

weekly worker



China Miéville and Neil Davidson front SWP pro-democracy opposition

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LETTERS



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

Left and EEC

Gerry Downing (Letters, December 15) has me at a disadvantage, in that he knows the “political trajectory” of VN Gelis, whose book I reviewed in the *Weekly Worker* (‘Defence of the nation-state’, December 8).

I have no such knowledge of comrade Gelis other than the book, which I presume Gerry has read since it made him “hopping mad”. The book has a passing reference to “illegal immigration”, which I clearly express my discomfort with. My point about not having a gloss on it is that he hasn’t written this book to win or retain friends on the British left, and the book was set to be challenging to *Weekly Worker* consensus views.

The trajectory of the book, which is what I was following, proves to be quite accurate in its view of the effects of Greek membership in the European Union and the single currency. This trajectory is still being played out with the uncertainty over continued membership of the euro and EU, and would seem to give the lie to the opinion of Arthur Bough that Gelis has the mood of the Greek masses all wrong (Letters, December 15); in this sense, the book is a useful backdrop, however events pan out.

I have no disagreement with Gerry’s conclusion that we must fight for trade union rights and organisation for all workers, migrants included. I did nothing else for the last four years of my working life, as an organiser for the TGWU and Unite. I hosted meetings across the religious, national and ethnic divide in ethnic community centres of all sorts and spent weeks and months trying to explain to local workers the vital necessity of winning one union for all workers.

Management will, as they did at Lindsey oil terminal, ship in workers directly from abroad to bring down rates and, more importantly, to break local and on-plant union identities. A few workers did ironically display ‘British jobs for British workers’ on their homemade placards, but the workforce was far from all ‘British’. Workers who struck and demanded proper contract agreements and a level playing field in manning included quite a few Polish and other workers of non-British origin who had settled in the area, joined the union and identified with the locally born workers. Here is not the place to replay the politics of that dispute, but it is still being misrepresented. Comrades, in their enthusiasm to be ‘internationalist’ and ‘anti-racist’, need to take care they don’t end up supporting management’s ‘right to manage’ and some intrinsic right to hire and fire whom they like without the interference of the workers.

I’m a bit disappointed that Gerry should think he has some right to demand that I distance myself from the views which he attributes to Gelis. None are my views and nothing I have ever said implies they are. The struggle is international and internationalist, but it is fought where we actually are and meeting the terms of the challenge such as it actually is in the here and now. That means engaging in the struggles which the workers are actually involved in. It was in that capacity that I first raised criticisms of the CPGB delegates and other self-declared ‘leftists’ for abstaining in the vote at a Coalition of Resistance conference to support the fight for jobs at Bombardier, and offering no alternative resolution or practical tactical response to the mass job losses.

The effects on working people in Derby were devastating and demanded action. ‘Wait for the international,

spontaneous, simultaneous working class revolution’ just wouldn’t cut it, but, had it been offered, it would at least have been better than abstaining. Arthur’s scolding that we shouldn’t be trying to take these jobs away from the German workers who now had them and, basically, that was the way capitalism worked, so get used to it, was even worse. In later correspondence, Peter Manson proposed a call for ‘nationalisation’ of the plant, which I then went on to debate. I say this because Arthur Bough has continually misrepresented my opinions on this whole subject, despite the actual exchanges being there in the archive for anyone to see.

He is wrong as to the position of most of the left regarding the prospect of the capitalist EEC.

The views of Chris Harman at the time were typical of the far left: “Revolutionaries ... must be adamant in their ideological opposition to those inside the working class movement who resort to chauvinistic arguments. But this cannot mean that we are neutral on the question of Common Market entry. There are a number of interrelated reasons which make it imperative for us to oppose entry” (*International Socialism* No49, autumn 1971).

Again, I refer Arthur simply to the articles and discussions on the period within the Labour Party Young Socialists and the Labour and revolutionary left in general. A lead article by Ted Grant in *Militant* read: “Capitalist Common Market - no! For a Socialist United States of Europe” (*Militant* special, May 1975).

I’m talking here of the actual experience of our socialist anti-EEC campaign platforms (as against the official ones, which we refused to work with and frequently attacked, given their popular frontist composition and sometimes odious rightwing politicians). Arthur seems to acknowledge that the ‘far left’ generally took up a position of opposition to the EEC. His interpretation of their positions doesn’t alter the fact that they opposed entry.

The CPGB was highly influential in the unions and labour movement at this time, and their opposition to the capitalist EEC project was widely reflected in the labour and trade union movement in general and in the revolutionary left generally. As I recall, only the Maoists campaigned for EEC membership for the reasons outlined in my review. This was not, by and large, because of ‘nationalism’, though there were some stomach-churning displays of toy-town patriotism on some platforms and demonstrations of the period.

I don’t agree that “Marxists always favour larger units bringing groups of workers together”. It depends what the composition of that unit is and what its political basis for bringing them together is. The reunification of Germany under Hitler wasn’t such a good idea. As I had said in my reflection on the period, most of us favoured the slogans for a United States of Soviet Socialist Europe or a European Socialist Republican Federation. We did not see foreign workers as our enemies, but our comrades and fellow workers; we did though see the capitalist EEC as utterly hostile to our common interests across the continent.

I have no doubt Arthur’s purer-than-pure splendid isolation made little contact with the raggy ranks of progressive opposition to the scheme and he, as usual, seeks to denigrate it by attributing the most vulgar of political positions which it never held. This simply means he was standing in a different place than I was, and still is. I have never supported calls for immigration and import controls, by the way - I and my branch always opposed

the National Union of Mineworkers’ position on import controls and did this widely throughout the 1984-85 strike and the campaign in 1992-93, as the comrades of the CPGB would surely testify.

David Douglass
South Shields

Play the ball

The Greek left always were anti-EEC on paper. One of the main slogans in the decade after the fall of the junta was ‘EEC and Nato are the same, US bases out’. Now one of the main slogans of the people - not the organised forces of the fake left - is ‘Bread, peace, freedom - the junta didn’t die in 1973’, which indicates a connection with the past and a hope for the future of a re-born left.

It appears that all nationalism is deemed evil, even though Trotsky argued: “In its day economic nationalism led mankind forward. Even now, it is still capable of playing a progressive role in the colonial countries of the east. But decadent fascist nationalism, preparing volcanic explosions and grandiose clashes in the world arena, bears nothing except ruin” (‘Nationalism and economic life’, 1934).

It’s no wonder that the British left have such a reactionary past when it comes to the struggle for the independence of Kenya or even Ireland, which is much closer to home, and they have a ‘plague on both your houses’ approach to issues that concern less economically developed nations such as Greece, who benefited not one iota from joining the EEC-EU, but instead became bankrupt as a result, thus confirming in retrospect why the slogans of the 1970s were correct.

Gerry goes a step further, arguing that all immigration is good (irrespective of whether we are in a boom or slump), even when it is bad for workers, as the world becomes a global village. But the country with the most immigrants, presumably the USA, hasn’t even created a national labour party. Britain had colonies and was a leading imperialist power. Greece had none in the modern era, so why are they lumped together? Greek workers have no obligation to accept, support or condone mass immigration into the country because the bosses have had no controls since 1990.

Gerry Downing adopts the Bolkenstein directive of the EU and assumes he isn’t part of the fake left. The expansion of the EU into eastern Europe proved a bonanza for the bosses for as long as the debt-induced bubble lasted. Now it is proving to be a burden, but Gerry wants to continue as before, arguing borders should be abolished the world over, so the bosses can have a permanent oversupply of labour. His jokes regarding border controls are indeed a joke. They haven’t existed for over a decade or more, and near enough anybody at any time can get in or out (even those provisionally expelled), using a variety of routes, such as fake student visas, fake names, fake nationality, etc.

Britain has, by all accounts, experienced the largest intake of newcomers in its post-war history. A majority of the British people have been consistently against the EU as a result of that. Should we ignore this and assert ‘British jobs to all and sundry’ in order to make Gerry happy?

Under the new world order, anything goes and those who argue against controls are essentially for a race to the bottom and against protectionism, but, above all, against workers’ control. I have never supported illegal labour or the rights of capitalism to march untrammelled into countries, nor do I condone transnational corporations outsourcing, offshoring or inshoring, as well as their extensive tax evasion.

Gerry wants to adopt capitalist

policies for workers and give them the title of ‘internationalism’, as if the creation of multinational, polyglot, hybrid ‘nations’ is the task of imperialism, not socialism. The *capitalist* United States of Europe, as Lenin argued almost a century ago will be either unrealisable or reactionary. It resembles both. Greek workers should have no truck with it and, the sooner they dispose of the fake left, the better, as they will be able to take back control of their country, their economy and their culture.

I would like finally to say that it is difficult to respond to people who comment on books they have never read, but then that would assume the critics are actually interested in the politics and not character assassination. After all, if you can’t play the ball, you play the man.

VN Gelis
email

Bad treaty

My, this week’s issue of the *Weekly Worker* was quite an issue on left nationalism all round - from across the European Union to Libya, to the Middle East, to the former Soviet space.

It is only about a week before the 20th anniversary of what Russian leader Vladimir Putin aptly called “the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century”, still felt by workers the world over even today. It is also about a week or two before the 89th anniversary of what could be considered one of the unsung geopolitical tragedies of the 20th century. The treaty on the creation of the USSR was a historical mistake.

In my opinion, the debates that led to this episode had Lenin in the wrong and his people’s commissar of nationalities mostly in the right. The promotion of miscellaneous national peculiarities and ‘positive discrimination’ in favour of non-Russians within what Terry Martin called the “affirmative action empire” may definitely have been more positive than, say, the later discrimination against non-Slavs becoming combat pilots in the Soviet air forces. The entire Soviet space in 1922 should have simply been an enlarged Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

Jacob Richter
email

Lesser evil

I seem to remember a letter from Dave Douglass a few years ago where he said that he supported the war against Nazi Germany (even under Churchill’s leadership) because the Nazis were such an evil regime that their defeat was absolutely essential. The ‘lesser evil’ had to be supported.

Surely, the same logic can be applied to Ian Bone’s view regarding Libya (‘In the footsteps of Kropotkin’, December 15). Namely, that the slaughter that Gaddafi’s forces were threatening to inflict on the rebel-held areas justified the need for Nato’s intervention. For the west to stand back would have been diabolical.

It so happens that I believe Dave Douglass was right in the case of World War II, as Ian Bone was in the case of Libya. Sometimes ‘liberal interventionism’ is the ‘lesser evil’ which has to be supported.

John Rogan
email

Dirty hands

Dave Douglass is, of course, free to argue what he wants, where he wants, and Ian Bone is a grown-up and able to fight his own battles without help from me.

However, I am perturbed that Dave decided to launch an attack upon another anarchist comrade in the pages of a newspaper committed to a politics which, if it were ever to gain power,

would happily shoot all anarchists who presented an alternative opinion to their Leninist dictatorship.

Although, to be fair to the ‘comrades’ of the CPGB (PCC), they would be unlikely to get their hands dirty and more likely to be those intellectually justifying the butchery whilst others did the dirty work.

Darren Redstar
email

Go to war

Anne Mc Shane calls on the United Left Alliance to pull itself together (‘ULA must take itself seriously’, December 1). By this she means that it should adopt a party structure and observe democratic norms.

In my view, these are necessary, but not sufficient elements in the building of working class resistance in Ireland. Unity requires an object and the object of a party is its political programme. Any campaign to build a party must be spearheaded by the call for a socialist alternative to the austerity (I accept that Anne addressed some elements of policy in a later article).

Under the pressure of events, the ULA, at its formation, took a step towards such a programme with its demand for the repudiation of the sovereign debt. Recently, it took quite a number of steps backwards with a policy statement on the budget. There is no doubt that this was arrived at undemocratically. My organisation, Socialist Democracy, is an affiliated organisation. Members of the organisation are active in ULA branches. We first saw the policy statement after it was issued to the press.

More important than the issue of consultation is the change of policy. The statement limits itself to calling for cessation of interest payments on private bank debt. No longer is there any call to repudiate the sovereign debt. As a result, it is utterly reformist. The Irish government, utterly subservient to capital, should tax the rich and invest in jobs - the policy even calls for the workers’ pension funds to be used by the state instead of demanding that they be ring-fenced. It is, in fact, a left version of the ‘better, fairer way’ advanced by the trade union bureaucracy.

As Hillel Ticktin keeps asserting in the columns of the *Weekly Worker*, the capitalist class will not adopt a Keynesian strategy. The function of a ‘better, fairer way’ for the Irish trade union bureaucracy is to distract from their actual strategy, which is to support the bank bailout and to act alongside Irish capitalism, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank to implement the austerity. As I write, the Irish government is threatening their union partners, indicating that they must meet cuts targets that they themselves select and help implement.

The function of the budget statement by the ULA is to avoid a rupture with the ‘left’ bureaucracy. The results of such a strategy are, as Anne Mc Shane indicated, the Dublin march. ULA members, themselves politically silenced, marched behind the programme of the bureaucracy and alongside Sinn Féin - themselves implementing cuts in the north of Ireland.

Anne believes the composition of the march was the result of a last-minute deal. My understanding is that from the first meeting on September 10 the only issue was building an alliance around the march, with any politics a very distant second. It was called by the ULA, but aimed at a broader coalition that would inevitably not be mobilised around a repudiation of the debt.

The meeting she refers to happened more recently, on November 5, and was formally called by Mick O’Reilly,

speaking for Dublin Trades Council. Mick announced a new campaign, the Campaign against Austerity, and opened the meeting by claiming that the Irish Congress of Trade Unions could support this campaign and the pre-budget march, as there was nothing in the Croke Park agreement to prevent them doing so. The SD member at the meeting was the only one to challenge Mick on this, saying that the trade union leadership had played the role of enablers for the offensive against the working class and that the troika had incorporated the agreement into the memorandum of understanding, around which the austerity was built. The condition for this popular front was that there be no repeat of the workers’ protests against the union leaderships that marked the November demonstrations last year.

Mick was unable to turn ICTU ‘support’ into a national mobilisation for the Dublin march because the union leadership, having implemented the last budget, had agreed through the consultation mechanisms of social partnership the main features of the upcoming budget. Later, in an interview on RTE news, Shay Coady, general secretary of the Impact union, clarified matters when he declared that it shouldn’t be forgotten that these measures would not have been possible without a good, solid agreement with the trade union movement, such as Croke Park.

The ULA leadership are unwilling to break with the left bureaucracy and are unable to present a credible alternative. As Anne Mc Shane says, they produce a budget statement that doesn’t mention the eye-wateringly low corporation tax. Another omission is blindness to a union bureaucracy openly implementing the austerity. The statement lists Greece and Italy as under occupation, but fails to question the legitimacy of the Irish government, itself under the direct supervision of the ECB and IMF.

If the workers are to oppose the bailout and austerity, then they must go to war, expropriating the resources and services that the capitalists want to destroy in the service of imperialism, close down the financial structures that are bleeding them dry, begin to construct a workers’ bank, link up with workers’ struggles across Europe.

I have written extensively about this because if the issue is simply one of democracy, then there is a fairly wide base of dissatisfied activists who can be mobilised. If the issue is one of programme, then convincing a majority of ULA members is a much harder task. The worry is that the momentum generated by the ULA’s formation is gradually slipping away without anyone confronting the political issues facing the working class.

John McAnulty
 Socialist Democracy

Dumb legalism

While I admire Trotsky as a Marxist thinker in many ways, I am not a Trotskyist by any means. Paul Anderson’s decision to frame my views as ‘Trotskyist’ say more about his ideological leanings than mine (Letters, December 15).

Yes, Nato military aggression is a threat to many workers around the world, and is still the main military threat. However, for the workers of Zimbabwe, Chinese-made weapons used by the Zanu-PF party’s security forces and the army are currently a bigger threat to them than Nato is. Again I state the point that Mugabe is an opportunist willing to tolerate whoever wishes to invest capital in Zimbabwe so long as they respect his autocratic rule. The principled way to approach Zimbabwe is to have a Hands Off the People of Iran-like organisation that is anti-regime and anti-intervention.

The Chinese can talk about respect for sovereignty all they want, but sooner or later their investments in

Africa are going to be challenged by African workers. They can then take the position that they are merely coming to the aid of a friendly government. Given that they didn’t even use this excuse when supporting Unita in Angola, Chinese capital will show its true colours when it is finally challenged by African workers.

I’ve never given tacit support to western intervention through foreign intelligence or Nato bombings. I loathed Gaddafi, but never for one minute supported what Nato did. Those who do are no better than the idiots at *Harry’s Place* and certainly not on the left. These leaders don’t deserve to somehow be put on a different level than Nato. They are dictators and bourgeois nationalists. When I call for Nato to get out of Libya, I do so with no illusions as to what Gaddafi is and was. There are, however, many Marxist-Leninists happy to fly the Gaddafi green flag of Libya and post sympathetic pictures of him, utterly ignoring the fact that he stood in the way of socialism in Libya and Africa.

National sovereignty and national self-determination are two different things. If we are going to fetishise national sovereignty, then I guess we should denounce Lenin as a social-imperialist for the Polish-Soviet war. I would argue that national self-determination was very much a tactic used by the Bolsheviks, given the situation in the Russian empire, that became a principle. If the UK were to have a socialist revolution today, but Wales decided to use its self-determination to opt out of a socialist federal republic and remain capitalist, do you really think that would be tolerated for long? I am not against national self-determination under socialism, but it becomes unworkable if large swathes of multinational states go socialist while smaller fragments do not.

Anderson’s obsession with national sovereignty is thoroughly bourgeois legalism, which was taken up by counterrevolutionary Stalinism. The real dumbing down of the left is the fact that there are still people who see Mugabe, Gaddafi and Assad as somehow worthy of support.

Roscoe Turi
 email

No socialist

According to *Businessweek* magazine (December 19), president Hugo Chávez of Venezuela is not exactly practising what he preaches:

“Dollar-denominated bonds issued by FertiNitro ... were trading at 68 cents on the dollar the day before Chávez nationalised the company in October 2010 ... On November 22, the government offered to buy back the bonds for \$1.05 on the dollar, or 54% more than they were trading for before nationalisation. ‘For all the noise associated with Chávez, he’s been very good to bondholders’, says Raymond Zucaro ... at SW Asset Management ...”.

Though it is clear the Venezuelan masses want genuine socialism, it would appear that Chávez is imposing a form of state capitalism. This confusion persists in Venezuela because Chávez makes ‘socialist’ speeches, while developing an economy similar to Argentina under Peron, who also carried out major reforms for Argentinian workers, while preventing change outside of state control.

Earl Gilman
 email

Murder worship

I see that the ‘Dear Leader’ has passed away to whatever celestial Shangri-La that the DPRK potentates go to when their earthly form degenerates (probably from having to churn out a book every couple of days).

At this stage, I wonder if we are going to be treated to any comedy letters in your column from the DPRK

Stalinist death, torture and starvation worshippers out there? No doubt we can choose between paranoid ramblings of conspiracy theorists going for some sort of Chinese/western-backed assassination, to weeping adoration from some middle class twerps idolising a non-existent ‘workers’ paradise’ that strangely they never risked defecting to, preferring to stay in the People’s Republic of Fucking North London with all its lousy wine bars and shit restaurants instead. If we’re really lucky, we might get some credulous fool wringing their hands about how the Americans - sorry, ‘imperialists’ - might use this opportunity to invade and somehow plunder a nation of undernourished skeletons with nothing much to offer at all, as if the US public and economy weren’t already exhausted by two drawn-out wars that its inept Congress has yet to actually pay for.

Hopefully, somewhere, some enlightened soul (not I) may eloquently discuss the fact that North Korea is such a basket case that South Korea dreads its collapse, knowing that even the 13th richest capitalist economy cannot hope to cope with the absorption of its impoverished and starving northern neighbour without Chinese and western assistance.

Personally, I hope that just one person out there who still hankers after the Orwellian dead end of totalitarian rule by ‘the left’ might find the time to read Barbara Demick’s wonderful *Nothing to envy: real lives in North Korea* and start to grasp that Marxists everywhere, even some who write in this paper, need to understand that the past is done, that many, many horrors were perpetrated in the name of ‘the left’ and that our purpose should be to move on and build a mass movement that embraces freedom, tolerance, equality and prosperity as the purpose of the making of a post-capitalist and, yes, a post-revolutionary human future.

Lenin said in April 1917: “it is time to cast off the soiled shirt and to put on clean linen.” We should all consider what we are doing here and what we want for humanity, so that perhaps then we might begin to understand, think and formulate what is to be done.

Alan Smithee
 email

How much?

David Lee says that no-one should be allowed to earn more than £75,000 a year (Letters, December 15). Surely, no-one would need that much. Why not provide all citizens with a free supply of basic essentials - eg, bread, eggs, potatoes, etc? Foreign travel would need to be controlled to prevent the wealthy fleeing with their ill-gotten gains and to stop key workers moving abroad for higher pay.

Foreign governments may object to their banks, petro-chemical companies and power companies being seized, so we would need to develop arrangements with like-minded governments in North Korea, Cuba, etc.

Stefan Gerlach
 email

Subtle

Harvey Filben observes that the left has approved various “outbursts of bloodthirsty rhetoric”, such as advocating the idea that “humanity will not be happy until the last bureaucrat is hung with the guts of the last capitalist” (‘Keep quiet and drive’, December 8).

He seems to share some amusement with this idea when he proposes that “21,000 carefully crafted death-threats” would be a creative response to Jeremy Clarkson’s rightwing opinions about strikers. Does he also find laughable the Stalinist/Maoist line that the physical liquidation of capitalists (and their allies amongst the intelligentsia, workers and the peasantry) is required to build a classless, communist society? Or is his irony too subtle for me?

Paul B Smith
 email

ACTION

CPGB podcasts

Every Monday we upload a podcast of commentary on the current political situation. In addition, the site features voice files of public meetings and other events: <http://cpgb.podbean.com>.

Northern Communist Forum

Sunday January 8, 3pm: Friends House, 6 Mount Street, Manchester M2. Discussing *From Lenin to Stalin* by Victor Serge. Organised by CPGB North: <http://northerncommunists.wordpress.com>.

End the siege of Gaza

Tuesday December 27, 1pm: Rally, Israeli embassy, Kensington High Street, London WC1 (nearest tube: High Street Kensington). Three years since Israeli attack on Gaza, December 2008. Called by Palestine Solidarity Campaign, British Muslim Initiative, Jews for Justice for Palestinians, Friends of Al Aqsa, Stop the War Coalition, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Palestinian Forum in Britain. Info: www.stopwar.org.uk.

PCS Left Unity

Saturday January 7, 11am to 4pm: Open meeting on pensions, Friends Meeting House, Euston Road, London WC1. Organised by PCS Left Unity: www.leftunity.org.uk.

Socialist films

Sunday January 8, 11am: screenings, Renoir Cinema, Brunswick Square, London WC1. John Sekler’s *Locked out* (USA 2010, 60 minutes); Emma-Louise Williams’ *Under the cranes* (UK 2011, 56 minutes). Organised by London Socialist Film Co-op: www.socialistfilm.blogspot.com.

Stand firm!

Tuesday January 10, 12.30pm: Lobby of Unison service group executives, Unison HQ, 130 Euston Road, London NW1. Organised by National Shop Stewards Network: <http://www.shopstewards.net>.

Fair pensions for all

Thursday January 12, 2pm: Lobby the TUC, 23-28 Great Russell Street, London WC1. No sellout. Organised by Unite the Resistance: <http://uniteresist.org>.

Don’t end the fight

Saturday January 14, 12 noon: Emergency national meeting on pensions, 12 noon to 4pm, central London - venue to be confirmed. Organised by Unite the Resistance: <http://uniteresist.org>.

Socialist nationalism

Tuesday January 17, 5pm: Seminar, Room 915, Adam Smith Building, University of Glasgow - ‘Racism and the iron cage of socialist nationalism’. Speaker: Satnam Virdee (University of Glasgow). Organised by Centre for the Study of Socialist Theory and Movements: gziinfo@udcf.gla.ac.uk.

Fundamentals of political economy

Saturday January 21, Sunday January 22, 10am to 5pm: Weekend school, University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1 (nearest tubes: Warren Street, Goodge Street). Labour theory of value (Moshé Machover); Money and finance (Hillel Ticktin); Political economy and the state (Werner Bonefeld). Against Keynesianism (Mike Macnair). Organised by CPGB: office@cpgb.org.uk.

Terminal crisis?

Wednesday January 25, 7.30pm: Meeting, Partick Burgh Hall, 9 Burgh Hall Street, Glasgow G11. ‘Is this the terminal crisis for capitalism?’ Speaker: Hillel Ticktin. Organised by the Glasgow Marxist Forum: lawatwork7@hotmail.com.

No intervention in the Middle East

Saturday January 28, 2pm: Picket, US embassy, Grosvenor Square, London W8. Oppose growing threats and increased sanctions against Iraq; signs of covert intervention in Iraq and Syria. Oppose all military intervention from the west in the region. Organised by Stop the War Coalition: stopwar.org.uk.

LGBTQ rights

Saturday January 28, 10am: General assembly, Ridgeway Community Centre, Dulverton Drive, Furzton, Milton Keynes. Open to all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning organisations in south-east England. Organised by Q Alliance: ga@qalliance.org.uk.

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.

Weekly Worker

This is the final edition of 2011. The first issue of 2012 will come out on Thursday January 12.

Signs of an awakening

Calls for internal democracy within the Socialist Workers Party can only be welcomed. **Peter Manson** reports on the third and final 'Pre-conference Bulletin'

After the drabness of the first two Socialist Workers Party *Pre-conference Bulletins*, a number of surprising but nonetheless highly positive contributions have appeared in the third. These publications, also known as *Internal Bulletins*, are supposed to prepare for the annual conference (in 2012 to be held in London over the weekend of January 6-8), but are normally dominated by routine central committee exhortations and deadly dull branch reports about how many *Socialist Workers* have been sold and new members recruited.

IB No3 has its fair share of both those, but there are also several interesting, often critical, documents sent in by rank-and-file members, either individually or together with their fellow-comrades. Leading the way is the submission entitled 'Party democracy in an era of revolution' from eight comrades from Cambridge, London, Oxford and Edinburgh. For reasons of alleged security, only the first names of contributors are given, and two of the eight that stand out are "Neil" from Edinburgh and "China" from North London. This document's style appears to be that of Neil Davidson, author on Scottish history and a leading SWP figure based in Edinburgh. And I doubt if there is anyone apart from comrade China Miéville, the fantasy-fiction writer and pro-democracy critic, with that first name in the SWP (or perhaps in north London).

Hot on the heels of this first piece are those from "Paris (Manchester)", entitled 'A contribution to the debate on democracy and the party'; "Matthew (West London)", who writes on 'Dissent and democracy'; "Jules and Luke (Merseyside)", and John (Central London)", whose article is headed 'On party and class again'; and finally "Justin (Cambridge)", who writes about the SWP's 'Democratic deficit'.

Comrade Davidson *et al* explain their aim in writing their submission: "What we seek ... is to open a genuine debate on party democracy at conference - not in the form of the CC position, which is posed in a 'take it or leave it' basis; but by exploring the different options which might enhance party democracy and, through it, our ability to act effectively."

This link between democracy and effectiveness is a common theme among all the above submissions. The eight themselves refer to the absence of a thriving internal democracy as one of the "structural limits to growth" - a reason why "our ability to recruit and retain membership beyond an upper limit of between 6,000 and 7,000 people remains unaddressed". (It ought to be pointed out that the above figures are those for "registered members", the majority of whom are made up by those who have signed a membership application form within the last two years, irrespective of whether they are ever heard of again. The actual SWP membership is a fraction of that.)

According to "Matthew", "What exists now is very little healthy debate about how the organisation functions and its ability to make the sharp turns required, as the crisis deepens and the space opens up for the left to make its biggest impact

for a generation or more. This has resulted in two splits in two years ..." While "Jules, Luke and John" contend: "Only when socialists are setting an example of openness and democracy ... can the case for the necessity of socialist organisation be taken seriously by wider layers of activists and militants."

For "Paris", "the issue of the internal party culture and the party structures that inhibit the development of a healthy, vibrant democracy is ... a pressing matter. The rising tide of working class struggle on a global scale not only creates the opportunity for us to address this in a serious way: it makes it an absolute necessity."

Concession

It is unfortunate that "Neil", "China" and co begin their piece by making an enormous concession to SWP's bureaucratic-centralist practice: "We accept that the current leadership and organisational structure may have been necessary in the initial period of the downturn, but is it credible that the same model could possibly have fitted every situation, every turn in the class struggle since then?"

But the "leadership and organisational structure" is one chosen by the CC in order to uphold its own bureaucratic control. As "Jules, Luke and John" state, there is a "culture of substitutionism" that has been "apparent throughout the party, in the weakness of many branches, the dominance of full-timers appointed by the CC, the manner in which the CC have functioned as 'caretakers', making all the key decisions on the basis that (for whatever reason) the rank and file are deemed incapable of doing so - with the effect that, at best, the party's internal regime resembles a 'managed democracy'."

In fact, the SWP's bureaucratic structure and stultifying culture - including the deliberate clamping down on genuine debate, the marginalisation of critics through the selection of

speakers at conference, party council, etc, the arbitrary expulsion of opponents deemed to be a threat to the current CC - go hand in hand, and they can *never* be justified.

However, comrade Davidson and his comrades soon get on the right track. They write: "Democratic and open debate ... is the only way to arrive at conclusions that can be tested in practice. The current set-up almost guarantees that this will not happen." Therefore, "we believe that discussions should be openly conducted in the party's publications - we are not a sect and have nothing to fear from showing our audience and potential membership our ability to discuss these questions, while intervening wholeheartedly in the class struggle. To do so should be treated as a sign of our strength and maturity as an organisation."

"Justin (Cambridge)" concurs: "There is nothing wrong with comrades questioning or disputing the official party line openly, even outside the party, provided that those who disagree make it clear to outsiders that they are putting forward their own view, not that of the party." For the comrade, "To put forward differences, even just of nuance, can help clarify the issues for everybody, bring us closer to the truth in our analysis, and combat dogmatism by helping all comrades to deepen their understanding. In fact, even if comrades are wrong, they have a right to make incorrect assessments, as this encourages them to develop the confidence to arrive at more sophisticated arguments able to challenge the ruling class."

But, far from encouraging such a culture, the current leadership does all in its power to smother it. "Justin" reports: "I was told by a comrade at the end of our pre-conference

aggregate ... that one of the reasons he did not want me to go to the conference was because he could not 'trust the way I would vote' ... Is this how a democratic organisation works, or a bureaucratic one?"

Faction ban

Another means by which the CC ensures that its bureaucratic grip cannot be effectively challenged is through the ban on factions - in other words, on any group of comrades other than itself coming together to discuss an alternative platform or policy. This is partially relaxed during the three-month period prior to conference, but even then all documents for circulation must be submitted to the CC. During this period a temporary faction may be formed "by producing a joint statement signed by at least 30 members of the party" in order to campaign against "a specific party policy or a decision ... of the party". However, "Permanent or secret factions are not allowed" (SWP constitution).

However, as Neil Davidson and comrades point out, "A faction ... involves an act of opposition, in effect to the CC, since the NC [the 50-strong national committee, whose agenda is always set by the leadership] has not yet demonstrated that it is capable of either revising or producing alternatives to CC proposals." In fact, "At the point where [new policies] are being considered, every proposal is surely a factional one - including those emanating from the CC - until conference decides."

This is a big problem, the eight comrades contend, because it prevents the proper airing of alternative platforms. Yet "Even a CC composed of Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg and Cliff [!] could not be expected to grasp the essence of the period and the necessary strategy and tactics without institutionalised input and control by a membership rooted in the class."

While "Neil", "China" and the rest are content to point out the problem, others come up with concrete proposals. In the case of "Matthew" they are both tentative and clumsily expressed. He advocates: "Extending the faction period at present to a period from three months to one of four to six months, with the view in the long run to extending the freedom of members to faction, with the view to the admittance of factions all year round." However, "Jules, Luke and John", quite correctly, do not think democracy should have to wait: "Permanent factions to be allowed with all the rights that implies (ie, allowed to publish and distribute faction material among the membership). Communication across the party to be allowed, with space in *Party Notes* to be given over to debate and presentation of alternative views."

Another target for the eight is the anti-democratic method of electing the central committee: the notorious slate system, whereby comrades may only propose and vote for the entire CC rather than its individual members. As

the eight correctly point out, "voting for the leadership individually, by whatever mechanism, would not, of course, preclude the CC presenting a suggested slate, so members happy with their judgement could vote for all those candidates". But "the current set-up of a slate-elected CC composed overwhelmingly of full-timers and limited pre-conference tolerance of factions skews the relationship far too heavily towards the central body".

As can be seen, comrade Davidson and co tend towards understatement - partly, no doubt, because they believe that is probably the best way to gain a hearing, and partly because of their loyalty to the SWP. Such loyalty, which appears to be shared by the other proponents of democracy, is no bad thing, since there are many good comrades and traditions to be salvaged from the current monstrosity and it will require a patient struggle to transform the SWP into part of the answer, instead of, overwhelmingly, part of the problem.

But "Paris" pulls fewer punches in his/her critique of the SWP regime and championing of genuine democratic centralism: "I believe we must return to Lenin's conception ... Democratic centralism can be best summed up as complete freedom of discussion, with absolute unity in action ... Only an organisation where controversy is the norm, where different ideas are argued out, and where comrades are encouraged to develop their ideas and test them can develop a serious revolutionary cadre." Therefore what is needed is the "creation of a quarterly internal bulletin, open to all comrades", and "the opening of the party press to key arguments within the party and class".

Comrade Paris turns to the founder of the International Socialists/SWP, Tony Cliff, to back up this case. S/he quotes Cliff's *Trotsky on substitutionism* (1960) - ie, before the SWP guru did a complete U-turn on such questions: "all discussions on basic issues of policy should be discussed in the light of day, in the open press. Let the mass of the workers take part in the discussion, put pressure on the party, its apparatus and leadership."

For comrade Paris, this "indicates clearly the kind of internal party culture that should exist: namely one of continual debate and discussion ... In any socialist organisation, a wide variety of views could, and should, exist. Accordingly, around any key question, different tendencies will start to develop. The right of the minority in that situation to organise in order to become the majority is central to Lenin's conception of the democratic centralist party. Currently within our party, this right is severely restricted."

"Jules, Luke and John" echo this: "Democratic centralism means full debate before collectively implementing the line decided by the majority. Though most minorities/factions would clearly be episodic, such a democratic culture also means - as established in the Bolshevik tradition - the possibility that the minority might become the majority."

Paris also proposes that political differences within the leadership "should be openly acknowledged, with the debates open to the party. Different political tendencies should be represented on the CC, not suppressed behind a veil of 'unity'." Finally s/he identifies a key piece of



China Miéville: yes to openness

the jigsaw: “Development of a party programme” - the CC rejects the very idea, knowing that the existence of such a document would both reduce its ability to engage in opportunist twists and turns, and provide a means by which it could be held to account for its actions. A programme would “not only serve to give greater clarity to the party’s strategy,” says Paris, “but also to stimulate serious discussion, creating ownership over the party’s direction and politics”.

All of this is very much to be welcomed, in that the battle for democracy within the sects is an essential corollary of the fight to create what our class really needs: a single, democratic-centralist Marxist party. It is “Justin (Cambridge)” who pinpoints this other missing piece of the jigsaw: “A bigger SWP, while desirable, is not the answer. The party we need must have tens of thousands of members and enjoy the support of millions. It is wrong and sectarian to put any extra few hundred recruits before working in every way we can to win such a party. In my opinion we should be looking to merge our forces with other Marxists rather than seeing them as rivals or pretending they don’t exist.”

Build the SWP

But that is not part of the CC’s sectarian plans to ‘build the party’ - by which it means itself alone, complete with crippling bureaucratic defects and suffocating culture.

IB No2 claimed that the SWP’s “registered membership” is 7,127, but the CC’s financial report in IB No3 paints a rather different and more realistic picture. A table is published showing that since January 1 2009 there are 2,010 new ‘members’ old enough to set up a direct debit, yet only 542 of them (27%) pay membership subscriptions. So, as usual, states the CC, “In the first three months of 2012 we plan to launch a new subs drive. We hope to ask every member who is paying subs to raise them and to ask those not paying subs to start.” (Note the word, “hope”. Not only do most ‘members’ not pay dues: a good proportion of them cannot even be contacted!)

The CC reports: “This year’s subs drive, which took place from January to March 2011, was the most successful in a decade.” However, “As has been the pattern in previous years, membership subs have since declined ... This decline is only partly counteracted by the recruitment of new members (who typically join on lower levels of subs).” Surely there is a connection here with the SWP’s ridiculous membership (non-) requirements.

This “open recruitment” enables the leadership to continue boasting of growth, although most *actual* members know the disheartening reality only too well. The SWP is at best stagnating - and CC exhortations to branches to activate more of their ‘members’ produces only disenchantment. Many comrades can do no more than bemoan the situation. So “Dominic (Merseyside)” correctly states: “In this period we should be recruiting massively.” He goes on to add: “One of the reasons for hesitancy in recruitment, I think, is the experience of the anti-war movement, where despite high levels of recruitment the party failed to grow and may even have shrunk in size.”

“Sabby (Central London)” also expresses what everyone knows: “recruitment to the SWP has been problematic”. But he is not entirely convincing about why: “A major reason for this, I believe, is the cynicism towards all political parties It should not surprise us that half of the new recruits are students. The young are the least tainted with the cynicism towards political parties that affects older folk.”

No doubt there is an element of

that. But those comrades who have located the problem in the SWP’s appalling internal regime, combined with its ‘us alone’ sectarianism (which it shares with almost the entire left), are nearer to putting their finger on the problem.

Nothing could better illustrate this sectarianism - ie, the SWP’s total prioritisation of recruiting to itself over and above advancing the cause of our class - than its cynical attitude to the fronts it sets up. Of course, the leadership always tells the members that these fronts are, or have the potential to be, important weapons in the class war, within which the SWP works alongside many other forces. But in reality the last thing it would do is approach other left groups to work unitedly alongside it.

Clearly the CC has now recognised the sad reality that its Right to Work ‘united front’ has been a dismal failure (although it goes without saying that it does not put it quite that way). Claiming that the campaign’s launch was “motivated by the growing economic crisis and was part of the attempt to pull together networks of resistance”, it confesses that a “full-blooded implementation of the perspective around Right to Work was never achieved. This was for a number of reasons - some internal to the SWP, the main driving force behind Right to Work.” This is a reference to the factional battle fought around the need for a “united front against the recession” by deposed leader John Rees before he walked out almost two years ago.

As a result, “A slowness to establish local groups quickly meant that anti-cuts campaigns came into existence without Right to Work established on the ground ... had RTW existed already, it could have played a role alongside the emerging anti-cuts groups ... In most areas, rightly, comrades have got stuck into building anti-cuts groups. But this obviously ‘choked off’ the possibility of establishing local Right to Work groups ... what we effectively have is a national campaign with limited local ‘legs’ on the ground.”

So what was the point of trying to create a campaign “*alongside* the emerging anti-cuts groups”? Why not try to link up with RTW’s rivals in helping to provide those groups with political focus and organisational cohesion? Once again, the SWP’s narrow sectarianism rules out such a possibility.

But, despite the RTW flop, there is good news: “With a major shift in the struggle towards workers’ action, the Unite the Resistance initiative is well placed to help pull together the ‘fighting elements’ in the trade union movement and draw wider forces behind it. This new situation means that, for the SWP and many of those forces involved in Right to Work, workers’ action and Unite the Resistance take on a central importance.”

In other words, RTW is to be put on the back burner - not that the CC would ever say it that candidly. After all, “the appalling rise in unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, certainly leaves room for initiatives by Right to Work ... We should continue to fight for local and national affiliations to the campaign and build its AGM in the new year.”

All this represents an implicit confession that ‘Right to Work’ was completely the wrong name for an anti-cuts campaign (it is, obviously, much more suited for a campaign against unemployment). However, don’t expect Unite the Resistance to do any better. In fact, as part of its contortions over ‘united fronts’, the CC continues to deny that UTR is “another anti-cuts campaign”. This “broadly-based resistance which centrally involves forces outside the SWP” is “a union-led organisation

that will hopefully draw in cuts campaigners and activists”. Who do they think they’re kidding? Union-led? Centrally involving “forces outside the SWP”? What kind of fantasy world are they living in? The same remark could apply to the statement: “We would like to see it become the framework for a new rank and file organisation.”

This perspective for UTR is contained in a supplementary pre-conference document, entitled ‘Where next after N30?’ Unfortunately, almost before the ink has dried, it is out of date - the *possibility* of most union leaders selling out the pensions struggle is rapidly becoming the reality, and this document will need a substantial rewrite before the SWP’s conference in a couple of weeks.

But UTR has already taken over from RTW. It is UTR that is to organise a lobby of the TUC on January 12, when public service union leaders are to meet to discuss their acceptance of the pensions sell-out.

‘All out, stay out’

This latest CC pre-conference document mentions in passing that the anti-working class assault is not limited to Britain: “The struggle across Europe against austerity takes different forms. This has to do with interrelated factors such as the scale of the cuts, the combativeness of the ruling class and the strength and confidence of the working class and its political and trade union representatives.”

Yes, but why is this point being made? No conclusion is drawn and the CC simply moves on to the next point. Presumably the talk about “different forms” is meant to discourage the notion that it might be possible to unite the resistance across the continent. Otherwise what is the purpose of these two sentences in a document entitled ‘Where next after N30?’

When it comes to Britain, however, the CC is specific: “We should be arguing to escalate the action as soon as possible - we want further one- or two-day strikes in January at least as big as N30 - bigger if possible.” See what I mean about the document already being out of date?

The leadership also attempts some kind of retrospective justification of ‘All out, stay out’ - a slogan that was effectively dropped immediately after the November 30 action. The CC writes: “Mass, all-out strikes would be the most effective method of defeating this government’s attacks. That is why we have pushed the slogan, ‘All out, stay out’. Of course, this still remains a propaganda slogan, but so was the call for a general strike a year ago! Propaganda slogans are not the immediate next step, but seek to become the common sense of the movement. They can then become agitational demands.”

Well, that’s a new one! Since when can a slogan be “propaganda” - usually defined as the dissemination of many fundamental ideas to a few people? Slogans cannot but be a form of agitation - the dissemination of one idea or a few ideas to many people. If it is a question of educating workers about the current situation - including the importance of building momentum, with the possibility that today’s one-day action could lead to an indefinite general strike some time in the future - then that indeed would be a form of propaganda. But I suppose at least this nonsense is a way of admitting that the slogan is ‘not for now’.

SWP cadres have long since recognised that in practice. They may have dutifully parroted the line in SWP forums or to others on the left, but you can be sure that for the most part they knew better than to raise it in their union branch. This is reflected in the fact that none of the individual contributors to the three IBs, apart from one, even mentioned the slogan

when relating their recent experiences.

The one exception is “Justin (Cambridge)”, who wrote of N30: “While three million is a huge number, it represents only a small proportion of the workforce. The majority of workers are not even union members and millions buy into the arguments of the ruling class about the ‘terrible state of the economy’ and the unaffordability of existing pensions. Whether we like it or not, only a tiny minority have the level of class-consciousness necessary to launch into the kind of open class war that ‘All out, stay out’ represents.”

Unless there is a mass rebellion of the rank and file over pensions, it looks like Justin will be proved right sooner than expected. So what was the point of the phrase? He continues: “When I questioned the ‘All out, stay out’ slogan with a comrade, he told me it is not really about asking people to stay out because it was not likely to happen. I said it must be about recruitment then, which he confirmed was obvious.”

Of course, this is just a reported conversation between two SWPers, but I think it demonstrates the cynicism behind the slogan.

Who’s been reading us?

I have concentrated to a large extent on contributions that, in my view, reflect the influence that this paper has been starting to exert, however indirectly, on the SWP membership.

And that must surely apply to the comrades from Manchester District, who, in a short piece entitled ‘Resolution for SWP conference’, write the following:

“The statement, ‘What the Socialist Workers Party stands for’, needs correcting and updating in at least two respects.

“*First*, the opening sentence of the statement is: ‘The workers create all the wealth under capitalism.’ This view was criticised by Marx himself in *Critique of the Gotha programme*. It confuses ‘wealth’ and ‘value’. It wants redrafting.

“*Second*, the statement says nothing about our position on matters of religion. It should at a minimum state that we defend the rights of believers to practise their religion without state interference.”

The first point in particular is one that the *Weekly Worker* has been making for some considerable time. Wealth, unlike value, derives ultimately from nature. This error must have been a source of embarrassment to the CC, but it obviously felt unable to initiate the necessary change in view of who it was pointing to the mistake. But, now that the matter has been raised within the SWP itself, I have no doubt that the leadership will thank Manchester for having brought it to the CC’s attention.

Comrades from the same district also seem to partially share our ideas on the nature of leftwing election contests. “Mark and Nahella (Manchester)”, in a piece headed ‘We need “99%” clarity in our strategy for the May elections’, talk about the “derisory” results so far gained by the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, but, more importantly, strongly criticise the SWP’s preferred electoral platforms ever since the organisation made its turn to election work from the period of the Socialist Alliance: “We stood as left reformist candidates (who happened to be revolutionaries.) Although revolution was never mentioned.”

The comrades go on: “But we contest that in the coming period it will not suffice for us to follow our former electoral model. One that simply was to present a ‘left alternative to Labour’ ... We should aim to use the elections to forward

an anti-capitalist, class-struggle alternative to the entire system.”

Good stuff. Although I am not sure about the components of the proposed “anti-capitalistic electoral coalition” representing “the 99%” that Mark and Nahella advocate - “UK Uncut activists, anti-cuts campaigners, trades unionists, students and pensioners, supporters of the Occupy movement”. Why not stand on the basis of a clear Marxist programme?

For its part, the CC, after making the usual leftist noises to the effect that “The November 30 strikes will be far more important than an election campaign”, confirms its intention to stand a small number of Tusc candidates in the May 2012 elections. And the platform? All we are told is: “We should try to break the mould of the normal election campaign and make it more exciting, less drab and more inspiring.”

Positive step

All in all, this *Pre-conference Bulletin* represents a positive step, however small. As could be expected though, it is highly contradictory. Thus the same “Neil (Edinburgh)” who wrote so eloquently about internal democracy has done us all a disservice with his dismal offering on Scotland.

In ‘The SNP electoral victory, Labour’s crises and the independence referendum’ he not only advocates a ‘yes’ vote in any ballot on separation, but suggests that the SWP should regard the Scottish National Party almost as part of the working class movement. It is “a party other than Labour ... offering reforms, sounding as if they actually believe in them, and invoking the social democratic tradition”.

The SWP should not approach the SNP as it does the Tories and Liberal Democrats (“as open enemies”). Instead it should “orientate towards” the approach it employs towards Labour (“as someone we expect to be a friend”). After all, “there are actual socialists in the SNP” and it does claim to be “governing in a social democratic model”.

While comrade Davidson admits that “there are circumstances in which workers’ action has reached such a level that the question of independence would be irrelevant or even reactionary”, we are not living in such circumstances today. True, there are “mainly negative reasons why we support a vote for independence” - the UK is imperialist, “the dominant tone of a campaign to save the union will be built around a reactionary conception of Britishness, not ‘the unity of the British working class’”, etc - but at least a ‘yes’ vote would allow us to “put forward an argument for class politics”.

Nevertheless, overall there are signs of a democratic awakening and indications that all is not lost within the SWP ●

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It’s coming



ECONOMY

Playing the blame game

With hundreds of billions of debt due to be repaid in the first quarter of next year, writes **Eddie Ford**, the euro zone crisis has not gone away

Despite the endless succession of 'rescue packages' and 'make or break' summits, there is still no sign of a resolution to the euro zone crisis. Quite the opposite. Though it would be mistaken to think that a catastrophic break-up of the euro is inevitable, it is equally true that the momentum remains towards malfunction. If so, it is beyond doubt that such an occurrence would trigger an economic slump or depression *at least* on the scale of the 1930s. We are confronted by the possibility that the world capitalist-imperialist system could descend into general chaos.

The warnings are all there. On December 9 the Moody's rating agency downgraded France's three major banks (BNP Paribas, Société Générale and Crédit Agricole) on the basis that liquidity and funding conditions had "deteriorated significantly" due to a "continued lack of investor appetite for bank debt". Then, perhaps more seriously, a week later it downgraded Belgium's credit rating by two notches, citing "sustained deterioration" in funding conditions for euro zone countries with relatively high levels of public debt - plus the economic woes associated with the dismantling of the troubled Franco-Belgium banking group, Dexia. In October, Dexia was nationalised at a cost of €4 billion and this move inevitably increased Belgium's exposure to the rest of the banking group's combined debts - Moody's estimating that this could come close to 10% of Belgium's total GDP. Potentially calamitous, for sure, even if the Qatar royal family and Luxembourg have teamed up to buy Dexia's private banking arm in a deal valuing the business at €730 million.

On the same day that Moody's downgraded Belgium, Fitch cut the "issuer default ratings" - which in theory "reflect the ability of an entity to meet financial commitments on a timely basis" - of the Bank of America, Goldman Sachs, BNP Paribas, Barclays, Deutsche Bank, Crédit Suisse and Citigroup. According to Fitch, US and European banks are presently "particularly sensitive to the increased challenges the financial markets face" - a problem facing the financial sector "as a whole". For example, Fitch explained, Citigroup no longer enjoyed the same very high level of financial support from the US government - which previously saw it receive \$20 billion in capital injections from Washington during the 2007-09 credit crunch, as well as a \$45 billion credit line and \$300 billion in guarantees; not to mention hundreds of billions more in emergency loans from the US Federal Reserve. Now that the state handouts are drying up, Citigroup is in an extremely vulnerable position. Too big too fail?

Furthermore, Fitch gloomily concluded that a comprehensive solution to the euro zone crisis was "beyond reach" - a damning verdict on the European leaders. Therefore the crisis will "likely be punctuated by episodes of severe financial volatility" and as a consequence Spain and Italy - alongside Ireland, Belgium, Slovenia and Cyprus - were told by Fitch to brace themselves for a "near-term" downgrade. Knives out, the rating agencies will claim more and more scalps unless the euro zone governments embark on a dramatic



Sarkozy and Cameron: no entente cordiale

change of direction.

It is widely expected that France too is on the cusp of a disastrous downgrade, its banks heavily tied in to Greek, Spanish and Italian debt - maybe before Christmas. Rattled by the prospect of losing their coveted triple-A status, French representatives lashed out in frustration at the UK. Christian Noyer, the governor of the Bank of France, suggested that the credit rating agencies should look instead at the UK because of the level of its debt and inflation, and the poor levels of growth and bank lending. A French downgrade "doesn't strike me as justified based on economic fundamentals," he said. Pick on Britain, not us.

Spat

Similarly, François Baroin, the French finance minister, maintained that "one would rather be French than British at the moment", given that Britain is in a "difficult economic situation" with a deficit level "equivalent to that of Greece" - an obviously absurd comparison from a financial-economic point of view, but which served the political purpose of sticking the boot in. He also remarked that the UK government was "marginalised" within Europe, a reference, of course, to David Cameron's decision at Brussels in the very early hours of December 10 to veto proposed changes to the European Union treaty - amendments heavily pushed by Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy as part of their plan for fiscal union. By all accounts Sarkozy was openly rude to Cameron at the Brussels negotiations, so perhaps Noyer and Baroin are remaining true to the spirit of modern-day French diplomacy.

Responding to the French jibes, an official spokesperson for David Cameron declared that the British government has "put in place a credible plan for dealing with our deficit" and that the "credibility of that plan can be seen in what has happened to bond yields in this country". In other words, 'I'm all right, Jack'. The spokesperson also

played down any idea that the prime minister was seeking to undermine the agreement, such as it was, reached at Brussels between the EU 26 and repeated Cameron's promise to "engage constructively" in the talks taking place on the implementation of the new "fiscal compact" devised by Sarkozy. But Britain would only sign up to the new treaty, the spokesperson added, if it obtained "safeguards" for the City of London - keeping up the silly fiction that the duplicitous Brussels bureaucrats would strangle the life out of British capitalism if given a chance.

In reality, as we all know, Sarkozy's putative fiscal union would leave the City - and the UK's financial services - untouched. But why let small things like facts get in a way of a cheap, populist gesture?

Less temperately, David Ruffley, a Conservative member of the treasury select committee, thundered that the remarks of Noyer and Baroin were "another example of Gallic self-delusion on an epic scale" - seeing how, he spluttered on, they are "tied to a currency that could become a basket case at any moment". As for Jesse Norman, another Tory treasury committee member, he opined that Noyer had misunderstood the agencies' warning, arguing that the ratings agencies views "do not simply reflect the fundamentals of the French economy, but also the continuing failure to resolve the euro zone crisis" - because at root "this is an expression of anxiety at a failure of political leadership" in the euro zone. Norman may have a point.

Clearly, this unedifying Anglo-French spat - or *Entente Discordiale* - shows the extraordinarily *fragile* nature of the capitalist system, as it enters another stage of its profound crisis. It is painfully obvious that establishment politicians and the capitalist class have absolutely no idea how to extricate themselves from the situation. Rather, they are looking around for scapegoats, with the French blaming the British and the British blaming everyone but themselves.

However, it could be the UK government and Ruffley who might turn out to be deluded in their conviction that the British government's triple-A status is inviolable - UK plc is a safe pair of hands for your money forever. Moody's stated on December 20 that, although the UK's credit status was "currently secure", it did face "formidable and rising challenges" - noting that the country's prized triple-A rating depended on the government keeping its deficit reduction plan on track. For Moody's the outlook on the UK's rating is "likely to be sensitive to future developments in the euro area's debt crisis". Which is to say, if the euro zone crisis deepens - hardly an impossibility - then the UK government could quickly find itself in the same position as the French: facing an imminent downgrading.

Sobering

Meanwhile the head of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, made a sobering address to the European parliament on December 20. He told the MEPs that the ECB's bond-buying programme was "neither eternal nor infinite", doubtlessly a worrying message for the Spanish and Italian administrations, given that it was only ECB intervention that prevented the bond yields (interest rate) on government debt reaching utterly disastrous levels. Not that the current levels are sustainable. For example, as of December 21 Italian bond yields stood at 6.92% percent - again dangerously near the 7% critical threshold, the point at which the Irish, Portuguese and Greek governments were forced to ask for a bailout.

Draghi cautioned viewing the ECB as some sort of potential Superman who at the last minute will magically fly to the rescue of the euro zone, arguing that there is "no external saviour for a country that doesn't want to save itself". The only recourse was "sustainable growth", which can be achieved only by undertaking the sort of "deep structural reforms" that EU leaders have "procrastinated" over "for too long".

More alarmingly though, he drew attention to the risk of "global contagion" in the new year thanks to the unpalatable fact that a *huge* volume of debt is to be rolled over in the first quarter - reminding his audience that €230 billion of bank bonds, up to €300 billion of sovereign bonds and more than €200 billion of "collateralised debt obligations" all become due for payment in the first three months of 2012. Even though the ECB president had "no doubt whatever about the strength of the euro, its permanence, its irreversibility" - as if anyone would suggest otherwise - Draghi feared that pressure in bond markets in that first quarter would be "really very, very significant, if not unprecedented". Not just banks, but countries like Portugal, Spain and Italy will seriously start to feel the strain - might even go bust or collapse under the sheer weight of debt.

Furthermore, in its financial stability review published on the day that Draghi spoke to the European parliament, the ECB noted that protracted indecision among European leaders has created a "cycle of risk" - helping to create a "systemic crisis" not witnessed since the 2008 collapse of Lehman Brothers". The outcome of all this is that the "risks to euro area financial stability increased considerably"

during the second half of 2011, and any "positive market responses" to the numerous European summit agreements and deals had been "short-lived" - indeed, a "bumpy ratification process appears to have contributed to additional market uncertainties". In conclusion, the report demanded "bold and decisive action" both within and outside the euro area.

Yet there is very little evidence of action, whether "bold" or "decisive". Currently, EU leaders are stumbling towards an extension of extra credit lines through a system of bilateral loans to the badly undercapitalised International Monetary Fund - falling short of the €200 billion target they had set themselves. Which itself was woefully inadequate by any serious calculation. These loans, in theory, would be used by the IMF to support struggling euro zone countries - but you do not have to be a fiscal genius to work out that €150 billion divided by 17, or even by three or four (Italy, Spain, Portugal, Ireland) does not go very far. Not nearly enough to make a difference if events take a turn for the worse.

One of the reasons for the failure to reach the €200 billion target was that the UK government refused to make a contribution of £25 billion. David Cameron may want Europe to get out its "big bazooka" to stop the euro from collapsing, and hence decimate the British economy, but he is certainly not prepared to pay for it. Wolfgang Schäuble, the German finance minister, admitted there was "no chance" of the US increasing its contribution to the IMF either - the Republican-dominated Congress would never give its stamp of approval. China is also unwilling to contribute, as its economy shows the first distinct signs of contraction - property prices in Beijing fell by 35% in November compared to the month before (looks like China's credit bubble is finally about to burst). Nor is Germany's Bundesbank particularly keen on the IMF scheme. With a slight hint of desperation, EU finance ministers on December 19 put out a joint statement saying they would "welcome G20 members and other financially strong IMF members to support the efforts to safeguard global financial stability by contributing to the increase in IMF resources". You bet. No wonder that the IMF's former managing director, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, castigated the euro area's leaders for their "poor leadership" and bleakly assessed that the zone only had a few weeks to come up with viable solutions.

The escalating nature of the crisis was exposed on December 21 when more than 523 banks borrowed almost €500 billion in cheap three-year loans from the ECB - taking advantage of a long-term refinancing operation that allowed them to offer lower-grade collateral in exchange for loans pegged to the ECB's main interest rate, which currently stands at a record low of 1%. Draghi has insisted that "no stigma" will be attached to banks applying for the loans, which for many is more than three percentage points cheaper than they could obtain on the open market.

But again, it seems like far too little, far too late. The sovereign debt crisis remains toxic and deadly, and the new year looks set to bring nothing but more debt, austerity, unemployment, poverty and recession ●

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OBITUARY

What kind of commitment?

Christopher Hitchens, 1949-2011

"I still think like a Marxist in many ways. I think the materialist conception of history is valid. I consider myself a very conservative Marxist - June 2010 New York Times"

The one question the obituaries, certainly in the liberal press, felt compelled to discuss was whether the columnist and writer who died last week of cancer was on the left or the right - even whether he remained a Trotskyist in his attitude or had become fully neoconservative. Either that or they echoed Hitchens himself when he quoted Orwell to the effect that it did not matter whether you were left or right, but whether you were "democratic or totalitarian".

In his time Hitchens took great pride in appearing detached from sides. He attempted to demolish the reputations of Henry Kissinger, the Clintons, Mother Teresa and Saddam Hussein. He supported the reunification of Ireland and took a 'pro-life' stand on abortion. He opposed Zionism as "an ethno-nationalist, quasi-religious ideology", but considered that the Palestinian struggle was now dominated by Hamas so that even the withdrawal of Israel would not satisfy them. His main enemy increasingly became religion, "the main source of hatred in the world", issuer of fatwa and holy bull.

The style of his writing was very much that of a cool but cheeky observer committed to certain enlightenment principles, but not to parties or movements. The trouble was that he could not maintain this juggling of detachment indefinitely. From the Gulf War (1990) onwards, he began to relate his principles to active people and movements. Those of us who think he made the wrong choice - the support of imperialist intervention characterised as "anti-fascism" - are still faced, even in CH's own 'fall' into conservatism, with the question of whether side-taking compromises one's position as a writer or thinker: what Julien Benda called *la trahison des clercs* (1927) and Orwell called a 'touch of the propagandist'. Is it safest for our integrity, as many seem to believe,

especially in post-empire Britain, to stay politically non-aligned - to be independent, detached, 'uncommitted'?

Going to the contrary

Christopher Eric Hitchens was born in Portsmouth on April 13 1949. His mother, Yvonne, had said that "if there is going to be an upper class in this country, then Christopher is going to be in it". The young Hitchens eventually reached Balliol College, Oxford, where he read philosophy, politics and economics, gateway to a career in power. Instead, he says he was "bowled over" by such books as *Darkness at noon*, Tawney's *Religion and the rise of capitalism* and the works of George Orwell.

He joined the Labour Party in 1965, but was expelled in 1967, along with a majority of Labour students, over what Hitchens called "prime minister Harold Wilson's contemptible support for the war in Vietnam". He met Peter Sedgwick, translator of Victor Serge, and wrote as a "correspondent" for *International Socialism*, when the Socialist Workers Party was still called the International Socialists. IS, of course, had a distinctive detachment of its own, refusing to define 'communist' states as non-capitalist and proclaiming the slogan, 'Neither Washington nor Moscow, but international socialism'.

As an anti-Stalinist, Hitchens left IS and joined "a small, but growing, post-Trotskyist, Luxemburgist sect" (Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton was also a member). The young revolutionary journalist was not shy either of being arrested and assaulted on various political protests. There is a photo of him in his memoir *Hitch-22* (2010) being led away by police after an anti-apartheid demo.

After Oxford, he briefly joined the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, serving as social science editor. A much more amenable berth proved to be the *New Statesman*, where

he became a drinking buddy of authors Martin Amis and Ian McEwan. It was at the 'Staggers' that he acquired a reputation as a fierce leftwinger, aggressively attacking such targets as Henry Kissinger, the Vietnam war and the Roman Catholic church.

But by 1979 he claimed he had secretly favoured Thatcher's Tories, though he had abstained from

voting. Later he would more explicitly support the British war with "fascist" Argentina over the Falkland Islands. In 1981 he moved to the United States, to write for *The Nation*, 'flagship' of the US left, where he penned urbane attacks on Ronald Reagan, George HW Bush and American foreign policy in South and Central America.

There may have been many small 'turning points' for Hitchens, like the Falklands war. But a major emotional one came in 1989 with the fatwa against Salman Rushdie and the ambivalent attitude of many on the left towards offending Muslims and non-intervention in the Middle East. Soon after, of course, came the first Gulf War in 1991, when he visited to the Kurds in northern Iraq. The Kurds became a symbol to Hitchens, despite evidence of red flags and their treatment of women, for an actually existing opposition to tyranny.

Soon after he became a contributing editor of *Vanity Fair*, writing 10 columns a year. On this gig he was known around Washington as a robust drinker, risky smoker and attender of celebrity parties. Getting to know insiders like Paul Wolfowitz can be justified as getting close to the enemy all the better to expose them. But after 9/11 and on foreign policy this closeness became alignment. His strong advocacy of the war in Iraq gained Hitchens a broader readership, and in September 2005 he was named one of the "top 100 public intellectuals" by *Foreign Policy* and *Prospect* magazines.

He told Rhys Southan of *Reason* magazine that he could no longer say, 'I am a socialist'. He accused all socialists of ceasing to offer a positive alternative to the capitalist system. Capitalism had indeed for Hitchens become the more revolutionary economic system, and he welcomed globalisation as "innovative and internationalist". He suggested that this meant he had returned to his early, pre-socialist libertarianism, having come to attach great value to the freedom of the individual from the state and moral totalitarians.

You might recognise this as a familiar terminus for some ex-Marxists - that is, if they identify a worldwide alternative with either the Comintern or the still extant possibility of a Trotskyist 'political revolution' in the 'workers' states'. This may remind some of particular ex-whatevers who find that, once their belief in mass change fails, they join centrist parties, 'dynamic' finance houses and even the Murdoch press. Contrary to legend, it is not the considered revolutionary, but the romantic rebel, who goes on to become the conservative, from Wordsworth onwards.

Though Hitchens retained his British citizenship, he became a United States citizen in 2007, his 58th birthday. In June 2010, his book tour for *Hitch-22* was cut short so that he could begin treatment for newly diagnosed esophageal cancer. On December 15 2011, Christopher Hitchens died from pneumonia, a complication of his cancer, in Houston, Texas.

The first I heard of the event was when I switched on the *Today* programme and found them talking about someone in the past tense. "He wrote ..." said one contributor (it could have been Ian McEwan on the line from somewhere). Registering the tense, I waited to discover whether they were referring to Christopher Hitchens and this was confirmed a few seconds later.

The pitfalls of commitment

Hitchens would have denied that he had departed the left - by no means a unitary grouping, to say the least, of course. Nevertheless, he began to attack certain general left positions from 1989 onwards, after what he called the "tepid reaction" of those in the west following ayatollah Khomeini's issue of a fatwa calling for the murder of Salman Rushdie.

Furthermore, his visit to the Kurds in northern Iraq after the Gulf War gave him a living example of a resistance movement that a socialist should support after the decline of revolutionary hopes. The September 11 attacks strengthened his alignment with an interventionist foreign policy, and his vociferous criticism of what he dubbed "fascism with an Islamic face".

However, his "contrarian" stance against "group think" can be seen at its best in *No-one left to lie to* (1999) - his book on the Clintons and Clintonistas. Having admitted that there were always scurrilous rape claims made against the president, Hitchens turns to the other cases: "What are the chances," he writes, that three women, all of them "respectable" Democrats and none of them known to each other, "would confect or invent almost identical experiences which they did not want to make public?" In this work Hitchens scrupulously presents previously unconnected testimony and at all times shows an awareness of possible objections.

However, another part of his style, growing with his new alignment, was of a more general name-calling and guilt by association. "Peaceniks", "tepid" lefties and "cowardly" anti-war activists go unnamed (though he has had his dig at Noam Chomsky and Gore Vidal). Anyone's reservations that forcing Arabs to be free would result in massive casualties and resistance of all kinds are dismissed. Not to be pro-intervention is "cowardice". Casualties in Clinton's missile attack on the Sudan medicine factory or even the war in Iraq must not be allowed to "outweigh" the atrocity of 9/11. On the other hand, no complexities about the US (and British) alliance with fundamentalist Saudi Arabia or totalitarian China must throw into doubt the White House and Pentagon's commitment to democracy. Proclaiming the "good side" of the west - eg, Hitchens' right to speak against Henry Kissinger - is more important than rejecting the "bad side" of capitalism and imperialism.

If Hitchens was any kind of Marxist, why did he not look to the complex totality? A strange kind of dialectician who does not discuss balance of forces or acknowledge that there are class and state interests. For example, in 1991 one Bush (the father) irritated him by not going far enough into Saddam's Iraq. In 2003 the son gained his approval by remedying this. Did Hitchens ever raise the issue of why one had pulled back, leaving a 'friendly' dictatorship in place, while the other had been able to jump at the chance, so stoking American 'pride'? Surely the elder Bush was not a tepid lefty?

Even those who argued a form of 'Neither Washington nor Baghdad' were simply not sufficiently "anti-fascist" for Hitchens. So the gadfly, the Washington Voltaire, was not happy to remain detached. He wanted to side with some kind of tendency to improve the world. He found it in the

neocons, however saddened he was by some of their methods.

There is something in the approach of humans to the world, in language itself probably (which associates and distinguishes, creates and projects), that encourages us to go beyond, to fabricate a vision of better things, even if this simply means us on top. This will to a better world is also shown in art, happy endings and wishful thinking of all kinds (see on this topic, Ernst Bloch's *Principle of hope* or Fredric Jameson in the *Political unconscious*). To be perfect is to be divine; to be human is to be utopian. Hitchens was most human, most involved in being human, by taking sides for the best possible world. But in his opposition to his main enemy, the religious, he gave little time to the fact that many religious people justify themselves not with holy writ, but rather with the approval of humanist ends.

Belief in what?

There are preachers who declare that it is not enough to base morality on ideas of human rights and universal human welfare. But many believers do, even if they argue that this is the historical result of a particular religious tradition. Most people go to religion for solace and bonding, not for mystical experience or theology - human values.

More broadly, there has been a winnowing out of inherited ethics, based on a developing and still inadequately applied consensus about human welfare. For example, society is still based on the supposition that it is wrong to kill (except under special circumstances, which are still debated), but no longer observes the biblical prohibition on eating shellfish or affirms that a menstruating woman must be secluded. Even those who call for a change *back*, a return to an ethos 'anchored' in holy writ, still do so in the main on the basis that this will be good for society and humanity, or some part of it. Not many just say, 'The gods desire it.' With many such believer-humanists we may make common cause, especially in the face of the material onslaught of 'austerity' and the glaring injustice of the 'bonus' gap.

A critically aware urge to utopia is also pertinent. Marx and Engels, for example, were famous for opposing idealism and prescriptiveness as debilitating to a global movement that aimed to liberate the future (see the *Communist manifesto*). But they still praised the utopian socialists' aspirations and were not above such speculations themselves, though usually in response to others' initiatives (in *The civil war in France* or *Critique of the Gotha programme*).

And on the way to utopia, if people are wary of 'totalitarian' organisations and losing their integrity in such a movement, this can be the basis not of detachment, but a cooperation to make such a movement one which does not demand total sacrifice of mind. The Leninist method of democratic centralism was supposed to achieve this: by the right to factions (and independent identities in united fronts), debate on the basis of a few shared demands, unity on agreed action.

Christopher Hitchens himself might have agreed that championing a better design for a transformative agency (a party, if you like) might be a good start, promoting such principles as make for the kind of organisation in which free-thinking people can come together. Not choosing sides, but choosing how to side with others ●

Mike Belbin



Died with the Falklands war

CULTURE



Sometimes everything changes, sometimes nothing changes

The other worlds of sci-fi and fantasy

How do science-fiction and fantasy help us understand reality? **James Turley** investigates

What do I mean by science-fiction and fantasy? The traditional thing to do is to define your terms, so that everyone knows what you are talking about. When you are dealing with genres, however, that is not strictly possible. You can read all sorts of people from the highest echelons of academia down to the most mundane internet warrior, arguing over whether such and such a book is science-fiction or not. They are trying to divide these genres up into some perfect sort of Linnaean system and, of course, it does not quite work.

There is a wonderful little screen-writing guide which is actually a great work of formalist literature and film criticism in disguise called *Story* by Robert McKee. McKee sets everything into diagrams, with lots of expositions of 'the negation of the negation' in the narrative arc and so forth. When it gets to the subject of

genre, all this disappears: it is reduced to the level where an action film has people shooting each other, or a science-fiction film has spaceships ... He loses this great rationalist impulse to systematisation, and it turns out that everything does not go back to Aristotle, as he tells you in the introduction.

When we deal with genres, we have to accept that we are dealing with something that arrives before us as an accomplished fact, an accumulation of texts and features - even sub-cultural attitudes - that have already gone through decades of history at the least, normally centuries. The boundaries, in this situation, are always going to be blurred and there will be overlaps. But nonetheless it is a *fact* that there is something about, for example, Isaac Asimov where we can open a book up and say, "this is science-fiction".

What I want to argue is that we are dealing with *tendencies* in cultural

products: you cannot organise them on a text by text basis into a perfect categorical system; rather you have to open the discussion up a bit more and problematise it.

The distinction between this whole field, which you could call 'speculative fiction', and literature and film as a whole is that it is avowedly counter-factual. Any given novel will, of course, depart from actually existing reality, but for science-fiction and fantasy that is the whole point. We pose a 'what if?' scenario, and throw people in to see how they deal with it. In science-fiction and fantasy, we have two broadly distinguishable modes of taking this approach.

Science-fiction tends to be oriented to the future, often embodied in forms of technology; something irrupts into human history, and then the humans have to deal with it, be it an alien invasion or a great technological advance - something that opens up a

space where new problems can arise.

There's a quite interesting essay by Matthew Beaumont in the book edited by China Miéville and Mark Bould, *Red planets: Marxism and science-fiction*. Beaumont compares the basic operation of SF to anamorphic painting: the classic example is Holbein's 'The ambassadors', a picture of two worthy looking diplomats in a rather opulent office. Across the front of it is a bizarre thing that does not fit into the picture at all, but if you look at it from the correct angle you can see that it is a skull, a *memento mori* - this changes the meaning of the whole picture.

Beaumont makes the point that you can either produce the whole painting around an anamorphic perspective that only makes sense if you view it from a peculiar angle, which would correspond to, say, a space-opera where nothing is immediately recognisable from mundane reality. On the other

hand, you can have the Holbein model - something incomprehensible enters reality and, in a way, to fix it in your vision is to distort the rest of the picture.

In fantasy there is, broadly, what we would call deformed representations of the historical past. The classic sub-genre is 'swords and sorcery' - well, we have moved on in terms of military technology from the sword these days; sorcery is more a retreat to a mythologised past, but nonetheless it is never a work of pure imagination, as it were. There are always humans in these great fantasy novels and they respond as the author *wants us to imagine* they would respond to the particular problems set by the particular narrative world.

So in science-fiction, I would like to argue, there is a tendency to highlight the dimension of historical chronology; because you are dealing with a historical irruption, you have

to have some sort of lurking idea of how history happens. Very often it is a technological-deterministic type of view. In the later *Star trek* series, it turns out that the Federation of Planets has a basically communist economy because someone invented a way to ‘magic’ infinite food out of thin air (the ‘replicator’). Technology has worked out all the contradictions; that is a fairly typical case.

In ‘high’ fantasy you have worlds that do not seem to change chronologically. Because they are so indebted to folk tales and so forth from an earlier period, they come off as a pastiche of the products of feudal culture, or an ancient Greek or Roman mythology. You get the idea of these perpetual worlds, but then what happens is that a historical dimension is spatialised.

In the typical high fantasy narrative, the protagonist will start off as a peasant on a farm or some such, unaware of all the magic in the world around him; but it turns out (of course!) that he is the long-lost descendant of a mighty king or sorcerer. A close brush with death at the hands of demonic creatures is avoided, forcing the protagonist into flight from the provincial life - usually escorted and mentored by a ‘wise one’ who has been secretly monitoring him.

It precisely is a cliché - nicknamed, in fantasy fandom, ‘the farm boy of prophecy’ - but what it allows the author to do is present a character in a situation of perfect ignorance, like the reader, and then take him on a grand tour of the wonderful secondary world. This character is a point for the reader to identify with, and share in his wonder. So the historical dimension is spatialised. As the narrative goes from one location to the next, alternative historical formations are presented - absolute monarchies, republics, patriarchal and matriarchal societies, and innumerable other variations (that nonetheless have mostly themselves become clichés).

Origins

It is perhaps a little dubious to get into the problems of origins; but there is something to be said about where this stuff comes from.

The generally agreed opening shot of modern science-fiction is *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, and this appears at a peculiar time for a certain type of radical, ‘progressive’ milieu. Mary Shelley is the daughter of the pioneering anarchist, William Godwin, and early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, and the wife of Percy Shelley, who was something of a democrat/radical. This is also the romantic milieu - *Frankenstein* was the product of the tail end of the enlightenment, where the forces against it are starting to gather strength.

The plot line is well known - Victor Frankenstein makes a living being out of cut-up bits of corpses. Having made it, he feels utter revulsion and repels it. Most of human society follows suit, and it turns the hypothetical monster into an actual monster that ends up committing acts of vengeful violence. The doctor and the monster end up chasing each other to their deaths. It is not strictly irrationalist: it does embody a certain kind of understanding of the power of scientific knowledge, but it is still a kind of a cautionary tale about the need for *moral* responsibility for scientific knowledge. It comes out of this moment of crisis and ambivalence in the ideology of the hard sciences.

As far as fantasy goes, there is not really a necessary historical precondition for people to create fantastic creatures and worlds, or indeed recycle pre-existing mythology. Nonetheless, if you take fantasy in its modern form as a mass cultural phenomenon, JRR Tolkien is obviously the most influential figure. Tolkien represents a conservative, Catholic reaction to the intense crisis of the first half of the 20th century, a reaction to

the fact that war can no longer be seen as noble and between great forces of good and evil any more - so he writes an enormous novel where it is.

It is not accidental that when we deal with these two genres they come out of a more general cultural crisis, because narrative works on crisis. It would not work if Victor Frankenstein makes his monster and everything turns out all right, because you do not have a story. Conflict is the petrol that these mutations in narrative actually run on - there are actually new problems that calls for these imaginary solutions.

What is lurking in the background here is the very old idea that science-fiction tends to be ‘progressive’ because it is imagining progress in some way, and that fantasy is a reactionary literature of mystification. This does not quite hold up. This view, by the way, originated in its systematic form with Darko Suvin - he was one of the first people to systematically attempt a literary theory on science-fiction in the late 1970s and he happened to be a Marxist (of a slightly peculiar type).

However, he was one of these people with a very clear definition of science-fiction; one characteristic early essay was titled, self-explanatorily, ‘On what is and is not an SF narration; with a list of 101 Victorian books that should be excluded from SF bibliographies’ (www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/14/suvin14art.htm). He was extraordinarily anti-fantasy. In addition, it is more common for science-fiction to flirt with leftwing politics. HG Wells was a Fabian, though he famously despised democracy. More recently there were ‘new wave’ authors, such as Michael Moorcock and later still Ken Macleod, Iain M Banks and so on. That is the general *tendency* in science-fiction; but if you open up the author’s biography of your average fantasy novel you will find many writers from military and religious backgrounds.

However, you can have reactionary myths of the future. You can perfectly well conceive of the future as a technological expansion in which *nothing really changes*. There are just more wars, and humanity will always be fundamentally red in tooth and claw. Conversely, in terms of fantasy, it has to be understood there are ways of posing historical problems in a fantastical mode that are not necessarily ‘obvious’ to science-fiction, in particular thematising the unreason that is part of human existence.

A good example would be China Miéville’s *Bas-Lag* trilogy - magic is called ‘thaumaturgy’, is an object of knowledge and a technical means of production (and, more gruesomely, physical mutilation). Miéville also has a formulation which, despite its Hegelian-Marxism, has a certain truth to it - “‘real’ life under capitalism is a fantasy”. What he means by this is commodity fetishism; but you could conceive of it a different way. The basic point is that there is a certain level at which everyone is always doing this myth-making. Fantasy is maybe in a position to make us conscious of what is going on there.

Two examples

I will take two quite recent series of books to discuss in more depth here: firstly, Richard Morgan’s Takeshi Kovacs novels (*Altered carbon*, *Broken angels* and *Woken furies*). The SF gimmick here is that consciousness can be stored in a ‘cortical stack’ and transferred from body to body, as well as being transmitted from one star system to another (necessary due to the lack of faster-than-light travel).

That sets up a certain number of expectations - primarily that we will be dealing with the liberation of humanity from the narrow corporeality of its existence; but Morgan is an incorrigible pessimist. What this actually allows is an enormous expansion of the means of destruction.

Now there are several planets colonised by humans, so it does not really matter if there is a nuclear war on one of them - and, sure enough, there are nuclear wars. If you can store someone’s consciousness on a disk, imagine the possibilities for virtual-reality torture (of course, we do not have to imagine, as Morgan explains in considerably graphic detail).

Beyond that, there is an abiding sense that, although you can transfer your consciousness from body to body, your behaviour is still determined more by the body you are in than by your free-floating consciousness; that nobody has escaped anything and that, despite all human efforts, we are always going to be stuck in a biological condition where exploitation and mass violence are inevitable.

This actually turns out to be a little too depressing even for Morgan. By the end of the third novel the main character has been thrown back into a revolutionary milieu; a series of increasingly outlandish plot contrivances leads one to the conclusion that an inscrutable and apparently dead race of super-advanced aliens has taken an interest in the future of humanity. You then have this strange *deus ex machina*, where the only possibility for change lies is a bizarre god-race that left this sort of stuff laying around.

It is a science-fiction novel, and Morgan delights in detailing the uglier bits of his ‘science’. But his world is strictly Nietzsche’s eternal repetition of the same, with the only possibility of breaking the cycle coming from some sort of pseudo-god (in spite, it must be said, of Morgan’s ultra-Dawkinsite hatred of religion).

On the contrary, there is presently a moment in fantasy where the old Tolkienesque moral certitudes are breaking down with some rapidity. The turning point was George RR Martin’s *Game of thrones*, now adapted for television by HBO; though it was a secondary world fantasy broadly in the Tolkienesque tradition, its cynicism about the stakes and consequences of war is in stark contrast to *Lord of the rings*, and has been widely influential in the genre. In its wake has arisen a wave of what you could call the ‘spaghetti swords and sorcery’ novel - a much more ambivalent and critical variant of the older, high-fantasy template.

I want to touch upon Joe Abercrombie briefly - he has written five novels, including a trilogy, set in a secondary world basically recognisable from older novels in the Tolkienesque tradition; there are barbarians in the north, there are mysterious, Oriental types with malign intentions at the gates, and in the middle there is an imperial capital, which seems to be in an advanced state of late-feudal decadence.

The main characters, broadly speaking, are a barbarian, a torturer from the capital and a self-absorbed minor aristocrat. The barbarian - Logen Ninefingers - has never been outside his homeland of snowy wastes, but at the outset of the trilogy he is rescued by an ancient sorcerer called Bayaz. It seems that we will see the classic relationship and Ninefingers will be taken under the wing of the archetypal ‘wise one’, be shown the world and introduced to his great historic mission.

But, as the trilogy goes on, everything slowly flips around and it becomes clear that Bayaz does not have the best interests of humanity at heart. By the point this becomes obvious, everyone else is entrapped in his scheme and he engineers the transition from this decaying feudal absolutism. The final state of affairs: the minor aristocrat inherits the throne, but is only a puppet for Bayaz, the torturer gets to keep his job, and the world is now to be ruled by money.

So what you have is this bizarre

myth of class exploitation surviving historical transitions; and this very transition is an alien irruption into a genre that has not really wanted to deal with this problem. It is nonetheless a very provocative piece of work.

Literary v ‘genre’

These books are not treatises on political economy, nor are they great works of modernist literature, where you have to check where you are in a 15-page paragraph. This is mass-market fiction, which is something which must be said about both fantasy and science-fiction: this is what they share.

This is why they end up on the same shelves in Waterstones, much to the annoyance of Darko Suvin. There is a quite grown-up, quite substantial sub-culture around SF and fantasy. Obviously there is the overlap in the audience generally, but it is also embodied in the whole culture of ‘fandom’, such as it is, with its convention circuit, the extremely devoted cult followings of authors - Robert Jordan, a classic high-fantasy author, must have sold 20-odd million books. Every teenage boy goes through a point of reading one of these endless series (mine was Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld*).

Combined with that is an overlap in ostracism. Despite the fact that this is mass culture, because of the way that the cultural economy surrounding literature goes it has an element of ‘outsider culture’ to it as well. Speculative fiction is forcibly separated from ‘literary fiction’ - in a bookshop (and on the awards circuit), there is ‘fiction’ and then there is science-fiction, crime-fiction, fantasy and so forth. Being on the ‘fiction’ shelf is either an indication that they have not quite made up a name yet for the micro-genre or represents a spurious sense of increased seriousness and closeness to ‘real’ concerns.

In this regard, the literary fiction/‘genre’ fiction opposition is worth a few comments. Genre fiction, such as it is, is able to be radical partly because it is cut off from this mainstream circuit and it is very visible. I should say in the first instance that literary fiction is quite as formulaic as any genre - just as I laid out ‘the farm boy of prophecy’ fantasy storyline earlier, the standard ‘literary’ fiction quite as commonly covers the travails, neuroses and relationship issues of an abstract middle class milieu. Iain Banks calls it the Hampstead novel, and he is absolutely right to do so - it is a genuine phenomenon.

In places, the Hampstead novel tries to encroach on science-fiction - but it very often gets into all sorts of problems. Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never let me go*, recently made into a nicely shot film, is a case in point. The idea, in brief, is that children are being bred in order that their vital organs can be farmed in early adulthood; they all go to this idyllic public school, somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

It is particularly clear, in the film more than the novel, what the problem is: at various points the narrator muses to the effect that ‘We always kind of knew we were going to grow up and be killed and farmed for organs, but also kind of didn’t’. There is a moment in the film where one of the rebellious teachers at the school confirms this fate to the room of teenagers, who sigh briefly in disappointment, and just get on with their lives.

There is also the great science-fiction high concept, which is roped to a plotline about a perpetual love-triangle that goes on and on. The issue is that Ishiguro is trying to do two things at once: he cannot quite separate them and he cannot quite put them together. He wants to write the love-triangle, but this pesky science-fiction concept that he refuses to follow all the way through just makes it look a bit ridiculous. He has the science-

fiction concept in it basically so he can have a hard time limit on the three characters working out who they fancy, so he can make a broad point on the transitory nature of love. He is stuck with these opposed narrative elements which never quite gel.

This is a kind of point that China Miéville makes again and again: you have to believe in your monsters. If the big metaphors come first, the result is an insufferably boring novel that is not half as profound as it thinks it is.

Having said all this, it is worth wondering actually what the point is. Why is it that there has been this peculiar, persistent flirtation between science-fiction and left politics - is it actually rooted in anything real? More to the point, I have come through five years of the literary academy, such as it is, being told at every turn that what we are doing is terribly radical and terribly important.

The issue is that it is not half as radical as academics think it is, in the sense that nothing we can say about science-fiction is politically actionable in even the most broad sense. Even doing the theorisation and close reading of texts to find out what is secretly revolutionary about them is of dubious value - it will not even help you write a more revolutionary science-fiction novel. After all, the novel is a work of language and endless signifying codes and that is not something you own as an author, or something intrinsic to the text - it is a product of history and largely extraneous to any given act of literary production itself.

What you *can* do, however, is force people to think - and what you have with science-fiction and fantasy are two pretty well worn but nonetheless useful tools for forcibly estranging people from their normal surroundings. You cannot just prescribe solutions in literature, but if you frame things in the right way people have at least to come to conclusions that they might not otherwise have done.

In terms of the theoretical aspect, the analysis of genre sheds *some* light on particular historical moments, regarding the way people relate to their culture. I argued that Frankenstein came out of an initial crisis in enlightenment ideology. The *Lord of the rings* and Tolkienesque works come out of moments of general human history, of crisis, of economic crisis, of horrendous and pointless wars and so forth. So there is one relationship going on here within the strictly contemporary context of these texts. But then there is the genre itself as something that persists through time - you can trace the strange mutations where the production of these things becomes industrialised. There is much to be said about how people relate to them now, which may turn out to be important.

At the end of the day we want a movement that has a serious cultural cachet, that can impose a frame of consciousness where ‘pulp’ culture can add up to something greater than bourgeois culture allows it to - products that had previously been thought of as useless pulp trash later reveal a radical underside that can reinforce a kind of critical consciousness. Raymond Chandler is a great example. In the 1930s he just wrote ‘trashy’ novels; but I would argue that he was the greatest writer of the 20th century, and that his novels are richly political and intellectually engaged.

It is part of building up a culture that is distinctively our own; but that inevitably involves appropriating other aspects of culture that aren’t strictly ‘ours’. The writings of Marx, in fact, are an object lesson in picking up material - Balzac, More, Shakespeare - that by no means belongs to the workers’ movement, and turning it against official bourgeois culture ●

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OUR HISTORY

Lenin, Kautsky and the 'new era of revolutions'

Lenin's vision of world revolution at the turn of the 20th century was inspired by Karl Kautsky, writes Canada-based scholar Lars T Lih

"Today, the battles in the liberation struggle of labouring and exploited humanity are being fought not only at the Spree River and the Seine, but also at the Hudson and Mississippi, at the Neva and the Dardanelles, at the Ganges and the Hoangho" - Karl Kautsky, 1909

In autumn 1914, shortly after the outbreak of World War I, Lenin wrote to his associate, Aleksandr Shliapnikov: "I hate and despise Kautsky now more than anyone, with his vile, dirty, self-satisfied hypocrisy." This pungent summation of Lenin's attitude toward Kautsky - an attitude that remained unchanged for the rest of Lenin's life - is often cited. Ultimately more useful in understanding Lenin's outlook, however, is another comment, made around the same time to the same correspondent: "Obtain without fail and reread (or ask to have it translated for you) *Road to power* by Kautsky [and see] what he writes there about the revolution of our time! And now, how he acts the toady and disavows all that!"¹

Lenin took his own advice. He sat down a few weeks later, flipped through the pages of Kautsky's *Road to power*, and came up with a page-and-a-half list of quotations that he inserted into an article entitled 'Dead chauvinism and living socialism'. He then commented: "This is how Kautsky wrote in times long, long past, fully five years ago. This is what German Social Democracy was, or, more correctly, what it promised to be. This was the kind of Social Democracy that could and had to be respected."²

In previous publications on the relation between Lenin and Kautsky, I have focused on establishing a central paradox: after the outbreak of war in 1914, Karl Kautsky was at one and the same time Lenin's greatest enemy and his greatest mentor. I have shown that from 1914 on, there is a constant stream of comments by Lenin praising "Kautsky when he was a Marxist" on a wide range of topics. The widespread opinion that Lenin underwent a process of radical rethinking that led to his rejection of pre-war 'Second International Marxism', as personified by Kautsky, is no longer viable.³

I now want to move on and ask a more fundamental question: what are the connections between the views of the pre-war Kautsky (more precisely, Kautsky up to the publication of *Road to power* in 1909) and Lenin's outlook after 1914? I answer as follows: Lenin's political outlook and strategy from 1914 on stemmed from a definition of the situation that he took lock, stock and barrel from the writings of "Kautsky when he was a Marxist".⁴ This basic definition of the situation can be given the following one-sentence summary. The entire world has now entered into a global era of revolutions, with intense interaction between revolutionary events at all levels - an era that can only come to an end with the victory of socialism at least in the advanced countries. As a shorthand label for this outlook, I have coined the term, 'scenario of global



October 1917: Influenced as much by Kautsky as Lenin

revolutionary interaction' (GRI).

Ultimately, I would like:

- first, to demonstrate how this GRI scenario is set forth with eloquence and strong empirical backing in a series of writings by Karl Kautsky during the period 1902-09;
- second, to show how Kautsky's GRI scenario explicitly undergirded Lenin's outlook and action recommendations, certainly from 1914 to 1917, and, in essentials, for the rest of his political career;⁵
- third, to replace standard accounts (which, of course, vary tremendously in sophistication) that portray Lenin's outlook undergoing some sort of radical rethinking and break from orthodoxy after 1914.

I will therefore mostly comment not directly about Lenin, but about Kautsky. My justification for doing so comes from Lenin himself, writing in January 1915:

"It was none other than Kautsky himself, in a whole series of articles and in his book *Road to power* (which came out in 1909), who described with the fullest possible definiteness the basic traits of the approaching third epoch and who pointed out its radical distinctiveness from the second (yesterday's) epoch. He acknowledged the change in immediate tasks, and, along with this, a change in the conditions and forms of the struggle of contemporary democracy - a change that flows out of the shift in objective historical circumstances."⁶

In other words, by looking at the relevant writings by Kautsky, I am also looking at Lenin's basic definition of the historical epoch in which he found himself and also at the basic tactical conclusions he drew from that definition.

My source base

I draw my picture of the GRI scenario from Kautsky's writings from 1902 to 1909. In *The social revolution*, a book published in 1902, Kautsky first set forth his claim that the world had entered a new era of revolutions. The *social revolution* focuses primarily on western Europe, but Kautsky's brief essay, 'Slavs and revolution', written for and published by *Iskra* also in 1902, already announces that revolutionary dynamics must be seen in the context of an intensely interactive and shifting global framework.

The Russian Revolution of 1905

and, perhaps even more, the Japanese victory over Russia led to an even greater insistence of the global dimensions of the new revolutionary era. A series of extensive articles devoted to this topic from 1904-07 are collected in the very valuable anthology, *Witnesses to permanent revolution*.⁷ Debates within the Second International about possible socialist support for colonialism led to Kautsky's *Socialism and colonial policy* in 1907. During this year, Kautsky and Lenin, among others, fought at the Stuttgart Congress of the International in favour of a strong socialist rejection of any support for colonialism, 'ethical' or otherwise. Finally, a summation of sorts comes in 1909 in *Road to power*, especially the final chapter, entitled 'A new age of revolutions'.

These are the main sources for the following discussion, although scattered comments in essays devoted to other topics - particularly on nationality problems - are also revealing. Kautsky's thoughts on these topics continued to develop after 1909, but Lenin stoutly rejected all of these further explorations.

In the following discussion, we should keep in mind Kautsky's pre-eminent position within international social democracy during these years. Two points in particular require underlining. First, Kautsky not only had global interests, but global contacts. The following remark by a German philosopher is revealing:

"[Kautsky] left behind a body of journalistic and scholarly work which in quantity exceeds the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and VI Lenin. Kautsky corresponded with personalities all over the world, especially with leading representatives of German and international social democracy. About 13,300 letters and cards exchanged with about 2,300 correspondents ... are available in the Kautsky Archive alone of the *Institut für Sozialgeschichte* [Institute for Social History]."⁸

As an example, in 1908 a group of intellectuals who had formed a social democratic organisation in Iran wrote to Kautsky asking his advice. He wrote back, answering their questions and asking for articles which he subsequently printed in his weekly theoretical journal *Die Neue Zeit*. (this episode is discussed below).

When assessing the impact of Kautsky's writings on Lenin, we should also keep in mind that after the 1905 revolution Kautsky acquired a deserved reputation as an honorary Bolshevik. Particularly in his seminal 1906 article, 'Driving forces and prospects of the Russian Revolution', Kautsky endorsed the basic Bolshevik strategy of alliance with the peasants and distrust of the liberals.⁹ Although Kautsky did not explicitly take sides in the factional dispute, both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks understood the import of his thinking.

Furthermore, Kautsky's writings were the basic educational tool of Russian social democracy. It is fair to say that Kautsky had more impact on the basic world view of Russian social democrats, year in year out, than any single Russian Social Democratic writer. If we ask, 'Who was the *vozhd i uchitel* of Bolshevism prior to World War I?', I would answer: Lenin was indeed the *vozhd* (leader), but Kautsky was the *uchitel* (teacher) - and Lenin remained proud of the fact for the rest of his life.¹⁰

Kautsky's GRI

Here is a list of the key features of Kautsky's scenario of global revolutionary interaction:

- After a generation of relative stability, Europe and the world are entering upon a new revolutionary era.
- The new era of revolutions differs from the previous one, which lasted from 1789 to 1871, primarily by virtue of its global scope and the new intensity of interaction made possible by growing ties, and in particular by new means of communication that allowed access to modern ideas and techniques.
- The revolutions that mark this new era fall into two large categories: the socialist revolution that is on the agenda for western Europe and the United States of America, and the democratic revolutions that are on the agenda elsewhere in the world. The category of democratic revolutions can be further broken down into three main types: revolutions to obtain political freedoms and overthrow absolutist oppression; revolutions of self-determination against national oppression; anti-colonial revolutions against foreign oppression.
- These four types of revolutions overlap and interact with each other in ways that are unpredictable, but that will certainly increase the overall intensity of the global revolutionary crisis. Thus any scenario of future developments must be extraordinarily open-ended.¹¹ We cannot even say that the socialist revolution will triumph - only that the only alternative to socialism is an endless crisis of civilisation.
- Global interaction implies a rejection of simplistic models, in which 'advanced' countries show 'backward' countries the image of their future. For example, in crucial respects Germany sees an image of its future in 'backward' Russia.
- The principal types of interaction are: direct intervention, such as invasions, investments and colonial domination; observation of the experience of other countries, allowing latecomers to swiftly catch

up and overtake; direct repercussions of revolutionary events, due to the enthusiasm of some and the panic of others, the breaking of some ties and the creation of others.

- The capitalist world will try to preserve itself from revolutionary change in a variety of ways, and in particular, by imperialism, "the last refuge of capitalism".¹² These attempts will fail, if only because the world has already been divided up by the imperialist powers.

- Only a resolutely anti-racist platform will permit social democracy to navigate the coming rapids of revolutionary change.

- The role of war as an incubator of revolution is likely to be extremely large.

Types of revolution

All of these points can of course be unpacked at great length. I will confine myself here to a few remarks on the various types of revolution and their role in the GRI scenario.

1. Socialist revolution:

Kautsky believed that western Europe was on the eve of socialist revolution (with America probably following not too long thereafter). He further argued that the fear expressed by some socialists that such a revolution would be "premature" must be rejected. Class antagonisms are not getting milder, but rather more antagonistic. The growth in the organisational prowess of the workers is more than matched by large-scale capitalist organisations, such as the trusts. In western Europe (in contrast to Russia), the proletariat as a class stands alone, since the peasantry and the urban petty bourgeoisie have become conservative and even reactionary (as shown by the anti-Semitic parties). Nevertheless, the petty-bourgeois classes continue to vacillate (the essential class marker of the petty bourgeoisie), so that a massive swing toward the proletariat due to some crisis certainly cannot be ruled out.

Present-day capitalism resorts to three methods to "rub the rouge of health and youth into its wasted cheeks"¹³: cartels, militarism and the arms race, and imperialism. Imperialism is not only a policy, but an ideology, a last final attempt to infuse capitalism with the passion of a great historical task. All these methods are bound to fail and are openly leading to even greater crises in the near future. The old elite is visibly degenerating into pettiness and corruption, as shown by the venality of journalists and parliamentary politicians.

Tactics should be suited to the nature of the situation, and a revolutionary situation required different tactics from non-revolutionary periods. The tried and true tactics of the Social Democratic Party of Germany that aimed for a patient build-up of worker organisation and consciousness are still appropriate, but not for much longer. A revolutionary situation was fast approaching, in which more aggressive tactics such as the mass strike would be needed.

Social democracy must remain true to its revolutionary calling. To dilute its message now, to promote alliances

with a compromised elite - the advice of socialist opportunism - is the road to disaster. “In this general vacillation, the social democracy party will stand its ground all the better, the less it itself vacillates, the more firmly it remains true to itself.”¹⁴

A war in the near future is quite likely. “The experience of the last decades proves, however, that war means revolution, that it results in enormous shifts of political power.”¹⁵ (The role of war is discussed in greater detail below.)

2. Democratic political revolution: A general point about all types of democratic revolutions: Kautsky affirmed that social democrats should support them. This proposition was by no means uncontroversial either within the larger field of socialists before the world war or even within Marx-based social democracy, as many controversies show. In these controversies and polemics, Kautsky and Lenin are always found in the same camp.

According to Kautsky, social democrats should support democratic revolutions for three sets of reasons: (a) commitment to democratic principles; (b) successful revolutions will clear away obstacles on the path to socialism; (c) democratic revolutions will indirectly weaken worldwide capitalism.

These principles can be illustrated by Kautsky’s answer to the Iranian social democrats who wrote to him in 1908. They told Kautsky that some people in Iran were unsure about the propriety of social democratic participation in the struggle against foreign capitalism. Kautsky replied:

“Socialist fighters cannot adopt an exclusively passive attitude towards the revolution and remain with their arms folded. And if the country is not sufficiently developed to have a modern proletariat, then only a democratic movement provides the possibility for socialists to participate in the revolutionary struggle.”

Kautsky went on to say that the social democrats may have to participate “as simple democrats in the ranks of bourgeois and petty bourgeois democrats”. They nevertheless have a wider perspective, since for them “the victory of democracy is not the end of political struggle; rather, it is the beginning of the new unknown struggle, which was practically impossible under the absolutist regime”. This new struggle required not only political freedom, but national independence.

The social democratic fight against capitalism in these countries may not be able to put socialist revolution on the immediate agenda, but nevertheless such a struggle will “weaken European capitalism and bestow greater strength on the European proletariat ... Persia and Turkey, by struggling for their own liberation, also fight for the liberation of the world proletariat.”¹⁶

The most important case of political revolution in Kautsky’s GRI scenario was the anti-tsarist revolution in Russia. Out of Kautsky’s long and extensive connection to Russian social democracy, the following should be mentioned. Kautsky used Russia almost as a textbook example of what was later called “uneven and combined development”: that is, the presence in the same country of extreme backwardness and highly advanced capitalism, of barbaric repression and a militant proletariat inspired by the latest models of European socialist struggle. In particular, Kautsky argued that the outlook of the Russian peasant was changing rapidly and its future evolution could not be predicted from European experience.

In his writings around the time of the 1905 revolution - in fact, already in ‘Slavs and revolution’ from 1902 - Kautsky expounded the international context of the Russian Revolution. On

the one hand, the Russian proletariat had to fight against world capital that was propping up Russian tsarism. On the other hand, the triumph of the anti-tsarist revolution would directly hurt European capital and greatly inspire the workers of western Europe, possibly even sparking off the socialist revolution. (These ideas are commonly associated with Trotsky, but the material collected in *Witnesses to permanent revolution* show clearly that Kautsky was the initiator of a set of ideas that were generally accepted by Russian social democrats. Trotsky himself gave effuse credit to Kautsky.)

3. Democratic revolution for self-determination:

Kautsky was joined by Lenin (and Stalin too!) in a position on the nationality question that rejected both the overestimation of nationality of Austrian social democracy and the underestimation of nationality by Rosa Luxemburg in Poland. To adapt Kautsky’s own famous witticism, the Kautsky-Lenin position was midway between Luxembourg and Vienna. And if you look at a map of Europe to find out what is actually between the Duchy of Luxembourg and Vienna, you will find (a little south of a direct line between the two) Switzerland, used by these writers as a successful model of bourgeois-democratic treatment of the nationality question.

The basic principles of the Kautsky-Lenin position are: the right of self-determination against national oppression must be respected; social democracy does not necessarily advocate the use of this right in concrete cases; separatism in socialist and other worker organisations must be resisted; great-power chauvinism (Germans v Poles in Kautsky’s case, Russians v various national minorities in Lenin’s case) must be opposed, even at the cost of bending over backwards to avoid offence; the ultimate solution to nationalism is to reassure national minorities that their democratic rights will be respected.¹⁷

National revolutions also play an important part in global revolutionary interaction as one more source of upheaval and crisis.

4. Democratic anti-colonial revolutions:

In the case of anti-colonial struggle, as with other types of democratic revolution, Kautsky took a stand that was controversial within social democracy. As he wrote in *Road to power* (in my opinion, magnificently):

“The colonial policy or imperialism is based on the assumption that only the peoples possessed of European civilisation are capable of independent development. The men of other races are considered children, idiots or beasts of burden, according to the degree of unfriendliness with which one treats them; in any case as beings having a lower level of development, who can be directed as one wishes. Even socialists proceed on this assumption as soon as they want to pursue a policy of colonial expansion - an ethical one, of course. But reality soon teaches them that our party’s tenet that all men are equal is no mere figure of speech, but a very real force.”¹⁸

Anti-colonial revolutions play a very large role in Kautsky’s scenario of global revolutionary interaction. The Japanese victory over Russia represents a major turning point in history because it ends the illusion of the European colonisers as all-powerful. As such, the Japanese victory is inspiring anti-colonial unrest all over Asia and the Muslim world. Payback time has come.

The independence of former colonies will have an immediate and severe impact on Europe’s capitalist powers. The independence of India, to take a crucial example, would end England’s parasitic monopoly position and therefore also end the passivity of the English working class, since

this passivity was the result of being bribed by colonial booty.

Kautsky warns that, although the anti-colonial rebels are enemies of the proletariat’s enemies, they nevertheless “oppose to foreign capitalism a domestic, national capitalism. We must not allow ourselves any illusions in this respect ... This does not in any way alter the fact that they are weakening European capitalism and its governments and introducing an element of political unrest into the whole world.”¹⁹

5. The role of war:

The earlier discussion has brought out some of the many ways in which the different types of revolution inspire and intensify each other. The role of war is another factor that Kautsky sees as contributing to the overall global revolutionary crisis. Kautsky’s remarks on war are rather complex and do not reveal one simple attitude. The following paraphrase of his outlook is therefore somewhat provisional.

According to Kautsky, war is a terrible thing that the proletariat fights against with all its might. The most important current struggle of the proletariat is against militarism and imperialism. The proletariat’s militant stance and the elite’s fear of revolution is right now the main bulwark against the outbreak of war.

Nevertheless, of all the classes, the proletariat is the one that can look forward to war with the most confidence. War leads to revolution in a number of ways. An unpopular war or one that leads to crushing defeat will thoroughly discredit the elite classes and make the proletariat the vigorous champion of a national cause. In 1891, Engels still thought that war would bring the socialist proletariat to power prematurely. According to Kautsky, premature socialist revolution was no longer a threat in the Europe of his day, and therefore social democracy could look with confidence toward the revolution that war would bring in its wake.

Any European war today will be caused by imperialism. Thus the population will understand that the war does not represent national interests and that neither side in the war can claim the moral high ground. The necessity of anti-capitalist revolution will be all the more evident.

Social democracy should certainly not choose war as a means to achieve revolution. War imposes terrible costs and it warps and distorts the revolution itself. Nevertheless, social democracy may not have a choice in the matter, since the reckless policies of militarism and imperialism may lead to war, even against the desires of the elites themselves. Already in 1902, Kautsky had concluded that “we must reckon on the possibility of a war within a perceptible time and therewith also the possibility of political convulsions that will end directly in proletarian uprisings or at least in opening the way toward them.”²⁰

Kautsky’s point about the dangers of revolutionary degeneration caused by war is one of the very few theses of his that, so far, I have not found reflected in Lenin. To take up the slack, a very similar argument is employed by Martov in his analysis of the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Lenin and the GRI scenario

Anyone familiar with Lenin’s post-1914 writings will recognise the enormous debt Lenin owes to Kautsky - one that Lenin had no qualms about acknowledging. I will merely broach this subject by mentioning a few key moments.

1. ‘Turn the imperialist war into civil war’:

Lenin very quickly arrived at his basic political slogan during the years 1914-17. The speed at which he

arrived at it is explained by its deep connection to Kautsky’s pre-war GRI scenario. Lenin’s tactical slogan was based on the following propositions: “The present war is imperialist in character.” This characterisation implies cartelisation at home and expansionary policies abroad. This in turn implies that “the objective conditions are perfectly ripe for socialism to be achieved”.

No genuine progressive or national interest is served by these wars, thus discrediting “defence of the fatherland” as a slogan. Although the betrayal by opportunists has hurt proletarian organisations, nevertheless, “a revolutionary crisis is maturing”. Opportunist attitudes in some sections of the working class are explained in large part by “the privileged position of their ‘fatherlands’ in the world market”. A new international must be formed by rejecting not only opportunism, but all those who obscure the undiluted revolutionary message of social democracy (now, ironically, including Kautsky himself).

A democratic peace is not possible without a series of revolutions. Revolutionaries should not worry about revolutionary propaganda causing defeat, since defeat “facilitates civil war against the ruling classes”.²¹

For the time being, I will leave to the reader the task of connecting the dots from Lenin’s position to Kautsky’s GRI scenario.

2. The spread of revolution:

I have emphasised that the spread of revolution though direct intervention and through inspiring example is a central facet of Kautsky’s scenario. I will cite two places where Lenin shows the centrality of this facet in his own global scenario.

In August 1915, Lenin outlined how a socialist revolution that occurred in one country could spread in a variety of ways to other countries: “the victorious proletariat [of one country] will arise against the rest of the world - the capitalist world - attracting to its cause the oppressed classes of other countries, stirring uprisings in those countries against the capitalists, and in case of need using even armed force against the exploiting classes and their states”.²²

In October 1915, Lenin outlined a somewhat similar scenario, but this time he contemplated the way in which a democratic political revolution would inspire revolutions at other levels. This was a wartime version of the scenario that was already part of parcel of old Bolshevism, as inspired by Kautsky. In theses that were published as a semi-official statement, Lenin envisaged the policy of a proletarian party that had come to power as a result of Russia’s democratic revolution. At home, the content of the revolution was still the minimum programme, based on the “revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry”. Abroad, however, an aggressive diplomatic policy aimed against national and colonial oppression would probably result in revolutionary war.

The Russian revolutionary government would actively work to inspire uprisings in all colonies. It would also “raise up the socialist proletariat of Europe for an insurrection against their governments”. Thus, “there is no doubt that a victory of the proletariat in Russia would create extraordinarily favourable conditions for the development of the revolution in both Asia and Europe. Even 1905 proved that.”²³

3. Lenin’s final writings:

In one of his final articles of 1923, Lenin took heart that “Russia, India, China, etc” made up the vast majority of humanity and “this majority has been drawn into the struggle for liberation with extraordinary rapidity, so that in this respect there cannot be the slightest doubt what the final

outcome of the world struggle will be. In this sense, the complete victory of socialism is fully and absolutely assured.”²⁴

This passage indicates that the influence of Kautsky’s GRI scenario was still alive and well in Lenin’s mind, as he tried to take final stock of the position of the Russian Revolution. True, by 1923 he had to make some adjustments, the most important of them resulting from the fact that the Russian Revolution simply had not spread. In the short term, the world was emerging from a revolutionary situation without undergoing socialist revolution. Nevertheless, Lenin still expressed complete confidence that global revolutionary interaction was still the fundamental reality of the day - one that guaranteed the security of Soviet Russia and the eventual triumph of socialism ●

Notes

1. Letters of October 27 and October 31 1914.
2. VI Lenin, ‘Dead chauvinism and living socialism’, December 1914.
3. LT Lih, ‘Lenin and Kautsky, the final chapter’ in *International Socialist Review* No59 (May-June 2008); ‘Lenin’s aggressive unoriginality, 1914-1916’, in *Socialist Studies: the Journal of the Society for Socialist Studies* 5(2) fall 2009, pp90-112.
4. For the concept of “definition of the situation”, see RC Tucker *Politics as leadership* Columbia 1981.
5. Looking again at the small book written right after Lenin’s death by Georg Lukács, I was struck by the fact that in the chapter entitled ‘Imperialism; world war and civil war’, Lukács brought out the systematic nature of Lenin’s views in a way that closely matched by own reconstruction of the inner logic of Kautsky’s view of the “new era of revolutions”. Readers can judge for themselves; the Lukács text is available at www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/1924/lenin/ch04.htm. Lukács was writing in the midst of the burgeoning Lenin cult and wanted to make Lenin look as unique and original as possible. Furthermore, his chapter makes clear that he had not read anything by the pre-war Kautsky. From my point of view, therefore, he is something of a hostile witness. If ‘Lukács on Lenin’ closely resembles ‘Lih on Kautsky’, then we can eliminate the middlemen and conclude that Lenin’s view of global revolutionary dynamics closely resembles the view of Kautsky “when he was a Marxist” - the proposition to be proved!
6. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 26, pp143-44.
7. RB Day and D Gaido (eds) *Witnesses to permanent revolution: the documentary record* Leiden 2009. The editorial introductions to the Kautsky articles are very useful.
8. From a discussion paper by Hans-Jürgen Mende, a former East German teacher of Marxism-Leninism that was written in the immediate aftermath of the demise of the German Democratic Republic (see www.socialisteducation.org/KKautsky.html).
9. Kautsky’s article, as well as commentaries by Trotsky and Lenin, can be found in *Witnesses to permanent revolution*; the young Stalin also wrote a commentary on Kautsky’s article.
10. See the relevant comments in his *State and revolution* (1917) and *Leftwing communism* (1920).
11. The stereotype, still prevalent in some circles, that Kautsky represented a “fatalistic, mechanistic, deterministic” style of Marxism does not stand up to examination. As Day and Gaido remark, “Disputing the notion of any single pattern of capitalist development, Kautsky simultaneously rejected any idea of unilateral economic determinism” (*Witnesses* p617).
12. K Kautsky *Road to power* chapter 9.
13. K Kautsky *Socialism and colonial policy* (1907).
14. K Kautsky *Road to power* p89.
15. *Ibid* p84.
16. This material is taken from a special issue of *Revolutionary History* entitled ‘The left in Iran, 1905-1940’ (Vol 10, No2 [2010]), pp123-28).
17. A very useful case study that compares Kautsky’s attitude toward the Jews and the Czechs is J Jacobs, ‘Karl Kautsky: between Baden and Luxemburg’, in *On socialists and ‘the Jewish question’ after Marx* New York 1992, pp5-43.
18. K Kautsky *Road to power* p80-81.
19. *Ibid* p83.
20. K Kautsky *The social revolution*, p96-97.
21. The quoted words are decisions of a Bolshevik conference in spring 1915, as drafted by Lenin (*CW* Vol 21, pp158-64), although the same basic outlook can be found in Lenin’s writings earlier.
22. V I Lenin *CW* Vol 21, p342. I therefore do not believe that this passage can be used as an indication of Lenin’s belief in the possibility of constructing full socialism in one country: this is simply not the topic on Lenin’s mind. Following the logic of the GRI scenario, Lenin wanted socialist revolution in one country to rapidly spread to others; he certainly did not envision a long period of socialist construction before entering the world revolutionary maelstrom. (This remark is not meant as a full reading of this contested passage.)
23. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 21, pp403-04.
24. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 45, pp401-06.

PLATYPUS

Adam Smith's profoundest reader

Karl Marx built on and developed bourgeois revolutionary consciousness, contends **Spencer A Leonard** of the US Platypus group



Adam Smith: quoted copiously, quoted admiringly

Though certainly Marx is an original thinker, he is also a pre-eminent immanent thinker. No deviser of utopias to oppose to other utopias respecting what ought to be, Marx is rather a dialectical critic of practice obscure to itself. He attempts to grasp capital from within, working through its own highest expressions.

Though the fact is scarcely ever acknowledged, it is no exaggeration to claim that Adam Smith is among Karl Marx's primary interlocutors. A search of his name on Marxists Internet Archive generates more hits than any other except for Hegel (where many link to works by Engels). Moreover, unlike Engels, Marx ceases to engage explicitly with "that mighty thinker" and his epigones after 1846, whereas Marx writes on Smith from the Paris manuscripts through *Capital*. Marx also refers explicitly to his other primary interlocutor among the political economists, David Ricardo, less frequently than he does to Smith.

While his ceasing to address him explicitly need not (and does not) signal any actual break in Marx's engagement with Hegel, the simple philological fact that Smith is the more abiding, explicitly invoked interlocutor is rarely, if ever acknowledged. This is because of radical opposed general perceptions of the two engagements. For, though many disapprove of it and try to explain it away, few Marxists deny Hegel's centrality for Marx. Indeed, some - most notably Georg Lukács, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno - have made critical contributions to the 20th century understanding of Hegel.

But Marxists have left no comparable legacy with respect to the interpretation of Adam Smith. Indeed, few would so much as grant

that Marx indeed took Smith as an *interlocutor*, preferring to assume that Marx argued *against* him as a 'liberal'. This is because liberalism, and indeed the bourgeois revolution itself in the prevailing late Stalinoid conception, is typically thought by Marxists to be a bourgeois class project that Marx instinctively opposed. Thus Smith is typically regarded on the left in much the same way as the German nationalist economist, Friedrich List, thought of him - as the patron saint of 19th century British free-trade imperialism.

Most left commentators sneer when they intone the word 'bourgeois', as in the phrase 'bourgeois political economy'. In this sneering contempt of even resolutely 'anti-Stalinist' Marxists can be detected that constitutive, ubiquitous Stalinism that both occasions and indexes the death of the left in our time. And in their incomprehension of Marx's critique of political economy, to which the engagement with Smith is central, today's Marxists reveal more than they guess.

Telling left from right

Everyone is familiar with the conservative Smith and, undoubtedly, the conservatives thought it a triumph to have his image put on the £20 note. But on the left, where it is fashionable to have 'a critique of the enlightenment', none object to this cooption. Indeed, even among Marxists who claim the enlightenment for the left, few would class Smith within its radical strain.

Take, for example, the prominent Marx scholar, David Harvey. Harvey describes Smith as a "liberal utopian" committed to a theology of "perfectly functioning markets and the hidden

hand".¹ A spokesman for the rising capitalist class, Harvey's Smith promoted capitalism as a "utopianism of process". On the basis of this liberal utopianism, we are told, Smith "derived a political programme ... Give free markets room to flourish, then all will be well with the world." Having thus caricatured Smith's thought, Harvey then pulls him into the present, saying, "this, of course, is the ideology that has become so dominant in certain of the advanced capitalist countries ... these last 20 years". Finally, as if to put the matter to rest, Harvey 'reminds' his readers that "Marx mounted a devastating attack upon this utopianism of process in *Capital*."² Here Harvey expresses something like the standard view of Smith: While we might puzzle over Marx's relationship to, perhaps even his dialectical appropriation of, Hegel's dialectic, the critique of Smith's political economy is an attack, a refutation or at the very least a criticism. Hegel is a precursor, Smith an opponent.

Though for the most part Smith is regarded by the existing left as little more than a spokesman for bourgeois class interests in his own time and our own, there has recently emerged at least one purportedly left Smith - that recovered by Italian historical sociologist Giovanni Arrighi in his *Adam Smith in Beijing*. But this appropriation is as symptomatic as is Harvey's rejection. For, however improbably, Arrighi argues that Smith harbours an "anti-urban bias", preferring agricultural labour to urban wage-labour. Maintaining an "utter scepticism concerning the efficiency and usefulness of big business", Smith's "overwhelming preoccupation", Arrighi claims, is with "the establishment and preservation of the central government's capacity to

pursue the national interest".³ Here is a Smith serviceable to Arrighi's anti-bourgeois purpose. Rather than one of the 18th century's leading and most thoughtful advocates for the extension of freedom, Smith is forced into the ranks of the discontented critics of the 'unnatural' development trajectory of Europe.

A strong proponent of "the natural progress of opulence" he thought China to exemplify, "Smith upheld China rather than Europe," Arrighi maintains, "as a model of the kind of market-based economic development that was most advisable for governments to pursue." Thus reduced to the status of an 18th century Sinophile, Arrighi's Smith advocates "benevolent absolutism, meritocracy and an agriculturally based national economy", such as can be found, we are told, even today in China. A kind of precursor of mid-20th century welfare statist Karl Polanyi, this Adam Smith favours "economic development as a process embedded in, and limited by, a particular physical, institutional and social environment".⁴

Just such social, institutionally embedded development as Arrighi's Smith favours has, according to him, been taking place in China since before the publication of Smith's *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*. For the Chinese path, according to Arrighi, exemplifies a "natural" pattern of socio-historical development, as opposed to the "unnatural" foreign commerce- and manufacturing-based form of development, a form Arrighi terms "capitalist". Capitalism on this view is what the west first pursued to overcome feudalism and what it has continued to pursue ever since. The result is the subjection of society and tradition to relentless transformation (not only in Europe, but also in those

places forced to supply Europe with raw materials). Chinese development, by contrast, has taken a more "natural" course, occurring as it does in and through traditional social norms and values.⁵

Thus Arrighi's Smith is, however improbably, anti-capitalist. At the same time, he is symptomatic of the cultural catastrophe of the west. For, though he supposedly would have approved of it, the Chinese form of development that Arrighi celebrates does not require the services of philosophers like Smith. It has no need of self-reflection or the exercise of public reason to achieve its purpose. "No 18th century Chinese thinker theorised the contribution of self-interested enterprise to the national economy," Arrighi notes, because such theorisation was unnecessary.⁶ China unwittingly pursued Smith's non-capitalist, market-based course to a non-capitalist modernity. The Chinese path that Arrighi so admires itself derives from the wisdom of Chinese culture to which the Chinese revolution presumably accommodated itself. Arrighi places Adam Smith in Beijing only as an approving observer. Rather than the restless churning of societies dominated by capital, Giovanni Arrighi prefers unconscious development pursued in the national interest by a tradition-embedded state bureaucracy. This in a work published not by some academic press, but by Verso, the leading left publisher in our time.

Since the Marxist, Harvey, is hostile to Smith and Arrighi invokes him only to strip him of his philosophical project, we must ask ourselves the question, who on the left today speaks of Smith as a leading 18th century philosopher of freedom or even, as did an older generation of Marxists, as a significant pre-Marxian exponent of the labour theory of value? But to raise this question is to answer it. While the left generally disdains the category of 'freedom' as reactionary, the right, which claims to value Smith as a founder of free market economics, dismisses his labour theory of value as pre-scientific.

Marx's Smith, by stark contrast, attends closely to him as a dialectician and theorist of bourgeois society. More particularly, Marx pays close attention to Smith's radical overturning of past political economy in his struggle against the Physiocrats and mercantilism. Nor does he reduce Smith to simply his place in history. But who on the left today can say what Smith's significance is for Marx? How many reflect upon why, rather than prognosticating crises of the system or giving speeches to the working men, Marx spent nearly three years in the early 1860s working through his history of political economy - in which Smith, like Ricardo, is given pride of place - before undertaking the final drafting of *Capital* volume 1?

Though Adam Smith is chiefly associated with the demand for freedom of property, and the translation of this into the project of unfettered national markets and international free trade (the whole being lumped under the rubric of the 'invisible hand'), none of this is in fact peculiar to Smith. Rather, integral to the project of the revolutionary third estate broadly conceived, these were mainstream concerns of political economy from at least the time of John Locke and Sir Dudley North in the 17th century. Similarly, the character and productive potential

of the division of labour, so closely associated with Smith's name, forms a subject for intense reflection and analysis nearly three-quarters of a century before *Wealth of nations* in the writings of Sir William Petty, the man Marx credits with the founding of political economy. The neglect of what is novel in Smith goes hand in hand with the neglect of Marx's immanent relation to liberalism and to bourgeois revolution itself.

Bourgeois revolution

Though he falsely attributes the view to Platypus, Mike Macnair is nonetheless right to deny that the bourgeois revolution began with the French Revolution. Rather, as Marx knew, it began much earlier, though not so early as Macnair imagines, in the time of the Italian city-states. And, again, though comrade Macnair is correct to point out that "Marx's *Capital* cannot be read without reference to the broader claims ... about the history before fully developed capitalism", the fact that he opposes this to a Hegelian reading shows not only that he does not understand Hegel, but that he does not understand the significance of Marx's treatment of "the history before fully developed capital" either.

Macnair's confusion demonstrates the extent to which he is complicit in the very "new leftism" of which he accuses Platypus on the basis of his non-attendance at a panel it sponsored on the bourgeois revolution back in April. For Macnair believes that to pose the question of "the need for an emancipatory movement to start from the conquests of capitalism ... in terms of the conquests of liberalism" is, as he puts it, "pathological" and lands one up a defender of what calls itself liberalism today. Thus he claims to know where such an understanding leads: ie, down "the path followed by the Schachtmanites, by Adorno and Horkheimer, and more recently by the British Revolutionary Communist Party/*Spiked* and the Eustonites".⁷ Leaving his understanding of Adorno and Horkheimer to one side, it is clear why Macnair would wish to avoid the question of building on the project of freedom in favour of building on capitalist productivity's conquest of scarcity, as his faith in the communist future rests on what he terms "elaborated theoretical reasons for supposing a proletarian will to collectivism", as if collectivism were a negation of what exists.⁸

But there are more fundamental reasons for Macnair's hostility to Hegelian Marxism and thus his incomprehension of Marx's critique of political economy. These derive from his 'pre-critical' conception of philosophy, a field he takes to be one divided up into various sub-domains - epistemology, ontology, logic, etc - matters about which all humans in all times and places are presumed to speculate to one degree of clarity or another.

However, as a bourgeois thinker, Marx rejects such a view of philosophy. He represents an attempt at fulfilling what he took to be a distinctly bourgeois philosophical project. This project he conceived - following Rousseau, Smith, Kant, Hegel and others - in distinctly post-traditional terms. Indeed, for Marx the question of the extent to which modern philosophy specified itself in terms of its modernity was crucial to its own advance, and it was on this ground that he criticised his closest precursors. Thus, ultimately, for Marx the question of the immanence of the thinker to the object thought posed a distinct, indeed the crucial, theoretical problem. It bore directly on how the adequacy of our understanding of what it is we are doing politically 'here' relates (or fails to relate) to how we

reach 'there'. For Marx the question of capitalist society as freedom in self-contradiction turned on how we can be successful in changing the circumstances that we find ourselves in, so as to render those very circumstances more tractable, more susceptible to further transformation. This theory-practice problem cannot be assimilated to a pragmatic learning by trial and error, steadily inching one's concepts toward reality in a way and to a degree that one hopes they will grow asymptotically more accurate.

Marx's relation to Smith hinges on precisely his further specification of modern freedom, since for Marx Smith has, so to speak, advanced the object to such a point that his own approach to it is no longer adequate. That is, Smith's dialectic reaches towards, even provokes, Marx's, albeit by way of Ricardo and the Ricardian theorists of the labour movement. Thus Marx undertook no anachronistic critique of Smith, but only of the unconscious repetition of Smith's emancipatory project.

Georg Lukács commented on Marx's approach to the enlightenment tradition and to political economy more specifically when he writes in *History and class-consciousness*:

The survival of the bourgeoisie rests on the assumption that it never obtains a clear insight into the social preconditions of its own existence. A glance at the history of the 19th century reveals a profound and continuous parallel between the gradual growth of this self-knowledge and the decline of the bourgeoisie. At the end of the 18th century the bourgeoisie was ideologically strong and unbroken. The same thing was still true at the beginning of the 19th century, when its ideology, the idea of bourgeois freedom and democracy, had not yet been undermined ... and when the bourgeoisie could still hope, and moreover hope in good faith, that this democratic, bourgeois freedom and the supremacy of economics would one day lead to the salvation of all mankind ... It is this, too, which confers upon the great scientific pronouncements of the bourgeois class (eg, the economics of Adam Smith and Ricardo) their forthrightness and the strength to strive for the truth and to reveal what they have without cloaking it.⁹

As Marx wrote by way of criticising that supposed working class political economist, Proudhon, "Economic categories are only the theoretical expression, the abstraction of the social relations of production ... Thus these ideas, these categories, are as little eternal as the relations they express."¹⁰

Marx's critique of Smith hinges on the respecification under changed circumstances of the theory and practice question. It is no simple matter of correcting Smith's theoretical errors. For this reason, the divide that extends between the epoch of bourgeois society and 'capital', between the 'age of enlightenment' and the thus far unrealised 'second enlightenment' of Marx and Engels, can be illuminated through Marx's relation to Adam Smith. Contra Macnair, I would argue that, rather than sidestepping or criticising liberalism, in *The poverty of philosophy*, *Capital* and other major works published in Marx's own lifetime, he critiques liberalism precisely in order to achieve its aspirations under the new conditions that liberalism itself has produced. Industrial capitalism was, by the very fulfilment of its own logic, bound to overcome itself and issue into socialism, but, by the operation of that same logic in the absence of historical consciousness, it tended to

regression and disintegration, even to the point of falling below the threshold of bourgeois freedom.

In failing to fulfil the liberal project, Marxists do not substitute another, proletarian or 'collectivist', project in its place. Rather, they conspire with the hollowing out or disintegration of liberalism, its transformation into its opposite: Bonapartist imperialism, mass democracy, the liquidation of the individual and authoritarianism. As Marx writes in 1871:

The empire, with the *coup d'état* for its birth certificate, universal [manhood] suffrage for its sanction and the sword for its sceptre, professed to rest upon the peasantry, the large mass of producers not directly involved in the struggle of capital and labour. It professed to save the working class by breaking down parliamentarism, and, with it, the undisguised subservience of government to the propertied classes. It professed to save the propertied classes by upholding their economic supremacy over the working class; and, finally, it professed to unite all classes by reviving for all the chimera of national glory. In reality, it was the only form of government possible at a time when the bourgeoisie had already lost, and the working class had not yet acquired, the faculty of ruling ... Under its sway, bourgeois society, [is] freed from political cares ... the state power, apparently soaring high above society, was at the same time itself the greatest scandal of that society, and the very hotbed of all its corruptions ... Imperialism [post-1848] is, at the same time, the most prostitute and the ultimate form of the state power ... in it full-grown state bourgeois society had finally transformed into a means for the enslavement of labour by capital.¹¹

Intellectual regression

Bourgeois political economy is not simply the political economy written by or for the bourgeoisie. As Marx never tired of demonstrating, not only did the vulgar thinkers of his own day fail to advance beyond their predecessors: they regressed behind the level they had attained. Far from having the benefit of hindsight and certainly no ruling class masterminds, Marx considered so-called liberal political economists in the age of imperialism beneath critique. He wrote of the foremost among them:

John Stuart Mill, with his usual eclectic logic, understands how to hold at the same time the view of his father, James Mill, and the opposite view. When ... he announces himself as the Adam Smith of his day, we do not know what we should be astonished at: the naivety of the man or that of the public which accepted him in good faith ..., for he bears as much resemblance to Adam Smith as General Williams of Kars does to the Duke of Wellington.¹²

And again on John Stuart Mill and the regression characteristic of late political economy:

Ricardo never concerns himself about the origin of surplus value. He treats it as a thing inherent in the capitalist mode of production, which mode, in his eyes, is the natural form of social production. Whenever he discusses the productiveness of labour, he seeks in it not the cause of surplus value, but the cause that determines the magnitude of that value. On the other hand, his school has openly proclaimed the productiveness of labour to be the originating cause

of profit ... Nevertheless, Ricardo's school simply shirked the problem; they did not solve it. In fact these bourgeois economists instinctively saw, and rightly so, that it is very dangerous to stir too deeply the burning question of the origin of surplus value. But what are we to think of John Stuart Mill, who, half a century after Ricardo, solemnly claims superiority over the mercantilists, by clumsily repeating the wretched evasions of Ricardo's earliest vulgarisers?

The present bourgeoisie no longer produces philosophers. Frederic Bastiat is no latter-day Adam Smith, any more than John Stuart Mill is. For the same reason, no political economy whatsoever was ever written in Germany.

As Marx wrote in his 1873 preface to the German edition of *Capital*:

[Prior to 1848] political economy, in Germany, [was] a foreign science ... [there were] historical circumstances that prevented, in Germany, the development of the capitalist mode of production, and consequently the development, in that country, of modern bourgeois society. Thus the soil whence political economy springs was wanting. This 'science' had to be imported from England and France as a ready-made article; its German professors remained schoolboys. The theoretical expression of a foreign reality was turned, in their hands, into a collection of dogmas, interpreted by them in terms of the petty trading world around them, and therefore misinterpreted ... Since 1848 capitalist production has developed rapidly in Germany, and at the present time it is in the full bloom of speculation and swindling. But fate is still unpropitious to our professional economists. At the time when they were able to deal with political economy in a straightforward fashion, modern economic conditions did not actually exist in Germany. And as soon as these conditions did come into existence, they did so under circumstances that no longer allowed of their being really and impartially investigated within the bounds of the bourgeois horizon.¹³

Germany's modern history began with, and is inextricably bound up with, the age of imperialism, the age of liberalism's vulgarity.

Macnair in his reply to Chris Cutrone in the pages of the *Weekly Worker* complains when Cutrone claims "what the Second International radicals meant by 'imperialism' was ... not core-periphery relations", retorting that "This claim is a commonplace from somewhere in the historiography ... The problem is that it cannot really survive confrontation with the primary sources."¹⁴ But the text quoted above in which Marx expresses his own conception of imperialism is drawn from one of Marx's most well-known writings, *The civil war in France*. This was a text studied by any and all calling themselves Marxist in the Second International, so that when later thinkers developed a theory of imperialism in the late 19th and early 20th century, they did not do so in ignorance. They grasped it as a category referring to historical time, specifically to the post-1848 epoch, no less than to the global space of core-periphery relations.

Since then, with the massive publication of Marx's *New York Herald Tribune* articles, with their preoccupation with the hollowing out of liberalism in Britain and its empire, the continuity on the theme of imperialism between *The eighteenth Brumaire* (in which Marx introduces the category of Bonapartism) and

The civil war in France is even more clearly instantiated. Certainly, as has been shown, the intellectual degradation evident in post-1848 political economy is a leading preoccupation of Marx's in the period of his writing *Capital*. Both *Capital* and *The civil war in France* elaborate Marx's recognition that, in the absence or self-defeat of proletarian socialism, liberalism does not simply carry on. Rather, capitalism itself disintegrates, and what had been liberalism grows vulgar and authoritarian. These are not matters that the dictionary meaning of the words 'imperialism', 'authoritarianism' or 'vulgar' are going to help us navigate.

So the issue I am trying to sharpen via this discussion of Marx's Smith is not a matter of 'philosophy', as comrade Macnair poses it in his article, 'Against philosopher kings', where the divisiveness of philosophy is opposed to the unity to be attained through programmatic consensus. Because, if the question is one of changing the world, the philosophical task remains of grasping as *historical* the world in which we find ourselves. And this is a world that in the absence of such historical consciousness, as Hillel Ticktin has recently argued, might enter into seemingly interminable crisis. As Ticktin said of the condition in which the self-contradiction of freedom, of history itself, goes unrecognised and unmastered, "the logical solution to a crisis - in which the working class does not take power, that is - is disintegration. We are seeing that very obviously today: whether it is in [the London] riots, in what is happening to the EU, or national states, or economies around the world, disintegration is the logic in the present stage of capitalism."¹⁵

Moreover, as Jack Conrad pointed out in discussing Ticktin's paper, all institutions - political parties, trade unions, etc - through which the working class has asserted itself in the past are today rotten to the core. It is not simply a question of the relative weakness of the labour movement now as compared to times past, just as coming to terms with this situation requires more than simply learning from past mistakes.

This is not why we must interrogate the history of the left. Men and women much wiser than we are or can be, given our historical condition, have understood the past in its details better than we could ever hope to learn from documents. So that, admirable and necessary as is the project of historical study (I myself am a historian by profession), the issue remains of understanding not simply how to avoid repeating past mistakes, but to grasp the regression/repetition at the core of our wholly unprecedented condition. Not even the recovery of Marx's ideas - the Marx who recognised capital's disintegrative, regressive potential; who recognised, that is, that liberal society was rotting from within and could only be fulfilled in and through socialism - is of immediate assistance. This is because, to the extent that we lack all continuity with the project of human emancipation first begun in the bourgeois revolution, it is not clear that we live in what Marx called "capital". Neither liberalism nor its inheritance by Marx and Marxism is relevant, though Platypus is dedicated to investigating the possibility that they might again (and finally) be made so.

Labour theory of value

To return then: for Marx, Adam Smith's key contribution to modern thought lies in his recognition that "labour alone ... is the ultimate and real standard by which the value of all commodities can at all times and places be estimated and compared".¹⁶ Here we begin to glimpse what Marx

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understood as crucial about Smith. It generally passes unremarked because very few Marxists today actually attempt to think through the labour theory of value. Here is how Marx celebrates Smith's achievement in 1857, in the first draft of *Capital*, known as the *Grundrisse*:

It was an immense step forward for Adam Smith to throw out every limiting specification of wealth-creating activity - not only manufacturing, or commercial or agricultural labour, but one as well as the others, labour in general. With the abstract universality of wealth-creating activity we now have the universality of the object defined as wealth, the product as such or again labour as such, but labour as past, objectified labour."¹⁷

Not only has Smith significantly deepened the concept of labour, but the very category 'value' is altered thereby. That is, value in Smith is not merely a measure, but it is a form of wealth, indeed a form of human freedom. A profound historian of his own time, Smith grasped something essential about the social transformations through which he was living. He penetrated the project of overcoming feudalism to recognise in it nothing short of European labourers' self-emancipation from slavery. Smith writes:

In the [medieval] state of Europe, the occupiers of land ... were all or almost all slaves; but their slavery was of a milder kind than that known among the ancient Greeks and Romans, or even in our West Indian colonies. They were supposed to belong more directly to the land than to their master. They could, therefore, be sold with it, but not separately. They could marry, provided it was with the consent of their master ... If he maimed or murdered any of them, he was liable to some penalty, though generally but to a small one. They were not, however, capable of acquiring property. Whatever they acquired was acquired to their master ... This species of slavery still subsists in Russia, Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, Moravia and other parts of Germany. It is only in the western and southern provinces of Europe that it has gradually been abolished altogether.¹⁸

Thus does Adam Smith give expression to a society simultaneously engaged in the completion of its self-emancipation through wage-labour and poised on the very cusp of industrialisation. A development that will ultimately deepen, destabilise and threaten to undermine that very self-emancipation. As history stands poised to develop forces of production adequate to abstract labour, Smith grasps labour's abstract generality as emancipation from caste-bondage. He thus pushes for the generalisation of wage-labour as the universalisation of freedom from custom and tradition. Anything short of the free sociality that individuals living by labour brings Smith can only regard as a reversion to feudalism. Marx could not but agree, though he demands that the project be pushed further.

Smith's proclamation of labour's emancipation from slavery was, as Marx commented in *Anti-Dühring*, "not [merely] the expression of the conditions and requirements of [his] epoch, but the expression of eternal reason; the laws of production and exchange discovered by [political economy] were not laws of a historically determined form of those activities, but eternal laws of nature; they were deduced from the nature of man".¹⁹ The western European's self-emancipation from feudal slavery was a declaration of opposition to all hitherto existing forms of class society.

It was, in this sense, "eternal". In the heat of humanity's struggle for its own emancipation from feudal unfreedom, political economy (again following *Anti-Dühring*) developed "the laws of the capitalist mode of production and its corresponding forms of exchange in their positive aspects: that is, the aspects in which they further the general aims of society".²⁰

Smith lived at a time when the generalisation of wage-labour was in prospect and he theoretically grasped this prospect as both necessary and desirable. He thus expressed conceptually what for the first time has achieved "practical truth as an abstraction" in society.

As Marx recognised:

Indifference towards any specific kind of labour presupposes a very developed totality of real kinds of labour, of which no single one is any longer predominant ... [Smith's] abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labours. Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form.²¹

Capitalism is the first emergent totality or mode of production; in a philosophical sense, the first society. This is not simply because it breaks with the long history of human collectivity as an amalgam of castes, ranks or estates, but because at capitalism's core is freedom, albeit a freedom that, in the very attainment of its concept, comes into contradiction with itself. This is what distinguishes capitalism not only from all hitherto existing (class) societies, but from all human pre-history.

Adam Smith advanced beyond his insight into the philosophical significance of capitalism as a society in which every person is, in some sense, a merchant, drawing a distinction, as he did, between productive and unproductive labour. As Marx remarks in the historical component of *Capital* in volume 4, "Productive labour [in *Wealth of Nations*] is defined from the standpoint of capitalist production, and Adam Smith here got to the very heart of the matter ... [He] defines productive labour as labour *which is directly exchanged with capital*."²² Smith recognises that labour is not just any productive activity, but that "productive labour" (re)constitutes a social relation. Labour here is no mere moral or religious conception of useful or meritorious activity, the opposite of idleness. Nor does the value it produces arise from circulation - as with, for instance, the monetarists' exports, which can fetch back money to their nation of manufacture. Nor again is productive labour identifiable with one particular type of labour - say, the Physiocrats' agricultural labour, supposed to be naturally fertile with value. Rather, productive labour takes place in and through labour-power's ongoing relation to its product, capital. That product exists independently of and consumes the worker's commodity, labour-power, producing thereby greater value than what inhered in the consumed commodity, the value of the labour-power. Labour is how this society reproduces itself - though, Smith added, not all who work are performing labour. Yet capital on Smith's conception is not yet 'capital', just as labour in Smith, however drudgerous, is not alienated.

Not only the fact of society rooted in proletarian labour, but also, no less

certainly, its apprehension, represents for Marx a revolutionary and epochal achievement. In consequence of the 17th century British revolution, feudalism was largely overcome, entailing "the dissolution of all fixed personal (historic) relations of dependence in production".²³ Already then the question of freedom was posed, and Smith deliberately inherited the 17th century revolution in order to push it forward. Already for Smith, what Marx recognised in his 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge was coming into focus: post-feudal society had become the "philosophical" object and that *for this reason* philosophy had changed; it had become "worldly". In 1844, at the beginning of his lifelong engagement with Adam Smith and political economy more generally, Marx knew the old Scotsman to have made a fundamental breakthrough:

The *community of men*, or the manifestation of the nature of *men*, their mutual complementing the result of which is species-life, truly human life - this community is conceived by political economy in the form of *exchange* and *trade*. *Society* ... is a *series of mutual exchanges*. It is precisely this process of mutual integration. *Society*, says Adam Smith, is a *commercial society*.²⁴

If in and through the proletarianising revolution humanity has not emancipated itself, but has instead subjected itself to the domination of capital, Marx and Engels are quick to point out in the *Communist manifesto*, "Capital ... is not a personal, [but] is a social power." The bourgeoisie are not the fundamental obstacle to workers' emancipation.

For interpreters for whom Marx's text represents some form of sociological or economic analysis, his repeated, indeed ongoing, excursions on political economy must seem puzzling - a needless (and seemingly interminable) interruption of the exposition. That is, if Marx were simply elaborating his own theory and categories, lengthy inserts detailing minutiae respecting the history of political economy would be stylistically infelicitous, if not gratuitous. Yet, obvious as this is, most Marxists read such passages, notes and remarks in Marx's *Capital* as just that - an interruption - recognising in them at most bravura displays of Marx's polemical prowess, as though Marx had need of refuting political economists who wrote a half-century or even a century before. Interpreters such as David Harvey, as we have seen, presumably think it comprehensible that he should write three full volumes on past theories of surplus value simply in order to attack them as mistaken, if not deliberately deceitful. Yet they are curious as to why Marx neglected to say more about supply and demand.²⁵ Presumably, such interpreters imagine that Marx's preoccupation with the history of political economic thought was somehow dictated by proletarian intellectualism's struggle against capitalist mystification. But this not only occludes Marx's oft-manifested generosity towards intellectuals of the stature of Smith. It loses sight of the critical aspect of Marx's *Capital* project, the central corpus for the elaboration of the Marxian dialectic. I refer to Marx's method, by which he intends to critically appropriate the project of universal human emancipation that he finds at the heart of bourgeois political economy.

Through the appropriation of the categorical apparatus of the labour theory of value, Marx works out in greatest detail what he terms his theory of fetishism. One way of putting this polemically as regards certain 20th century commentators is that, in completing and rendering scientific

the labour theory of value, Marx did not iron out its contradictions, but rather allowed those contradictions to reveal themselves dialectically as they are: ie, as necessary forms of appearance - forms of appearance whose actuality must be practically overcome if capitalism is ever to be confined to the dustbin of prehistory. In *Capital* Marx undertakes to construct no theory of his own, to generate no categorical apparatus of his own. What he terms "the political economy of the working class" is simply bourgeois political economy fully realised. This Marx indicates by his very point of departure, the commodity form, which he adopts from the first chapter of Ricardo's half-century old treatise on political economy, a work that Marx understood as simultaneously a lengthy attempt to appropriate Smith and as the political economic basis (whether acknowledged or not) of the socialism that prevailed in his own day.

Conclusion

Karl Korsch argued eight decades ago that Marx's critique of political economy presupposes that, just as it is constituted politically through liberal-democratic revolution and socially through social revolution, bourgeois society is constituted subjectively through the deliberate striving for comprehension of social (un)freedom (through political economy and, in a different sense, in modern philosophy). What Marx would view as the subjectivity of the commodity form, the highest expression of which is political economy, was won through revolutionary struggle, at the heart of which lay the modern philosophy that is political economy. To grasp the nature of the freedom that has been thus conquered for humanity (and the unfreedom that this freedom creates) this singularly modern philosophy of political economy (and with it this modern revolution) must be subjected to critique. Often enough, subjectivity's emancipatory activity

is acknowledged in the heroic liberal narrative of the rise of modernity through scientific revolution, the weakening and privatisation of religion, etc, but capitalism as freedom could not have come about strictly through reflection upon nature and the divine. It had rather to contemplate freedom in society and it had to do so scientifically.

That Smith's thought is inadequate to modern capitalism is, so to speak, our problem, not his. And, at this point, the same might be true of Smith's profoundest reader, Karl Marx ●

Notes

1. D Harvey *A companion to Marx's Capital* New York 2010, p52.
2. D Harvey *Spaces of hope* Berkeley 2000, p175.
3. G Arrighi *Adam Smith in Beijing* London 2007, pp60, 55, 64.
4. *Ibid* pp69, 328, 49.
5. *Ibid* p65 *inter alia*.
6. *Ibid* p328.
7. M Macnair, 'No need for party?' *Weekly Worker* May 12 2011.
8. M Macnair, 'Theoretical dead end' *Weekly Worker* May 19 2011.
9. G Lukács *History and class-consciousness: studies in Marxist dialectics* translated Cambridge MA 1971, p225.
10. K Marx *The poverty of philosophy* New York 1992, pp80-81.
11. K Marx, 'The civil war in France', in K Marx and V Lenin *The civil war in France: the Paris Commune* New York 1993, p56.
12. K Marx *Capital* Vol 1 New York 1976, p221, note 31.
13. *Ibid* pp95-96.
14. M Macnair, 'The study of history and the left's decline' *Weekly Worker* June 2 2011.
15. H Ticktin, 'The theory of capitalist disintegration' *Weekly Worker* September 8 2011.
16. A Smith *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations* Vol 1, Indianapolis 1981, p51.
17. K Marx *Grundrisse* New York 1973, p104.
18. A Smith *Wealth of nations* Vol 1, pp386-87.
19. F Engels, 'Anti-Dühring', K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 25, p139. Note that this chapter on the history of political economy is generally recognised to have been drafted by Marx.
20. *Ibid* p138.
21. K Marx, *Grundrisse* New York 1973, pp104-05.
22. K Marx, 'Theories of surplus value' *Capital* Vol 4, Moscow 1969, p157.
23. K Marx *Grundrisse* New York 1973, p156.
24. K Marx, 'Comments on James Mill *Eléments d'économie politique*', *MECW* Vol 3, p217.
25. See, for instance, Harvey's 2011 Deutscher Memorial Prize Lecture, 'History versus theory: a commentary on Marx's method in *Capital*', available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=90yDWg6z0Gk&feature=related.

Fighting fund

Essential task

I hope readers enjoy this final edition of the *Weekly Worker* for 2011. We thought we might give you something to remember with the addition not only of four extra pages, but hopefully a more attractive appearance for the print issue, thanks to the colour cover.

We are intending to make colour more of a feature in 2012, but, to be honest, we are not yet in a position to do so regularly. Not for any technical reason, of course, but because of the extra costs involved. So, in order to make the paper bigger, better and more attractive, we have decided to raise our fighting fund target to £1,500 from next month. Although that is an increase of £250, we have in fact mostly been exceeding the current target, if not quite by that amount.

This week's post has given me confidence - two brilliant cheques from AP (£100) and RI (£50), plus a £25 gift from CM. Thanks go to all three. Then we received a total of standing order transfers amounting to £378 (SP, RP, SK, MM, SP, JD, SP and MKS were the donors). Finally two £10 contributions were received via our website - thank you, LK and DF. All in all, our total increased by £557 this week, taking us to £1,013 with over a week to go.

Talking of our website, over the last week our readership has exceeded 20,000 for the first time this year (what better time than the very last week of 2011!). It is true that our 20,667 web readers have long been able to view images in the paper in colour, but that is no reason not to help us improve our paper. We need a few more of them to contribute - not just to help enhance the *Weekly Worker's* presentation, but, most of all, to make sure we are able to keep putting out our paper's unique message - the crying need for a united Marxist approach to organisation and political intervention.

We will be resuming this essential task on Thursday January 12. In the meantime, we have another task to fulfil - we need £212 by January 1. Can you help? In order to beat the Christmas post, please use our online PayPal facility.

We hope our readers have a restful holiday. See you in 2012.

Robbie Rix

Fill in a standing order form (back page), donate via our website, or send cheques, payable to *Weekly Worker*

REVIEW

What made us human

Chris Stringer **The origin of our species** Allen Wood, 2011, pp333, £20

Professor Chris Stringer of the Natural History Museum is one of the world’s leading experts on human fossils, famous for advancing the ‘recent African origin’ (RAO) model. *The origin of our species*, a semi-autobiographical account, describes how human origins research has developed. As he explains in the introduction, “I want to try and provide a comprehensive - but comprehensible - account of the origin of our species from my position in these debates over the last 30 years or so” (p1). Nobody interested in human origins should do without this book.

Its nine chapters range over archaeology, fossil specimens, life history, DNA, language and symbolism to the future evolution of the human species. Some of these subjects may seem daunting to the uninitiated, with terms and concepts unfamiliar to those seeking an introductory text. However, each chapter is clear and concise, the terms are explained, and the reader comes away having learnt something.

Stringer aims to address the big questions about what made us human. His wide-ranging interdisciplinary approach is impressive. Obviously, his knowledge is greatest in addressing the fossils with which he has worked so closely, augmented by his up-to-date grasp of relevant developments in molecular genetics. When it comes to questions of language and symbolism, discussing archaeological evidence on possible ritual and religious activity, he is probably weakest, lacking a social anthropology background. But his treatment of data and models is always meticulous, as he explains them all clearly and dispassionately.

The problem for any scientist in this area is to discern how new discoveries add to our understanding and enable us to pose questions to guide future research. One of the most interesting chapters, ‘What lies beneath’, looks at techniques applied to teeth, including computerised tomography - CT scans. The most modern and minute versions of CT scans require subatomic particle accelerators, such as the synchrotron at Grenoble. This is now revealing fascinating differences in the childhood of modern humans compared with Neanderthals, who appear to have grown up at a faster rate.

Comparing Neanderthals with modern humans has always been at the heart of Stringer’s work, since his PhD is from the early 1970s, right at the beginning of multivariate computer analysis of fossils. To get his data, he trundled around museums from west to east of Europe as a long-haired hippy in an old banger. Luckily, the long hair and unkempt beard got him across the Czech border to measure some important fossils at Brno; the guards relented about denying him entry, as he reminded them of Che Guevara!

Through this foot-slogging, detailed work examining far-flung specimens, Stringer became certain that Neanderthals were not ancestral to Europeans, whether Cro-Magnons or people today. Fossil evidence accumulating from Africa led him to develop his ‘out of Africa’ stance by the early 1980s, when it was highly controversial. The ensuing battle between adherents of the multiregional and RAO models caused a rift in the palaeontological community, with Stringer and colleagues emerging victorious.

Besides the fossils, the new molecular genetic studies from the 1980s onwards gave almost unequivocal backing to RAO. Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA), found outside the nucleus of cells and inherited through females only, shows that the common ancestor of all humans living today - so-called ‘African Eve’ - is less than 150,000 years old. Since diversity of mtDNA lineages is greater in Africa than the rest of the planet put together, her homeland was definitely Africa.

The original ‘African Eve’ results of Cann, Stoneking and Wilson have stood up surprisingly well. In this book, Stringer

examines closely how the RAO model measures up to the latest exciting genetic evidence on both Neanderthals and the even more mysterious Denisovans. Analysis of mtDNA from a Siberian fossil little finger (dating 40,000 years at present) shows that it is neither modern human nor Neanderthal, with a time span of separation reaching back 500,000 years. There are shared genetic links with Melanesian peoples. If you are European or Asian, about two per cent more of your DNA is shared with Neanderthals than if you are African. This suggests a model of some interbreeding perhaps 60,000 years ago in the Middle East, as modern humans exited Africa. Stringer claims that he never absolutely ruled out some mating going on between these populations, and he concedes the picture of our origin is shown to be more complex.

But, whatever genetic sequences have come down to us today, marking out population movement and migration, genes in themselves explain nothing. To answer the question of what made us human, we need to understand the behavioural selection pressures, or other factors, which led to those genes being the ones that made it. For instance, Forkhead box protein P2 genes (FOXP2) may determine ability to coordinate certain facial muscles, without which speech cannot work. But FOXP2’s presence or absence tells us nothing about the Darwinian selection pressures leading to language.

To get at that, we need to engage in modelling hominin social and sexual lives. Stringer, as one of the original authors of *The human revolution* with Paul Mellars, has never been afraid to look at social arguments. He gives a solid overview of the archaeological evidence that has been piling up in Africa (and the Middle East) over the past decade, indicating symbolic activity and challenging the Eurocentric idea of the Upper Palaeolithic as the main stage of the human symbolic revolution. He outlines the positions that various archaeologists have now adopted in response to the African record, and the debate about defining modern behaviour. These run from *The revolution that wasn’t* of Alison Brooks and Sally McBrearty, through the D’Errico/Zilhão ‘multispecies’ account of comparable Neanderthal symbolic activity, to the Henshilwood ‘symbolic organisation’ watershed of the modern human species, and the last-ditch defence by Richard Klein of genetic mutations making a sudden cognitive change about 50,000 years ago.

Because the African evidence on regular pigment (red ochre) use now ties in so well with the dates for modern speciation, it is a little surprising that Stringer does not seize on this with both hands to say yes to the human revolution in that 150,000-year timeframe. All the previous problems of explaining why we have modern anatomy at that early date in Africa, while apparently no symbolic activity till much later in Europe, have now been resolved.

Instead, he inclines to the rather fiddly version of Robin Dunbar’s ‘social brain’ hypothesis, arguing for incremental levels of intentionality. Each clause here represents one of those: ‘I believe that you think that John did something bad which god knows about and will punish him for’, representing steps from basic theory of mind to full-scale belief in the supernatural, forming a basis for moral values. Stringer gives a fair account of how this ‘levels of intentionality’ argument has been practically applied to increasing elaboration of symbolic practice in the archaeological record, notably by Paul Pettit.

While this may sound perfectly sensible from a bourgeois, individualistic perspective, any classic social anthropology text on ritual experience - Durkheim, Rappaport or Victor Turner - rips apart this flimsy house of cards. Ritual does not do understanding of ‘I think you said he did this or that’. Ritual does ‘we’: ‘we are here’, ‘we belong to god!’, and it is the only possible medium for generat-

ing that. It is the engine of what Michael Tomasello calls ‘collective intentionality’. Placing collective intentionality in charge was surely the essence of the human revolution. What revolution reflects only ‘a low level of symbolic intent’? A revolution is a ground-breaking event, transforming and turning the world upside down. The preoccupation with incremental levels of intentionality risks missing this point. There are no different levels of intent. What counts is only one intention: Revolution!

This theoretical dispute underlies the debate about whether red ochre in the archaeological record indicates symbolism. According to Pettit, who would certainly not claim to know much about anthropology or even the pigment record, smears of pigment have no more significance than trying to show off one’s rosy cheeks. Using ochre on the body somehow does not count as symbolic by comparison with carving marks into ochre, or stringing tick shells together. The trouble is, Stringer has not well represented the counterargument to all this, best made by Ian Watts, the major expert on the African Middle Stone Age pigment record. Watts has assiduously examined the colour selection and dating on regular and ubiquitous pigment use in the southern African record to argue that it marks a ritual tradition. Yet all his thorough, anthropologically informed arguments have been airbrushed out here.

Stringer pulls his biggest rabbit out of the hat in the last chapter with his very personal account of the story of the Kabwe or Broken Hill skull - in some ways a leitmotif of his whole life. He vividly remembers seeing it (or a cast) as a boy in the Natural History Museum; the first important human fossil from Africa, it now resides outside his office. It was dug out from a Zambian ore mine in 1921, and with the destruction of the site, all hope of dating the fossil accurately seemed to be long gone. Enigmatic and primitive, Kabwe combines a close-to-modern brain size with a low forehead, massive browridges and sharply angled back of the skull, almost *Homo erectus*-like, a strange puncture wound, and abscessing. While old estimates often placed Kabwe around 300,000 years, many have argued it could be a more distant ancestor, even more than half a million years old. Fifteen years of detective work with colleagues at the Natural History Museum have produced a new estimate which is quite startling: Kabwe could be closer to 200,000 than 300,000 years. That would put it within a few tens of thousands of years of the first modern human, now recognised as the Omo Kibish 1 skull from Ethiopia, approximately 195,000 years old.

The lesson is that Africa, a vast continent encompassing virtually all of our recent evolutionary ancestry, contains yet unknown degrees of diversity. At the same time that modern humans were emerging, they would have lived in landscapes alongside more archaic populations, possibly into very recent times. This implies also that at least some of the traces of archaic genetic markers still found in people today may have arisen as a result of intermixing of archaic and modern populations within Africa, rather than interbreeding of ‘pristine’ modern people with archaic populations only after leaving Africa.

Despite its subject matter, this book is far from intimidating, and written in a relaxed style full of anecdotes, while referencing cutting-edge research. Unfortunately, the dim and dark illustrations are not on a par with the lavish presentation in Stringer’s previous volumes, *Homo Britannicus* and *The complete world of human evolution* (with colleague Peter Andrews) ●

Simon Wells

This review was first published in Radical Anthropology No5, November 2011

What we fight for

- Our central aim is the organisation of communists, revolutionary socialists and all politically advanced workers into a Communist Party. Without organisation the working class is nothing; with the highest form of organisation it is everything.
- The Provisional Central Committee organises members of the Communist Party, but 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 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’. To the extent that the European Union becomes a state then that necessitates EU-wide trade unions and a Communist Party of the EU.
- 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. All forms of nationalist socialism are reactionary and anti-working class.
- The capitalist class will never willingly allow their wealth and power to be taken away by a parliamentary vote. They will resist using every means at their disposal. Communists favour using parliament and winning the biggest possible working class representation. But workers must be ready to make revolution - peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must.
- Communists fight for extreme democracy in all spheres of society. Democracy must be given a social content.
- 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.
- All who accept these principles are urged to join the Communist Party.

Become a

Communist Party

member

Name

Address

Town/city

Postcode

Telephone

Age

Email

Date

Return to: Membership, CPGB, BCM Box 928, London WC1N 3XX

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Separate
church and
state

Cameron in the court of King James

The prime minister’s speech on the King James Bible ticks every reactionary box going, argues **James Turley**

On December 16, an assortment of the British religious establishment gathered in Christ Church cathedral, Oxford, to commemorate the 400th year of the authorised version of the *Bible*, popularly known as the King James version. The guest of honour was none other than David Cameron - by his own admission a “committed” but only “vaguely practising” Anglican.

Cameron’s intervention¹ was, unsurprisingly, directed at certain of his present political priorities; it contained material, as David Edgar noted in a piece for *The Guardian*, recycled almost word for word from his attack on multiculturalism at Munich,² as well as cheeky attacks on the summer riots and hypocritical prods at the amorality of City excess. It was, in short, an outpouring of quite old-fashioned Tory stupidities.

Cameron makes three claims for the continuing relevance of the KJV - firstly, that it had an enormous influence on the development of the modern English language; secondly, that the shape and the practice of British politics is deeply indebted to the Good Book, “from human rights and equality to our constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy”; and finally, that Britain is a ‘Christian’ nation, and “should not be afraid to say so”.

The first claim has more than a grain of truth to it, but contains a telling historiographical error. The English language, in the middle ages, was hardly a unified and regulated whole like its modern descendent - scholars of medieval English literature confront a great variety of regional dialects and unpredictable, sometimes ephemeral, changes in the language. But English translation of the *Bible* did have a unifying effect on the lexicon and morphology of the English language.

As to the claim of a ‘Christian’ character to British politics, it is true enough, but in not the same way that Cameron implies. Religion, as a social phenomenon, is one stage among many upon which the social drama is played out. It is clearly enough a means of oppression and a veil for exploitation; it may also attempt to directly alleviate the effects of exploitation and oppression; finally, it may become a form of *political* opposition.

In all societies with major religions, the story is much the same. In Britain, the established church happens to be Christian, and so do its predominant rivals; but, for all the difference the particular phenomenal content of Christianity makes, it may as well be Zoroastrian. Moreover, with the accelerated pace of social transformation characteristic of capitalism, religion increasingly plays a simply reactionary role, and becomes separated from oppositional politics.

Finally, Cameron argues that the King James *Bible* is relevant because Britain is a “Christian nation”. Some have simply disputed this as a factual statement - an increasing number of Britons do not identify as religious at all. This is the line taken by the liberal-secular British Humanist Association, in a statement condemning Cameron’s

speech:

“Although Christianity has undoubtedly had a sometimes positive influence on the cultural and social development of Britain, it is far from being the only influence. Many pre-Christian, non-Christian, and post-Christian forces have shaped our society for the better and Christianity has often had ill effects. So, on the factual level the prime minister’s remarks are simply bizarre.”³

Actually, Cameron has the better of things on this particular point; Christianity’s ill effects on British society do not make Britain any less Christian, as far as they go. The tendential increase of atheism and agnosticism is encouraging, to be sure, but the British *state* remains officially religious; its functions, as well as its pomp and pageantry, are sacralised in the name of the Christian god. The problem, in other words, is not that Cameron claims that Britain is Christian when it is not; but rather that Britain *is* in important respects Christian, and that this represents an obstacle to leftwing politics.

Hidden agenda

Religion, then, is an instrument of more ‘earthly’ forms of politics rather than a determining force in them. We need to ask: what exactly is Cameron attempting to *do* with his speech?

There are, firstly, those parts of Christian dogma that have most consistently irked far-left critics of religion - the “render unto Caesar” attitude of passive toleration of oppression in this life, in anticipation of eternal reward in the next. It has to be said that Cameron rather emphasises (indeed, over-emphasises) the role of religion in historical struggles against oppression; but it must nonetheless be noted that any ruling class politician standing, as Cameron does, on a programme of generalised social devastation has a substantial vested interest in his opponents ‘turning the other cheek’, and assuming the moral high ground *in lieu* of conducting

uncompromising struggle against them.

Other matters, however, are more pertinent. David Edgar is right to pick up on the homology with Cameron’s attacks on multiculturalism, though Edgar’s uncritical attitude to the latter means he does not say much worthwhile on the subject. The specific phenomenon of chauvinist anti-multiculturalism, so beloved of contemporary rightwing demagogues, is often interpreted simply as being a paper-thin excuse for attacks on minorities (specifically, in this period, Muslims); but it has a wider significance brought out nicely by the occasion of the King James anniversary.

This is the idea that there is a distinct British national character which is unchanged at least since 1688 (and, in some versions, goes back to a crudely mythologised era of Anglo-Saxon ‘liberty’ preceding even the Norman conquest). Upon the King James *Bible*, Cameron pegs an organicist myth of British tolerance, liberty and so forth, without attention to the gore-flecked underside of this nation’s history. He cites the religious inspiration of campaigners against the slave trade; but not the religious apologetics *for* slavery that cheered it on in the first place. This whitewashed Tory view of history can only be reinforced by the eternal verities of religious doctrine.

Finally, there is the small matter that Cameron veils with vacuous guff about ‘morality’ throughout his speech - the characteristic Tory obsession with petty social authoritarianism. His may ostensibly be a religion of tolerance and justice, but the recurrent reference to the summer rioters as exemplary of the moral decay of “these last few generations” gives the lie to the ‘liberal’ Christianity he claims to espouse. His attitude, and the attitude of his government, after the August disturbances were not exactly reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount; rather they suggested some familiarity with the zero-tolerance approach of the prophet Elisha to recalcitrant youngsters:

“And he went up from thence unto

Bethel: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him, Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head. And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the *Lord*. And there came forth two she-bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them.”⁴

In this, as in most things, the obscene counterpart to Cameron’s ‘nice guy’ image is the odious countenance of education secretary Michael Gove. After the riots, he announced plans to slacken rules governing the use of physical force in school discipline. Of course, the Tories have always been titillated by corporal punishment; but in this case, it really was remarkable to see a 21st century politician suggest that street unrest was down to the lack of “male authority figures” in schools. To redress the balance, Gove suggested recruiting former soldiers to teaching roles, adding a faintly comical homoerotic touch to a truly repulsive policy suggestion.⁵

Gove’s patriarchal arguments happened to be secular in this case; but the *Bible* (hardly uniquely among religious texts) is fairly swamped with proclamations of the inferiority of women, of the necessity of their subordination to men, from the Garden of Eden onwards. To justify morality in religious terms - even in the cowardly, pseudo-liberal religious terms favoured by David Cameron’s Oxford address - is, in the last analysis, to defend ‘family values’. Countless generations of women have found out, the hard way, what religious morality truly means for their sex.

Both the academy system (which he inherited from Tony Blair) and free schools (which he did not) amount to an invitation to reactionary religious organisations to take over education provision on an ever-increasing scale. The BHA notes that Christian-fundamentalist free schools are planned in Sheffield, Newark-on-Trent, Bedford, Barnsley and many other places.⁶

The current period remains a period of reaction; David Cameron’s assertion of Britain’s ‘Christian’ heritage has hardly come out of the blue, and it is an identifiable point in a longer-term trend *away* from secularism. It has become customary for Britons, and Europeans more generally, to sneer at the overt and quite insane fundamentalist lobby in the United States. In this country in particular, we should be very aware that similar forces already exist - and they are growing. As the Tories proceed to hack the welfare state to death, the power of religious organisations is very likely to increase.

The encroachment of such organisations on different areas of social life - education, welfare, official ideology - is conceived by the clerical apparatus as a kind of battle for the nation’s soul. In fact, they are quite right to think of it in those terms. The left, however, equally needs to join the battle - and fight for secularism, for the complete separation of church and state, the confiscation of church property not related to worship, an end to all public subsidies (including ‘charity’ tax breaks) for religious schools.

Secularism is not a side issue for socialists, but a key front in the battle for democracy. No wonder David Cameron is so keen to oppose it ●

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Notes

1. www.number10.gov.uk/news/king-james-bible.
2. *The Guardian* December 18.
3. www.humanism.org.uk/news/view/952.
4. 2 Kings 2:xxiii-xxiv (quoted here, naturally, from the King James version).
5. *The Guardian* September 1.
6. www.humanism.org.uk/news/view/910.

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