in view of the failure to meet that target for three successive months earlier in the year. Now, hopefully, we'll exceed it by a bit more - I'll let you know next week!

But let's make sure this isn't a one-off and that the *Weekly Worker* can continue to play its vital role in fighting for the principled, democratic Marxist party that we need so much. Please help us do that by donating regularly to this paper. Go to [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate](http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate) ●

Robbie Rix

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THE LEFT

# Anti-Semitism of useful idiots

We need a principled defence of free speech and a firm grasp of geo-strategic realities. Mike Macnair discusses the case of David Miller

**O**n March 23 the House Armed Forces Committee of the US Congress received testimony on the “United States’ military posture and the national security challenges in the Greater Middle East and Africa”. General Michael ‘Erik’ Kurilla, commander of the US Central Command (Centcom, covering the Middle East), remarked that the extent of Chinese reliance on Middle-Eastern oil and gas means that “God forbid there’s ever a conflict with China, but we could end up holding a lot of their economy at risk in the Centcom region.”<sup>1</sup>

Made in a public hearing, general Kurilla’s statement clearly had at least two purposes. One was to emphasise the importance of Centcom in relation to the military budget issues that the committee was clearly discussing. The second is a threat to China.

But it is more significant as a pretty naked statement of the US’s strategic interest in the Middle East: not to achieve ‘cheap oil’, but rather to control the oil taps and thereby hold potential commercial rivals in *military* subordination to the US.

This military subordination in turn allows the enforcement of US economic interests. Thus the rest of the world was hit by the 1973 ‘oil price shock’ after the Nixon administration first part-defaulted on US debts to foreign holders by floating the dollar in 1971, then backed Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur war. Thus Japan was forced to reduce exports to the US in the 1985 Plaza Accord, triggering the country’s ‘lost decades’.

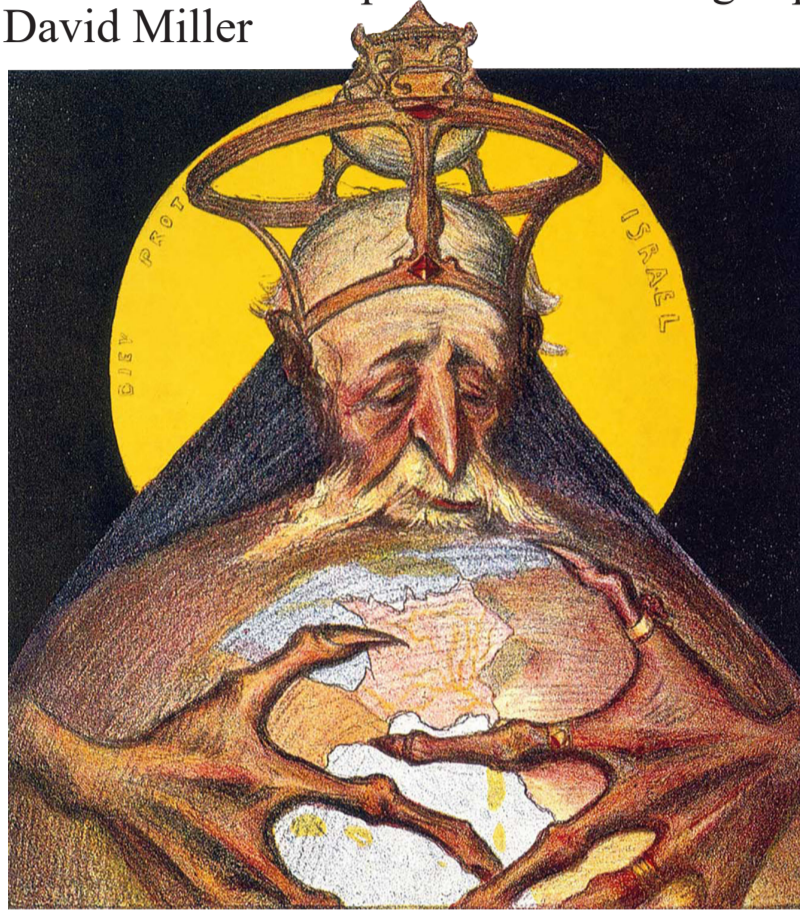
Kurilla’s open avowal of US geostrategic interests reflects a more general shift towards another open avowal - that of American nationalism - as distinct from US national interests being masked in ‘world order’ and other ‘moral’ claims. This began under George W Bush, was slightly rolled back under Barack Obama, and accelerated under Donald Trump - with Joe Biden continuing Trump’s nationalism rather than drawing back from it.

## Control

The US geo-strategic military interest in having veto control of the oil taps, which Kurilla avowed, was the real reason why the Kennedy administration decided to introduce large-scale US military aid to Israel, and why ever since then US policy has been governed by maintaining Israel’s “qualitative military edge” over its neighbours.<sup>2</sup> Eisenhower, in contrast, had threatened Israel with UN sanctions to force its withdrawal from the Suez in 1957.

This turn in US policy took place *before* anti-Semitism in the US had seriously declined: it was only in the early 1960s that Ivy League universities got rid of caps on the number of Jewish students, and in the mid-1960s that polls began to report a decline in anti-Semitic prejudice. Jews ‘became white folks’ because the Kennedy administration chose to make Israel a specially favoured vassal, in order to promote US geostrategic control of the Middle East. It was not the other way round.

But - as I have just said - the US was unwilling until recently to openly avow the geostrategic



Charles Lucien Léandre ‘Le roi Rothschild’ cover illustration for the anti-Semitic journal *Le Rire* (1898)

interests which led it to commit to Israel’s “qualitative military edge”. Instead, the explanation offered had to be about the sufferings of the Jews. Hence the rise of the ‘holocaust industry’<sup>3</sup> - though the US also often pretended in its diplomatic statements to act as an ‘honest broker’ for peace between Israel and the Arabs.

It was the natural and probable consequence of this duplicity of US public statements that there should be a rise of a variant of the classical anti-Semitism originally pioneered by the later 19th century papacy, under which the Jews are to be seen as a *privileged* class. In the new variant, this privileged class is responsible for US support for the Israeli settler-state and its crimes. For the US, of course, this was a bonus. Since the ostensible ground of US policy towards Israel was the threat of anti-Semitism, the fact that the policy *produced* anti-Semitism was a positive feedback loop: the more anti-Semitism the US could point to, the more it could win support for its Middle East policy. The small quantity of real actual argument from ‘Jewish privilege’ lends a spurious plausibility to these US and US-sponsored allegations.

Meanwhile, the ‘oil price shock’ poured money into the coffers of the US’s second-rank vassal in the region, namely Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states. That, in turn, enabled the large-scale funding of Islamist political parties and charities across the region, able to deliver forms of welfare withdrawn by states thanks to the impact of the ‘oil price shock’ and International Monetary Fund ‘structural adjustment’ programmes. Since the Islamist political movements continue to depend for their mass bases on welfare provision ultimately founded on oil revenue, they are not and cannot be more than verbal opponents of US Middle East policy. They are merely one arm of the dilemma offered by the US to the region: ‘the only alternative’ to Israel is

to be ... the indirect instruments of another US vassal state, Saudi Arabia.

In consequence, people who actually put forward ‘Jewish privilege’ arguments serve as *useful idiots for the benefit of US Middle East policy*.

## Targeted

This is the background to the recent left controversy about David Miller’s August 6 tweet - though it is a background participants in the debate do not really grasp. On August 6 Miller tweeted:

The facts:

1. Jews are not discriminated against.
2. They are over-represented in Europe, North America and Latin America in positions of cultural, economic and political power.
3. They are therefore, in a position to discriminate against actually marginalised groups.

It is not possible to get clear the context (what this tweet responded to); it seems to have been taken down.<sup>4</sup> But Miller had previously (March 13) made the argument on the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Press TV channel that Palestinian claims cannot get a hearing in Britain because of the wealth and social status of British Jews; so the August 6 tweet is not a wholly unexpected novelty on his part.<sup>5</sup>

David Miller is an academic by background, who has worked extensively on issues of media and ‘spin’. His earlier books and other writings on this issue have something of a ‘liberal engagé’ character: that is, they *assume* that the regime we live in would be a ‘democracy’ (undefined) but for media manipulations, and then go on to expose these manipulations.<sup>6</sup> In 2017, he co-edited with Narzanin Massoumi and Tom Mills *What is Islamophobia?* - a collection which reads ‘Islamophobia’ as ‘racism against Muslims as Muslims’ and sees

it as the product of the state and “social movements from above” - the latter of which are taken to include leftists critical of political Islamism, who were by a classic Moscow-trials-prosecutor ‘amalgam’ made responsible for the narrower *pro-Iraq war* ‘lefts’. The methodology of *What is Islamophobia?* was already a long step towards this year’s ‘Jewish privilege’ tweets.<sup>7</sup>

While teaching at Bristol University, Miller was targeted by complaints of ‘anti-Semitism’ and in the end victimised by the university.<sup>8</sup> This is a signal example of ‘cancel culture’, and the government’s open support for Miller’s victimisation is a clear demonstration of the utter hypocrisy of its stance against ‘cancel culture’ around trans issues, and so on. Defending freedom of speech, if it is to mean anything, has to mean freedom of speech for all - including people who for whatever reasons use really anti-Semitic arguments, as Miller did.<sup>9</sup>

Hence Jewish Voice for Labour’s official statement on August 9 is a betrayal of the principle of free speech, when it says that “Many were distressed by some of Miller’s statements in the past which seemed to exaggerate Israeli power, but we believed they fell within the terrain of academic freedom. This recent tweet, focusing on Jews, is of a different order and has crossed a line”.<sup>10</sup> The statement here, that ‘Jewish privilege’ arguments “cross a line” so as not to be “within the terrain of academic freedom” is a concession to official cancel culture, which will inevitably be used against JVL itself. A much better line was taken by the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine on August 18, which made clear, before condemning the tweet, that Miller’s sacking “constitutes one of the clearest breaches of academic freedom for many years. BRICUP was right to support Miller against dismissal, and continues to do so.”

## SWP

*Socialist Worker* offers good grounds to suppose that the tweet was anti-Semitic: eg, his words “lump together all Jews without any recognition of class or other differences. Miller targets Jews, not the actual ruling class, and plays on the idea of Jews as ultra-rich and manipulative.” But it follows JVL in failing to make a clear defence of freedom of speech and claiming that Miller “crossed a line”:

Bristol University sacked Miller in 2021 after some students attacked the content of his teaching.

*Socialist Worker*, while even then not agreeing with all of Miller’s views, defended him against the attack. A university investigation by a leading lawyer found there was no evidence that he was guilty of anti-Semitism or “unlawful speech”.

But he has crossed a line with these tweets.

This is even more clearly than JVL’s statement a retreat from their 2021 defence of Miller. The Socialist Workers Party is

unable unequivocally to defend freedom of speech, because it *practises* cancel culture against ‘racists’, ‘transphobes’ and so on, providing the Tories and their press with an indefensible target for *their* cancel culture and *their* ‘free speech’ frauds.

There is a larger background. Miller’s political evolution down to *What is Islamophobia?* is entirely consistent with the line of the SWP at the high period of Stop the War Coalition and Respect: that is, of prettifying the SWP’s Islamist allies, and making an amalgam between criticism of the Islamists and pro-war politics. If Miller has become a useful idiot for the US’s imposition of a dilemma between Israel and Saudi-financed Islamism, the SWP’s Gyorgi Dimitrov version of the ‘united front’, in which unity required cessation of criticism, set him on this road.

Analogous issues affect Tony Greenstein’s defence of Miller against JVL and the SWP.<sup>11</sup> This is, to be frank, somewhat tortured. It begins with the legitimate point that the JVL statement came out “on the eve of Miller’s employment tribunal against Bristol University”. But rather than defend Miller’s right to free speech, even if what he says is crap, comrade Greenstein goes on to argue with the highest degree of artificiality that Miller’s tweet’s focus on Jews being “over-represented in Europe, North America and Latin America in positions of cultural, economic and political power” is not anti-Semitic because it is statistically true. Well, yes. But would you make the same complaint about Jews being “over-represented” in post-revolutionary Soviet government or the Red Army? The “over-represented” claim is *classically* anti-Semitic.

Greenstein’s problem is that, like the SWP, he is basically committed both to no-platforming and to the illusion that there is a ‘virtuous’ nationalism of the oppressed to be upheld, while only the ‘vicious’ nationalism of the oppressor is to be rejected. Hence he cannot take a clear line either for free speech or against people (like Miller) blaming the Jews for the crimes of US imperialism ●

mike.macnair@weeklyworker.co.uk

## Notes

1. [armedservices.house.gov/hearings/full-committee-hearing-us-military-posture-and-national-security-challenges-greater-middle](https://armedservices.house.gov/hearings/full-committee-hearing-us-military-posture-and-national-security-challenges-greater-middle). The video exchange with Congressman Khanna (California) is at 2:51:17. Also: [fpif.org/in-the-middle-east-u-s-holds-china-at-risk](https://fpif.org/in-the-middle-east-u-s-holds-china-at-risk) (May 16).
2. References in [cosmonautmag.com/2022/02/anti-postone-introduction/](https://cosmonautmag.com/2022/02/anti-postone-introduction/), note 19.
3. N Finkelstein *The holocaust industry* London 2003.
4. It is imaged on Tony Greenstein’s blog post (discussed below).
5. [twitter.com/highlightsnews1/status/1635360710632034304](https://twitter.com/highlightsnews1/status/1635360710632034304).
6. Eg, his contributions in W Dinan and D Miller (eds) *Thinker, faker, spinner, spy* (London 2007), and the co-authored book, D Miller and W Dinan *A century of spin* (London 2008).
7. I have argued before against using ‘phobia’ as a characterisation of opposed political views: see ‘Clearing the ground’ *Weekly Worker* February 9: [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1429/clearing-the-ground](https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1429/clearing-the-ground).
8. [www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2021/october/prof-miller-statement.html](https://www.bristol.ac.uk/news/2021/october/prof-miller-statement.html).
9. Cf ‘Knavery and folly’ *Weekly Worker* June 8: [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1446/knavery-and-folly](https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1446/knavery-and-folly).
10. [www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/statement/david-miller-has-crossed-a-line](https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/statement/david-miller-has-crossed-a-line).
11. [azvsas.blogspot.com/2023/08/defend-david-miller-against-both.html](https://azvsas.blogspot.com/2023/08/defend-david-miller-against-both.html).



## POLEMIC

# Techno-conservatism

This is no time for degrowth, green reductionism or confining our ambitions to mere custodianship of nature, argues Daniel Lazare

**M**onthly Review - a self-proclaimed Marxist journal with Maoist leanings - has a new issue out, which is all about degrowth.<sup>1</sup>

This is an eyebrow-raiser, since a Marxist brief in favour of economic regression makes as much sense as a materialist brief in favour of philosophical idealism - or, for that matter, a Ku Klux Klan brief in favour of anti-racism. Given that the *Communist manifesto* calls for the "extension of factories and instruments of production", while the *Critique of the Gotha programme* predicts that "the productive forces" will increase under socialism to the point that "all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly", it is a contradiction in terms that stands Marxism on its head.

Not surprisingly, the issue overflows with tautologies and non-sequiturs. But what particularly stands out is its techno-pessimism - the belief that technology is irrelevant, when it comes to problems like global warming, and that the likelihood of a game-changing technological breakthrough is so minimal that working conditions can only grow tougher and more arduous. As a *Monthly Review* contributor named Kent A Klitgaard (an economist at Wells College in upstate New York) puts it,

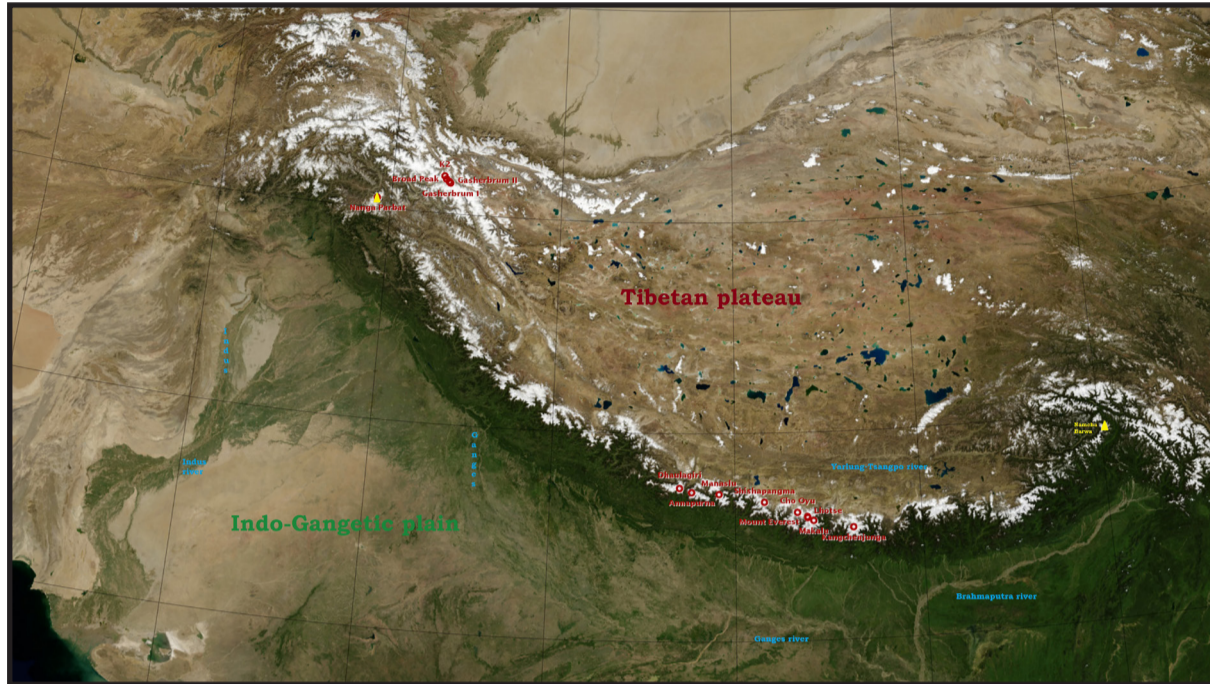
We can neither rely on technology to save us, nor believe that a transition to an economy that lives within nature's limits can be accomplished by a series of minor reforms. Technologies are built upon fossil fuels and, if there are not sufficient minerals in the earth's crust to gear up alternatives, the future may include longer hours of physical labor.

Hence, life can only grow nastier, more brutish and perhaps shorter as well due to growing natural constraints. As John Bellamy Foster, *Monthly Review's* editor, argues in the issue's lead article, "Price-induced technological solutions, which would allow continued economic growth and the perpetuation of current social relations, do not exist on anything like the required scale and tempo."

If they do not exist now, they will not exist in the future - such seems to be the *MR* message. All we can do is reduce technology's worst environmental effects by scaling back capitalist production, as it presently exists. Never has economics been more dismal.

Unfortunately, *Monthly Review* is not the only place where techno-pessimism is popping up. It is also on display in somewhat milder form in the *Weekly Worker*, where Jack Conrad recently devoted 4,000 words to an attack on "techno-fixes" - a term he never fully defines, but which apparently refers to grand technological schemes aimed at tackling the climate crisis within existing capitalist bounds. As he notes, various scientists and engineers are thus proposing to shoot reflective particles into the stratosphere to block out sunlight, to send a 2,000-kilometre-wide sun shield into a near-Earth orbit, or to seed the oceans with iron filings, so as to foster vast algae blooms and draw out atmospheric carbon dioxide.

But after dispatching such schemes with the contempt they deserve, Conrad falls into a techno-conservatism of his own. He quotes the environmental



**Himalayas from space: "At every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside of nature" (Engels)**

writer, Elizabeth Kolbert, on the so-called fallacy of climate mitigation: "If control is the problem," she writes dismissively, "then, by the logic of the Anthropocene, still more control must be the solution." He seconds warnings by Michael and Joyce Huesmann, authors of *Techno-fix: why technology won't save us or the environment*, that humans cannot "substantially modify natural world systems without creating unanticipated and undesirable consequences". He assails the "blind worship of technology" that characterises certain "left" accelerationists such as Nick Land, Mark Fisher, Paul Mason, Nick Smicek and Aaron Bastani - all of whom, in his view, regard technology as a *deus ex machina* that will somehow save man from himself.

"Either way," Conrad concludes, "the message is clear: leave behind the dangerous nonsense about humanity being the master of nature. No, we should aspire to being nothing more than good custodians."<sup>2</sup>

Good custodians? This will come as news to Friedrich Engels, who, among others, cited "mastery over nature" as humankind's defining characteristic. Where "the animal merely uses its environment, and brings about changes in it simply by its presence," he wrote, "man by his changes makes it serve his ends, masters it. This is the final, essential distinction between man and other animals, and once again it is labour that brings about this distinction."<sup>3</sup>

Is Engels guilty of "dangerous nonsense"? Apparently so. The same goes for Marx, who celebrated mass-produced commodities as "the heavy artillery with which [capitalism] batters down all Chinese walls". If Conrad is correct, then Marx is also guilty of runaway techno-enthusiasm, since it is technology that has allowed industrial capitalism to produce cheap goods in such capacity.

But Marx is not guilty at all. On the contrary, the guilty party is Conrad, who is going counter to a Marxist tradition that, in championing the industrial proletariat, has championed the industrial technology that gave it rise. Rather than denigrating production, Engels lauded the productive forces that socialism will unleash. As he wrote in *Anti-Dühring*,

The whole sphere of the conditions of life which environ man, and

which have hitherto ruled man, now comes under the dominion and control of man who for the first time becomes the real, conscious lord of nature because he has now become master of his own social organisation. The laws of his own social action, hitherto standing face to face with man as laws of nature foreign to and dominating him, will then be used with full understanding, and so mastered by him. Man's own social organisation, hitherto confronting him as a necessity imposed by nature and history, now becomes the result of his own free action ...<sup>4</sup>

Instead of scaling back human ambitions, Marxism represents the opposite: ie, say expanding to the point that man realises his true destiny as *homo faber* - the being whose mission is to build and create. Instead of leaving nature alone, humankind's goal is to remodel it in his own image, so that man "revolve[s] around himself".

## Technology

Needless to say, the question of technology is more and more pressing due to the growing climate emergency. As Eddie Ford recently reminded us, "Our screens have recently been filled with apocalyptic imagery from wildfires burning in at least nine countries across both sides of the Mediterranean." With flames raging "like a blowtorch" and some 19,000 people forced to flee the Greek island of Rhodes, July may go down as the hottest month in 130,000 years, as some 180 locations around the globe register temperatures of 40°C/104°F or above.<sup>5</sup>

Something must be done, therefore, and it is more or less inevitable in an era of breakdown and decay that certain deracinated ex-leftists will conclude that scaling back production is it. Thus, *Monthly Review* urges that we "reject unlimited, exponential economic growth as the definition of human progress", while Kohei Saito calls for "degrowth communism" in his 2020 best-seller, *Capital in the Anthropocene*, repackaged in the west as *Marx in the Anthropocene: towards the idea of degrowth communism*. If growth is the enemy, all we can do is to scale it back until it finally disappears.

Degrowthers do not have the

gumption to follow such neo-Malthusian logic to its 'deep-ecology' limits in which mankind, the ultimate invasive species, disappears as well. On the contrary, they want to have their cake and eat it too, by arguing that the great majority will still wind up with more, even if global society as a whole winds up with less. According to Foster, economic shrinkage is only required for "the most opulent sectors of the world population", while another *MR* contributor - Jason Hickel, author of *Less is more: how degrowth will save the world* - contends that it need only apply to certain sectors, such as "sport utility vehicles, private jets, mansions, fast fashion, arms, industrial beef, cruises, commercial air travel, etc". These are all things that hipsters do not like and thus will have to go. The rest can stay, even while the global economy shrinks overall.

But are fewer burgers really the answer? When Foster says that the "vast majority" can continue to grow, what exactly does he have in mind - the vast majority outside Wall Street or the vast majority outside such advanced economies as the US, the EU, and perhaps China as well? If so, what happens to the billions left inside? Do degrowthers seriously propose to subject them to a programme of economic regression?

The idea is absurd. American, European and other advanced sectors of the international proletariat constitute a vast repository of skills, knowledge and creativity that the rest of the world needs in order to pull itself out of its current predicament. With an estimated 719 million people living on less than \$2.15 a day,<sup>6</sup> the working class needs *more* production to provide such populations with more food, housing and schools and also *better* production, so that diets can become healthier, communities more attractive, and transportation more energy-efficient. Growth must be understood in both quantitative and qualitative terms, so that development can proceed along both lines simultaneously.

While degrowthers insist they are not anti-technology - Foster calls for "steady qualitative advancements in production in mature industrial societies, while eliminating exploitative labor conditions and reducing working hours" - it is hard to see how technology and growth can be detached. Technology leads

to enhanced productivity, which leads to stepped-up output, which leads to economic expansion. Degrowth, by contrast, means the opposite: ie, accepting technology as it presently exists and simply reducing it arithmetically. Instead of replacing a global motor-vehicle fleet (currently estimated at 1.6 billion<sup>7</sup>) with something more advanced, for example, it means leaving it as is, only smaller. This in turn means not only fewer cars, but older cars that break down more frequently, highway potholes that go unfilled, engines that breathe even more exhaust because they are less and less efficient, and so on.

Nasty, brutish and short - that seems to be the ultimate life goal. If anyone wonders what this means, there is no better example than the United States - the country that invented the car culture with the advent of the Model T in 1908 and one that, more than a century later, is suffering more and more of its ill effects.

With mass transit all but nonexistent outside of a few major cities, Americans depend on their cars for everything - to shop, go to work, take their kids to school, etc. Yet costs are zooming out of control. With new cars selling at around \$48,000 (a 25% increase since 2020), Americans have no choice but to hold onto old clunkers for longer and longer - for 13.1 years on average as of 2022, versus 10.8 in 2010. They are shelling out 50% more for used cars over the last three years, while spending more and more on repairs, maintenance and insurance.<sup>8</sup>

It is a treadmill to nowhere. To be sure, fuel is dirt-cheap - roughly half the price of petrol in Britain or France. But it is only cheap because growing costs are shunted onto society as a whole. These include not just the cost of global warming, but of highway construction, highway services, such as traffic cops and ambulances, and highway fatalities - the highway death rate in the US is 4.4 times that of the UK - plus staggering military expenditures in the Middle East in order to maintain control of the region's vast energy resources. Classical economics tells us that, when a commodity is underpriced, it tends to be overused, which, in a nutshell, is why Americans drive twice as many miles per year as the French or the Germans and 2.23 times more than Brits.<sup>9</sup>

That is roughly an extra 5,600 miles per capita, which, at an average speed of 30 miles per hour, boils down to an additional 187 hours, compared with other advanced industrial economies. This is what the much-vaunted American lifestyle has come down to - the 'privilege' of spending nearly five additional work-weeks behind the wheel per year.

What will degrowthers do about this dreadful situation? Nothing other than pare it back. 'Internalising the externalities' - the war cry of those who want to raise fuel charges to cover the full range of environmental, military and infrastructure costs - is no help either, since it invariably leads to political disruptions that liberal capitalism is unable to absorb. As everything from the Yellow Vests riots to ultra-low emissions zones (Ulez) has shown, such measures lead to anger and protests of a distinctly rightwing sort. Since the usual bourgeois-liberal response is to roll back the measures that caused the trouble in the first place, the result is more of the same: ie, more driving, more congestion and pollution, and more militarisation.



# What we fight for

What should socialist do instead? Motorists have a point, if, like degrowthers, they assume that technology is static and that raising fuel taxes will therefore accomplish nothing other than make it more expensive to go from point A to point B.

## Our response

But socialism offers a way out by pointing to something better - which is to say transport that is more technologically advanced, and more exciting to boot. High-speed rail might fit the bill in the US, where a once-mighty rail system now lies in ruins. But other forms of transportation also beckon: eg, 'maglev', in which lightweight trains float inches above a magnetised rail, or 'vactrains' that travel at ultra-high velocity through a vacuum tube. Where one can achieve speeds of 300-400 miles per hour, the other can reach 4,000 or more. That means New York to Washington in four minutes, New York to Los Angeles in 42, and Lisbon to Vladivostok in a bit over two hours.

This is not sci-fi fantasy along the lines of time machines and anti-gravity boots, but technology that has already been tested in Germany, Japan, China and the UK, where a low-speed maglev airport shuttle was in operation in Birmingham between 1984 and 1995. A technological leap of this sort is impossible in a capitalist system that has nothing to offer workers other than wage cuts and political decay. But it is eminently feasible in a socialist economic framework that enables workers to see the benefits of tamping down one form of transport in order to shift resources to another that is more scientific and more industrially fertile too.

Engels waxed eloquent on the difference between bourgeois and socialist accounting principles in an 1876 essay:

Classical political economy, the social science of the bourgeoisie, in the main examines only social effects of human actions in the fields of production and exchange that are actually intended. This fully corresponds to the social organisation of which it is the theoretical expression.

As individual capitalists are engaged in production and exchange for the sake of the immediate profit, only the nearest, most immediate results must first be taken into account. As long as the individual manufacturer or merchant sells a manufactured or purchased commodity with the usual coveted profit, he is satisfied and does not concern himself with what afterwards becomes of the commodity and its purchasers.

The same thing applies to the natural effects of the same actions. What cared the Spanish planters in Cuba, who burned down forests on the slopes of the mountains and obtained from the ashes sufficient fertiliser for one generation of very highly profitable coffee trees - what cared they that the heavy tropical rainfall afterwards washed away the unprotected upper stratum of the soil, leaving behind only bare rock!<sup>10</sup>

It is not a question of internalising the externalities, but of recognising that the very concept of an externality is misleading, since human activity is a totality, in which everything touches on everything else. In assessing any specific act, the fullest range of costs and benefits must be taken into consideration - the consequences for public health, for communal well-being, for labour productivity and, most importantly, for growth, the material basis on which further human development rests. This does not mean spurious growth in the form of McMansions and SUVs, but

real growth that leads to real human betterment. Where per-capita GDP more than doubled in the US between 1996 and 2021, for example, life expectancy ended up flat due to a dramatic downturn beginning the mid-2010s.<sup>11</sup> So which statistic tells us more about where humanity is really heading? It is a question that only the international working class will be able to determine.

Degrowth is a concern of an increasingly tenuous lower professoriat, as it jostles for jobs and promotions, while touting the latest trendy ideas in a society in retreat - post-modernism one year, intersectionality the next, degrowth the third. But workers are different. Rather than the latest trend, they want real growth that puts human advancement on rock-solid foundations. They want real democracy that enables society to collectively chart a course to a better world.

There is little of this in the *Monthly Review*, which dismisses technology as an after-thought, denigrates growth, and, while praising the goal of a planned economy, ignores the question of who plans and why.

But there is little of this in comrade Conrad's article as well. Basically, his piece in the July 27 *Weekly Worker* is a blast at economic giantism. He is quite good at shooting down orbiting sun shields and the like, but then shifts gear, as he switches to the very different question of the Soviet Union and a series of pharaonic construction projects that the Stalinist leadership embarked on from the 1930s to the 1960s - collectivisation, a 'virgin lands' campaign aimed at a vast extension of cultivation and, finally, a Strangelovian plan to detonate 250 nuclear devices in order to divert a dozen rivers flowing "uselessly" into the Arctic Ocean.

As Conrad notes, the results were catastrophic. Not only did the Aral Sea dry up, thanks to all those redirected rivers, but "ploughing, sowing and harvesting the fragile virgin lands of the northern Caucasus, western Siberia and north Kazakhstan saw productivity steadily decline. Soils were quickly exhausted and deserts expanded." With dust storms so thick by 1963 that motorists had to drive with their lights on in midday, the upshot was a body blow from which the Soviet economy never fully recovered.

This was a tragedy, and Conrad is right to point it out. Yet the problem had less to do with scientific hubris than with plain old Kremlin politics. Nikita Khrushchev faced a problem. Torn between factions favouring an expansion of consumer goods and intensified cultivation of existing farmland versus those calling for a continued build-up of heavy industry, he opted for a bold stroke that would allow him to increase agricultural production in one fell swoop, while also channelling resources into coal, steel and ballistic missiles.

The gambit failed due to political methodologies that, despite deStalinisation, still retained the clumsiness, crudeness and lack of democracy that Stalinism implied. "If the Stalin regime entailed the dominance of the total lie," Isaac Deutscher remarked, "Khrushchev represents the triumph of the half-truth" - a half-measure that still left him crippled.<sup>12</sup> Failure was preordained. By misdiagnosing the problem, Conrad gets Khrushchev wrong and Soviet economic failures wrong as well.

Especially curious is the way Conrad makes the great leap from today's geoengeers to the Stalinist debacles of the 1930s and after. It is by way of Trotsky - in particular his 1924 book, *Literature and revolution*, in which he declares:

Man has already made changes in

the map of nature that are not few nor insignificant. But they are mere pupils' practice in comparison with what is coming. Faith merely promises to move mountains; but technology, which takes nothing 'on faith', is actually able to cut down mountains and move them. Up to now this was done for industrial purposes (mines) or for railways (tunnels); in the future this will be done on an immeasurably larger scale, according to a general industrial and artistic plan. Man will occupy himself with re-registering mountains and rivers, and will earnestly and repeatedly make improvements in nature. In the end, he will have rebuilt the earth - if not in his own image, at least according to his own taste. We have not the slightest fear that this taste will be bad.<sup>13</sup>

According to Conrad, this is giantism to the *nth* degree. Hence, what "Trotsky preached, Joseph Stalin and his successors put into practice - not in order to realise some global artistic grand design: rather, more prosaically, to provide the state (and in due course, its citizens) with more and more use-values." But Trotsky was not proposing to cut down mountains as a short-term solution to economic problems in the here and now; rather, he was waxing enthusiastic about communism's prospects *after* it had reached a high level of economic development.

What is wrong with that? Is Conrad suggesting that Trotsky was wrong to go on about communism's glorious future? Was he incorrect in proclaiming humanity's unbounded prospects? Hardly. If we use Copernicus's *On the revolutions of the celestial spheres* (1543) as a starting point, science is less than 500 years old. That is five centuries from geo-centrism to gravity waves, from primitive stargazing to the James Webb Space Telescope, from the theory of humours to magnetic resonance imaging. If science has accomplished that much in five centuries, what will it accomplish in five centuries more - or in 50?

## Transform

Humanity will be in a position to exert control over nature in ways we can barely imagine. Conceivably, the socialist society of the future may want to use its powers to remodel the Himalayas. But, since ever-higher levels of productivity will allow it to produce more and more out of less and less, it may decide instead to set aside vast areas as untouched wilderness. But 'untouched' represents a paradox. By setting such areas aside, even as society monitors their progress and studies their workings, it renders them no wilder than a tiger in a circus or zoo. Even though such areas may still brim with mountain goats and the like, they will still represent an intensification of human power. Rather than contracting, human control will increase.

Ironically, *Monthly Review's* degrowth issue and Comrade Conrad's somewhat weaker echo came out at nearly the same time that a pair of South Korean researchers named Sukbae Lee and Ji-Hoon Kim announced that they had achieved room-temperature superconductivity with a substance combining lead and copper known as LK-99. While superconductivity is currently only possible at around -150°F, achieving it at, say, 70°F opens up immense new opportunities. With resistance eliminated, transmission lines would become hyper-efficient, waste would be all but eliminated and, since heavy magnets would no longer be necessary, maglev would become cheaper and more lightweight. With computer chips some 300 times as energy-efficient and 10 times as fast, computers would become more powerful and compact.

This is why physicists and engineers refer to superconductivity as a kind of 'holy grail' - because it would revolutionise technology, while slashing carbon-dioxide emissions, the main cause of global warming. Indeed, superconductivity might also prove useful in generating the powerful magnetic fields needed to achieve controlled fusion - a feat that currently lies beyond science's reach. If so, the result would be a kind of double whammy in which clean energies sees a dramatic increase, along with the ability to stretch each individual watt infinitely further.

Efforts to replicate such results have so far been mixed, so it is entirely possible that the latest finding may turn out to be a dud just like previous reports. Still, one gets the impression that scientists are closing in on the problem and that "a superconducting golden age might be just over the horizon".<sup>14</sup> If so, such super-abundance will not simply take shape under its own power. Rather, it will require an immense working class effort to bring it to fruition by re-engineering global production along lines that are new, revolutionary and, above all, carbon-free. While superconductivity will not solve the problem on its own, it could become a vital tool in the hands of the international working class.

As Trotsky noted in a 1926 speech - right around the time that the Stalin-Bukharin faction was tightening its grip - everyday life since the turn of the century "has been invaded by the motor car, the aeroplane, the gramophone, the cinema, radio-telegraphy and radio-telephony". He continued:

If you remember, only the fact that, according to the hypothetical calculations of scholars, not less than 250,000 years were needed for man to pass from a simple hunter's way of life to stock-breeding, this little fragment of time - 25 years - appears as a mere nothing. What does this fragment of time show us? That technique has entered a new phase, that its rate of development is getting continually faster and faster.<sup>15</sup>

Quite right - and another new phase may cause it to accelerate all the more. So this is no time for degrowth, green reductionism or confining our ambitions to mere custodianship of nature. If Marx was correct in stating that society has an obligation to pass the earth on "in an improved state to succeeding generations", then workers not only have a world to win, but a world to transform ●

## Notes

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■ Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.

■ There exists no real Communist Party today. There are many so-called 'parties' on the left. In reality they are confessional sects. Members who disagree with the prescribed 'line' are expected to gag themselves in public. Either that or face expulsion.

■ Communists operate according to the principles of democratic centralism. Through ongoing debate we seek to achieve unity in action and a common world outlook. As long as they support agreed actions, members should have the right to speak openly and form temporary or permanent factions.

■ Communists oppose all imperialist wars and occupations but constantly strive to bring to the fore the fundamental question—ending war is bound up with ending capitalism.

■ Communists are internationalists. Everywhere we strive for the closest unity and agreement of working class and progressive parties of all countries. We oppose every manifestation of national sectionalism. It is an internationalist duty to uphold the principle, 'One state, one party'.

■ The working class must be organised globally. Without a global Communist Party, a Communist International, the struggle against capital is weakened and lacks coordination.

■ Communists have no interest apart from the working class as a whole. They differ only in recognising the importance of Marxism as a guide to practice. That theory is no dogma, but must be constantly added to and enriched.

■ Capitalism in its ceaseless search for profit puts the future of humanity at risk. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, exploitation and crisis. As a global system capitalism can only be superseded globally.

■ The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote.

■ We will use the most militant methods objective circumstances allow to achieve a federal republic of England, Scotland and Wales, a united, federal Ireland and a United States of Europe.

■ Communists favour industrial unions. Bureaucracy and class compromise must be fought and the trade unions transformed into schools for communism.

■ Communists are champions of the oppressed. Women's oppression, combating racism and chauvinism, and the struggle for peace and ecological sustainability are just as much working class questions as pay, trade union rights and demands for high-quality health, housing and education.

■ Socialism represents victory in the battle for democracy. It is the rule of the working class. Socialism is either democratic or, as with Stalin's Soviet Union, it turns into its opposite.

■ Socialism is the first stage of the worldwide transition to communism - a system which knows neither wars, exploitation, money, classes, states nor nations. Communism is general freedom and the real beginning of human history.

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# weekly worker

**Chandrayaan-3  
comes just weeks  
after failure of  
Luna 25**

## New faces on the final frontier

India has joined the club of states to have landed spacecraft on the moon - a matter of geopolitics rather than scientific endeavour, suggests Paul Demarty

The successful landing of India's Chandrayaan-3 spacecraft on the moon has triggered a great deal of interest.

India becomes the fourth state to achieve a successful moon landing - after China, the USSR and USA - and the first to land on the moon's south pole (the Russians failed recently to do so). By all accounts, this has been met with wild celebrations in India and among the Indian diaspora in other countries.

The landing came at an auspicious time for Narendra Modi, India's Hindu-nationalist prime minister, who got to celebrate while in South Africa for the summit of the Brics states - among them India. The moon mission underscored India's increasingly important role in the global economy, and its status as the only serious competitor for leadership within the soon to be expanded Brics group, as against a much richer China.

Indeed, the question arises as to what the point of this sort of endeavour is. An Australian BBC presenter got into a spot of hot water for questioning why huge amounts of money were being poured into a space programme amid India's dire poverty and poor infrastructure. While this triggered understandable outrage at the patronising neo-colonial arrogance of the BBC, the question really is worth asking - and not only of India.

The United States, after all, has poverty, as well as an increasingly rickety infrastructure, as does Russia, and - despite its economic 'miracle' - China. Should these countries be throwing money at this stuff? Why do they? There is some marginal scientific interest, of course. The Indian rover will traipse around taking photographs and geological samples. There is much hype about the possibility of finding water ice, which in principle could support crewed lunar bases after the fashion of 2001: a space odyssey. But then, what would be the point of that? Are there not more attractive potential outlets for scientific research than discovering a few interesting facts about the moon?

### Costly display

Partly it is just for prestige. A space programme is what evolutionary biologists would call a 'costly display', analogous to a peacock's tail - the point of spending (wasting?) money on this stuff is to signify wider vitality. That only four states have achieved this feat - one of which no longer exists - sends a certain message. For an ex-colony, subject to the usual patterns of underdevelopment and catastrophic interference from the old masters, the point is even more sharply made: a space programme is far away from the highly-dependent, extractive, low-productivity economies typical of ex- and semi-colonies.

Though the first soft moon landings (that is, where the craft survives intact) are now more than half a century past, and we all walk around with vastly more powerful computers in our pockets than that which got Apollo 11



LVM3 lifts off carrying Vikram lunar lander

to its destination, this remains a feat of formidable difficulty and engineering sophistication.

Yet this projection is not merely about India. The coincidence with the Brics summit is salutary. America's failure to get the world on board with its proxy war against Russia has led to a fresh spate of announcements of a brave new, multipolar world order. On the face of it, there is only one serious challenger to US hegemony - China. (The EU might have had pretensions in this area, but its failure to sufficiently centralise, its disastrous handling of the 2008-15 economic crises, and now its total and laughable subjection to US policy in Russia-Ukraine have put paid to that.) Yet it need not be the only one. India has, after all, a similarly large population (and much higher birth rate), a high level of especially scientific and technical education, and so forth. It already has an impressive

share of global production (depending on how you count such things), and may plausibly be said to be punching below its weight.

Yet China need not square off against its largest neighbour (though occasional wars have taken place). The advantage of being the challenger for hegemony is that you do not have quite so much imperial machinery to maintain, or so many coupon-clippers to enrich. You can play nice, and flatter potential allies rather than pushing them around. So long as the Brics summit was a success - and it was - the prestige of India's "costly display" accrues transitively to its allies.

There are more - so to speak - earthly considerations here, however, which also have to do with grand strategy. Once we dig beneath the guff about moon bases, what do we find in terms of concrete next steps for India's space sector? There is talk

of becoming a producer of private satellites, and (we may infer) satellites for India's own military-intelligence needs. This is serious business. Part of what it means to be the hegemon is to control the interstices of the physical world. Before 1900, that mainly meant the sea - Britannia rules the waves, and all that. The invention of powered flight, and its rapid employment as a weapon of war and means of spying, added the skies to the equation. The real legacy of the space race was to turn the immediate neighbourhood of the planet into yet another theatre of great power competition.

In this sphere, the US long enjoyed unquestioned supremacy. Many of the weapons it sells to other countries effectively depend on the GPS satellite system and similar technologies to function effectively, for example; a truly independent military capability, at comparable levels of technology to the US, requires independent space capability as well. GPS-like systems have now been rolled out by a familiar list of countries - Russia, China and India. Though the Indian system as yet only covers India itself, and a 1,500km radius around it, the success of Chandrayaan-3 suggests that the gap may be fairly easily closed.

### Decline

The new space race, then, has rather more competitors than the last one, which would seem to lend credence to the wider multipolarity thesis. It would go something like this: GPS no longer has a monopoly on global positioning, just as the dollar is slowly but surely being replaced by a basket of different currencies; and just as the US no longer has unquestionable military superiority over its nearest rivals, and there is every reason to suppose that, should the American state succeed in provoking a war with China over Taiwan, there would be no easy victory.

This paper has always been sceptical of the multipolarity thesis, but there is an important truth to it. The phenomena listed above really are happening - although some (especially dedollarisation) are grossly overstated. These are all symptoms of US decline, which is quite real. Yet powers can decline for a long, long time. One could perhaps date the decline of British global power from the conclusion of the US civil war and the completion of Bismarck's wars of German unification, which resulted in two new great-power rivals by 1900. It was not

until British defeat in the early days of World War II, and the consequent transfer of global dominance to the US when it entered the war, that Britain was finally supplanted. And that is a fairly quick turnaround by world historic standards - the Roman empire declined for centuries before its hegemony over the Mediterranean was finally ended by the Germanic conquests in the 4th and 5th centuries.

US military spending continues to dwarf all its competitors. Its supremacy in air and sea power is unquestionable. So, for the time being, is its advantage in space. Its relative decline notably affects its ability to deliver favourable outcomes in its military adventures. Its various escapades increasingly lead to chaos and state failure, rather than the cultivation of local potentates as allies and clients. America's defeat, after 20 years of blood and treasure wasted, to the Taliban in Afghanistan was a signal example of this phenomenon - US power proved completely incapable of producing a viable alternative power centre, and therefore, after a gory 20-year interregnum, we have the return of the burqa, the suppression of religious minorities, and the general medievalism of the Taliban. The power to bring disaster, however, remains; and, while it is unclear whether the US could win a hot war in China's backyard, it is entirely clear that China would suffer defeat in America's (never mind India ...).

Hegemons are displaced, in the end, by military defeat on a scale sufficient to break supremacy altogether. The US is simply not (yet) vulnerable to such a defeat. What such a defeat would entail in the age of large nuclear arsenals is not clear, and a troubling thing to contemplate. For that reason, those leftists of a third-worldist bent who welcome a multipolar order should be careful what they wish for. Under capitalism especially, there is room for exactly one military and financial hegemon, and the road to such hegemony is paved with bones. The rise of political figures like the pogromist Modi, the personal autocrat Xi Jinping, the clown-car revanchist Donald Trump, among others, exemplifies the drift towards such apocalyptic warfare.

In the interim, initiatives like India's space programme (and, for that matter, the expansion of the Brics group) serve to put the Americans on notice that nothing lasts forever ●

paul.demarty@weeklyworker.co.uk

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