



# weekly worker

**Socialist realism and  
the politics of literature  
in the 1930s CPGB**

- Worker sports
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## Grasping the Olympic enigma



# LETTERS



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

## Unbalanced

I think Tony Greenstein's indignant effusions (Letters, August 2) over my obituary for Alexander Cockburn ('A radical for all seasons', July 26) can be usefully divided into two parts:

1. Greenstein says that the online and print journal, *Counterpunch*, edited by Cockburn (until his death) and Jeffrey St Clair, has regularly published the writings of Gilad Atzmon and Israel Shamir, whom Greenstein claims are certifiable anti-Semites; and 2. From the above, Greenstein concludes that Cockburn was a reactionary conspiracy theorist and a racist; that my entire obituary is "utter garbage", completely out of place in a revolutionary socialist newspaper; and that the *Weekly Worker* therefore owes its readers a "profound apology" for having printed it.

On the first point, Greenstein is absolutely right. I was not aware of Shamir at the time I wrote the obit, and was familiar with Atzmon only by way of his polemic against Moshé Machover, which I instantly dismissed as the pratings of a crank. I am in the habit of reading selectively from a wide assortment of material that appears in *Counterpunch*. Having looked into the matter more thoroughly as a result of Greenstein's complaint, I can only conclude that these two writers are in the unmistakable territory of old-fashioned, anti-Semitic demonology.

Articles published under their by-line in *Counterpunch* often seem like rational political and social commentary, offering only hints of the primeval depths to which they descend in other writings. On his blog, Atzmon berates Machover for espousing "Judeo-Marxism" (in what country, by which political faction, was a similar epithet hurled in the 1920s and 30s?), because the latter thinks the answer to oppression by the Zionist state lies not in political Islam, but in mutual recognition of national rights by Israelis and Palestinians. In another article, Atzmon writes: "... we must begin to take the accusation that Jewish people are trying to control the world very seriously" ('On anti-Semitism', March 20 2003, Gilad.co.uk, quoted on the *Lenin's Tomb* website), and goes on elsewhere to speak of the Jewish bankers who helped finance many wars and at least one communist revolution ('Zionism and other marginal thoughts', October 4 2009; 'Truth, history and integrity', March 13 2010).

The above invective is tame in comparison to the rants on Shamir's website. It approvingly features an article describing Shamir's career by a self-professed rightwing Catholic, E Michael Jones, who writes: "Shamir ... saw Jews not [like the contemporary Catholic Church - JC] as our 'elder brothers', but as St Paul saw them, which is to say, 'as the enemy of mankind'." Jones says that Shamir, a Russian-born Jew who converted to the Eastern Orthodox Church, "was reborn out of the Jewish culture of death". He speaks of the "Jewish-American empire" and "Judeo-Mammonites", who can only improve their fortunes at the expense of other peoples ('A report from planet mammon', undated, israelshamir.net). Shamir repeatedly states that whether the holocaust actually occurred is "irrelevant"; what counts is combating the contemporary holocaust narrative of Jewish victimhood, which is used to cement Zionist and western imperialist domination.

Atzmon and Shamir differ with Hitlerite anti-Semitism in that they don't regard Jewishness as a racial

category (both having been born Jewish themselves). Shamir argues that his rejection of racist views acquits him of the charge of anti-Semitism. But both view Israeli crimes against Palestinians, and the conflicts Zionism has unleashed in the Middle East, not as a result of specific historical or political causes, but as a contemporary manifestation of the timeless essence of Judaism - a tribal exclusiveness integral to the Hebraic culture and religion. Such sentiments, in fact, reprise an anti-Semitism present in Europe centuries before it was buttressed by 19th century racial doctrines. Shamir embraces this classical Christian variety of Jew-hating. He thus sees the solution to the 'Jewish problem' not in the adoption of what he (echoing traditional Catholic reaction) calls a non-religious "Masonic identity", but in the conversion of all Jews to Christianity.

In my opinion, the writings of lower-depth-dwellers like Atzmon and Shamir have no place in publications purporting to be of the left, whether or not their anti-Semitic views are propounded in any particular article they submit. Why *Counterpunch* continues to run their pieces is a question only the remaining editor, Jeffrey St Clair, can answer (which he has shown no inclination to do). It would seem that the journal's notoriously lax editorial control cannot be invoked as an excuse, since Greenstein, for one, has explicitly brought the views of Atzmon and Shamir to its attention.

But *Counterpunch* is hardly alone in its indulgence of these authors. Time-worn anti-Semitic falsehoods have gained ground in the Middle East, and have long lurked about the fringes of the left and the Palestinian solidarity movement like some sinister computer virus, successfully infiltrating even the most apparently secure of sites. The Socialist Workers Party invited Atzmon to speak at one of its conferences; Shamir's son is the official representative of Wikileaks in Sweden; a respected liberal scholar, John Mearsheimer, and a leftist journalist, Richard Falk, have written laudatory dust-jacket blurbs for Atzmon's latest book, *The wandering who?*, which has been published by a leftwing press, Zero Books. The publication has occasioned a written protest by other authors whose works have appeared under that imprint, including Laurie Penny and Richard Seymour of the *Lenin's Tomb* blog.

Such viruses seem to be flourishing amid the historical ignorance and mystified thinking that have grown exponentially since Marxism - which claims that the present can only be grasped in relation to the past - has fallen into disfavour. Too many younger activists know only of today's Middle East of Palestinian victims and Zionist oppressors who never tire of invoking the holocaust to rationalise their crimes; the self-appointed western Jewish spokespersons they encounter are even more Islamophobic and fanatically Zionist than many Israelis. Pre-World War II Europe, where millions of Jews were socialists, and Jew-baiting was a staple of reaction, is for them as distant as China under the Ming emperors. In this knowledge gap, ancient hatreds revive in anti-imperialist guise.

Regarding the second part of comrade Greenstein's argument, my differences concern the conclusions he draws from the sordid facts he does us the favour of bringing to light. From the string of pejoratives he directs at *Counterpunch* and the memory of Alexander Cockburn, one can only assume he thinks both are *defined* politically by their association with Atzmon and Shamir. As a well known

anti-Zionist activist, Greenstein may indeed define his own politics mainly in relation to Israel and the Middle East, but to impose a standard by which he may reasonably be judged upon others with a different profile seems to me highly subjective.

Cockburn was not, as Greenstein has it, "part of [a] reactionary gaggle of conspiracy theorists". In fact, he was a major debunker of the two conspiracy theories most popular in the US and beyond: those surrounding the Kennedy assassination and the 9/11 attack. Nor did Cockburn ever become a reactionary, a racist or an anti-Semite, despite his unconscionable decision to publish the writings of people to whom those descriptions apply. He remained throughout his career a person of decidedly leftwing views (albeit quirky ones in later years) and the magazine he edited was perhaps the country's most popular venue for writers ranging from radical-liberal to socialist and anarchist. My obituary may have benefited from the inclusion of the blemish on Cockburn's reputation to which Greenstein points. But nothing I wrote about him was wrong or misleading.

Neither I nor, in my opinion, the *Weekly Worker* owe readers an apology. People's political lives, like the rest of reality, are never free of contradiction, but it is on balance, and not on the basis of one or two transgressions, that lives should be assessed.

**Jim Creegan**  
New York

## Sleight of hand

David Walters (Letters, July 26) is right on point in his exposé of Moshé Machover's sleight of hand and abrogation of basic Marxist principles concerning the right of self-determination for the subjugated people of Palestine.

Machover contends that there are "two national groups" - the Palestinian Arabs and a "Hebrew nation" - on whom he confers an "equal right" to self-determination ('Standing the test of time', July 19). His attempts to give this formula socialist content are risible, as seen in the abstract demand that joint "national" rights of the oppressor population and of the national population, whom they have subjugated, may ensue only after the magical creation of a pre-established "socialist regional union or federation of the Arab east".

The realisation of a socialist revolution in the region cannot be abstracted from or counterposed to the democratic tasks of the revolution: the struggle for national self-determination of the oppressed. The Marxist and indeed Leninist principles of the right of self-determination for oppressed nationalities are turned, thereby, on their head: the Marxist call for self-determination has never placed an equal sign between the rights of the oppressed and their oppressors.

The settler populations of South Africa - dating back some 500 years - did not enjoy a right to self-determination in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, any more than did their counterparts in the cities and land of the Rhodesias, Algeria, Morocco or Tunisia. Why this indecent exceptionalism when it comes to Zionism and its Palestinian victims?

A similar sleight of hand is to be found in Machover's claim that the call for an Arab Palestine represents "bourgeois nationalism", let alone a "two-stage" Stalinist approach.

Permanent revolution does not counterpose the struggle for national liberation and the democratic tasks of the revolution to the realisation of social ownership by the mass of the working population. On the contrary, the necessity for social control over

the means of production arises specifically from the struggle for self-determination. It is through national mobilisation of the dispossessed in the broadest struggle for sovereign rule that the necessity of social ownership by the working masses is posed.

The struggle for national liberation is neither stagist nor "bourgeois", precisely because to achieve the former in the age of imperialism requires the basic fight for national rights of the oppressed to "grow over", through the mobilisation of the working masses, into the call for social ownership of the means of production. That is the core of permanent revolution that comrade Machover caricatures in the course of abandoning it.

By predicating mechanically the national struggle for an Arab Palestine on a pre-existing regional socialist federation, Machover seeks to conceal the basic content of his advocacy: the liquidation of the national struggle and with it the reduction of the call for socialism not merely to an abstraction, but to an actual barrier to a principled struggle for the national self-determination and liberation of the oppressed - and, therefore, for socialism itself.

This form of 'left' Zionism reveals the fear of the oppressor population that those they have subjugated will visit upon them a comparable brutal abrogation of democratic rights that defined the ethnic cleansing and subjugation of the people of Palestine. In its essence, this is the unspoken fear of the bourgeoisie and of all exploiting groups. Machover's call for "equal rights" for a "Hebrew nation" on the land of the oppressed Palestinian masses reduces itself to the demand for prior guarantees from the oppressed regarding the democratic rights of their former oppressors as citizens of a post-Zionist Palestinian nation.

These rights for all citizens arise precisely from the forms of struggle required to achieve national liberation: the constituent assembly and the conferring of citizenship upon all inhabitants independent of ethnic identity or religious affiliation. No, the formulations of comrade Machover have nothing in common with self-determination or its fulfilment and realisation in concomitant struggle for national liberation in a socialist region.

The call for a "Hebrew nation" in Palestine, and for postponing the struggle for Palestinian national rights until the magical emergence of a "socialist federation", reduces itself, posturing aside, to the core sensibility of the oppressor nationality and of the bourgeoisie itself.

**Ralph Schoenman**  
email

## Ricardian

Paul Smith is right that it is important to discuss whether capitalism is in decline or not. It is important also to discuss why so many on the left have always been obsessed with the view that it is an article of faith to proclaim that it is, and what this kind of catastrophism says about the state of demoralisation and decay within the left itself. A look at Trotsky's writings in 'Flood tide' and 'The curve of capitalist development' shows he had no truck with such ideas, and argued that the ultra-lefts were completely wrong in believing that a period of sustained decline would push workers into revolution. It would have the opposite effect, he argued.

Unfortunately, Paul's approach, whereby he provides no factual evidence to back up his claims that capitalism is in decline, and relies upon repeating 90-year-old dogma, both for that and generalisations based on it, rather than reasoned argument, do not advance such a debate very far. Yet, trying to respond to all of Paul's

misconceptions, misrepresentations and questioning of data is not something that can be quickly done without resorting to the same approach. Rather than take up more space in the pages of the *Weekly Worker* for that task, therefore, I have responded in more detail on my blog at <http://boffyblog.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/a-reply-to-paul-smith-part-1.html>.

There is just one short response in relation to data I would make here. Paul says: "As far as I know, there is no statistical evidence that can distinguish between growth rates and capital accumulation." I find such a comment bizarre, because there is no shortage of such data. The World Bank publishes data on global fixed capital formation. It shows that it rose from \$7 trillion per annum in 2002, to \$14 trillion in 2010! Paul also refers to having talked about the growth of derivatives, but does not seem to be aware that the value of derivatives are not included in data for GDP and so are irrelevant.

In the same issue, David Walters misrepresents my argument on at least two counts. Firstly, he chastises me for technological determinism. But I have not argued that technology will always, necessarily, provide a solution. My argument is rather that Tony Clark is wrong to discount the possibility - I would argue on the basis of evidence probability that it will on this occasion! Secondly, David is wrong to argue that coal replaced wood because it was cheaper. Essentially, David's argument is Ricardian rather than Marxian. As I set out, when wood/charcoal was running out, coal was neither cheap nor abundant. Only surface coal was available, and transporting it to where it was needed was nigh on impossible. In the same way that Marx describes how Ricardo was wrong in his theory of rent, because capital can take poor-quality land and improve it to the extent that it becomes more fertile, more productive land than the best previously in cultivation, so capital investment in steam engines and mining technology meant that deep-mined coal became available. Investment in canals, and then railways, meant that it could be transported cheaply and efficiently. It was capital investment that made coal cheap, just as today it is making oil and gas cheaper.

On David's point about energy density, the same argument can be made because how much energy per gram you get from any type of energy is again a function of how you use it! It should be noted, however, that gas is more energy-dense than oil. On nuclear, the point is that a precondition would be socialism to have any guarantee it could be used safely. The argument for workers' control of nuclear falls for the reasons Trotsky set out in relation to it in general - ie, you can only have real workers' control in a situation of dual power in society, a pre-revolutionary situation, where we would probably have more pressing things to attend to.

I would make one final point in respect of the technology, etc, which is in relation to the environment. Forty-odd years ago, when I was growing up, the environment was in a much worse condition than it is today. Every evening in the village where I lived the sky would go bright red and sulphur would fill your lungs, as they opened the coke ovens at the nearby gas works. Kilns belched dense black smoke, inefficient cars burnt oil and pumped out far more pollution than today, windows and brickwork were black with soot, and lungs must have had a similar coating. Rivers were dead, after decades of industrial pollution, and masses of land were filled with heavy metals as a consequence of industrial production.

Today most of that has gone. The air is relatively clean, the brickwork is being restored, country parks have replaced despoiled land and fish have returned to water courses. As Bjørn Lomborg has pointed out, all of those improvements have come about as a result of rapid economic development, which has made it possible to invest resources into it and more efficient, less polluting forms of energy and production.

Similar developments are happening elsewhere - for example, in parts of Africa, people are being helped to move away from inefficient and heavily polluting forms of energy, such as burning dung, into more efficient forms of energy, such as burning methane captured from the same dung!

Arthur Bough  
email

## War class

Mike Macnair (‘Imperialism, capitalism and war’, August 2) spends much effort pondering whether US warmongering is rationally irrational or irrationally rational, or so it seems. He tilts at many arguments along the way, and it is not usually clear whether these are his own Aunt Sallies or ones erected by unspecified “important sections of the left”. Those who claim that the US is concerned with the price and control of oil are somehow bracketed, without explanation, with those seeing Chinese victory in a progressive light.

The billions spent on unsuccessful war against the Taliban he presents as showing an irrational impulse, but it would not seem so from the standpoint of the arms producers, usually paid in dollars. Sure enough, capitalism is anarchic, made up of competing capitals and nation-states, but each actor has its own interests to promote.

The US produces 8.8% of world oil, but consumes 20.5% and has a definite interest in ensuring supplies are maintained and the producing regions are in friendly or amenable hands, hence intense lobbying over pipeline routes. The main oil- and gas-producing regions, from north Africa, through the Middle East and the Caspian basin, into western Siberia, are sparsely populated, politically volatile, contain many other vital resources as well as hydrocarbons, and sit between Europe and China. Direct control might not be the issue every time, but politics abhors a vacuum and fear that others might monopolise resources is a powerful rationale. Messrs Sykes and Picot knew what they were doing when they drew the straight lines on the map that became the boundaries of various states. It is precisely in this context that Mike’s description of a hierarchy of capitalists, with a “top dog” that must keep using its military advantage, has some merit. Even now, if it loses a war, others will pay.

Where I agree most with Mike is his last paragraph arguing that it is no use appealing to sections of the ruling class to ensure a “law-governed world order”. Instead, a successful anti-war campaign would be based on the working class. At the time of the Iraq war, I was involved with a few others in setting up a ‘No War but Class War’ campaign. It did not prosper; the prevailing mood was for ‘broad’ movements or activism for its own sake.

Many elements of the Stop the War Coalition were actively hostile to anything based on class or to serious discussion of principles. This is precisely what has to be challenged. Is it not time to break with the STWC and set up a campaign on a class basis?

Mike Martin  
Sheffield

## No discussion

When Alex Callinicos’s article on Syria referred to in ‘Where is the left?’ (*Weekly Worker* August 2) was published, I wrote a letter to *Socialist*

*Worker* that was, of course, neither answered nor published.

I wrote that there was not just the ‘pro-’ and the ‘anti-imperialist’ position, but that the main question was the socio-economic and political character of the oppositional forces. I wrote that the opposition to the Ba’athist regime was, of course, legitimate, but that I had not yet read anything about what the oppositional forces, so much hailed by the SWP, offered as a programme for a post-Ba’athist Syria (apart from ‘democracy’, which nowadays is the battle cry for almost everyone except perhaps the jihadi groups).

I think that, by ignoring things such as the role of the proletarian vanguard party and the programme (or - in both cases - their absence), the SWP is guilty of a serious deviation towards movementism, a deviation which lies at the base of its wrong position on the Syrian mess, its unwillingness even to correctly report such problems as the growing influence of sectarian forces. The SWP ‘forgets’ that the working class is bound to become the battering ram for other class forces unless it is able to build its own vanguard and, while a generalisation of struggles is the basis for building such a vanguard, it is not a spontaneous development.

*Socialist Worker*, however, has never reported the coming into being of a proletarian vanguard organisation in Syria. It also could not claim that the revolt in Syria was built on previous proletarian struggles, as was at least partly the case in Egypt. So how could it expect any positive (for socialists, that is) outcome of what has happened there since spring 2011? And why should an amorphous, and therefore highly fragmented, opposition be able to topple a vicious and highly militarised regime such as Assad’s, and why should it be the - in our view - best parts of this movement to get help from those who have the means to help (the imperialists and the regional pro-imperialist reactionaries)?

The ones who get this help, of course, have a programme: namely to become bosses themselves (and maybe to slaughter as many ‘kufar’ (Alawites, Druze and Christians, as in Iraq) as they can. They wouldn’t need any more of a programme, since their Syria will perhaps be even more neoliberal than it is now - only with others filling their pockets and with the masses remaining as destitute as they are now.

It is remarkable that a ‘Marxist’ organisation such as the SWP doesn’t even care to discuss any of these problems.

A Holberg  
email

## 40 years ago

In 1972 I was appointed clerk of Clay Cross parish council. In that same year the Heath government introduced the Housing Finance Act, which reorganised local government, abolished urban district councils and created a two-tier structure. There were district councils and metropolitan boroughs like Sheffield, Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham, while county authorities were retained. Clay Cross parish was more like a town council: it employed, for instance, groundsmen, cemetery workers and staff at local social centres.

The Conservative government of Ted Heath was responsible for major class battles with miners, dockers and building workers and it now sought to take on recalcitrant Labour authorities. Clay Cross had a reputation as a militant council and was determined to resist the Tory attack on council tenants. The Housing Finance Act fixed the level of rents to be charged, requiring Labour authorities to raise rents. But Clay Cross had a very good relationship with its tenants and refused to comply, as did Conisbrough, Lambeth and Liverpool. Some of the

councillors were miners - including Dennis Skinner, who was born in the town. His brothers, David and Graham, were also active politically: Graham was the local branch secretary of the National Union of Public Employees and David was a councillor alongside Dennis, until the latter became MP for Bolsover in 1970.

When the council refused to increase rents in line with the Housing Finance Act, a housing commissioner was sent in to take charge of the Clay Cross stock. The district auditor surcharged the 11 Labour councillors £635 each and they were disbarred from office. A ‘second 11’ of Labour councillors were elected in their place and they were also surcharged and disbarred. As a result of the surcharge they were declared bankrupt in 1975.

By the time I became clerk to the new parish council, Clay Cross Urban District Council was no more and most decisions were taken by the new North East Derbyshire District Council. I was a member of the Workers Revolutionary Party and it had been decided that I should join the local Labour Party in line with the ‘deep entry tactic’ also favoured by the Militant Tendency and other Trotskyists. Of course, some of the Labour councillors were supporters of ‘the Militant’ and I would cross swords with them - Militant had adapted to left reformism in the Labour Party while posturing as ‘Trotskyists’.

In opposition to the government’s pay freeze at the time, I recommended that the workforce employed by the parish council should be given a pay increase. I too was duly surcharged by the district auditor. There was no mention of my surcharge by those centrists in the Labour Party who had campaigned against similar treatment for the councillors. In the April 1974 elections Labour lost North East Derbyshire to the Ratepayers Alliance and I was duly dismissed. When I appealed to the local NUPE branch for support, there was no effort to organise the membership for strike action. Instead a claim for wrongful dismissal was submitted to the industrial tribunal office in Sheffield. A barrister called Steve Cohen represented me on behalf of the union’s solicitors at the tribunal. Despite the excellent case he made I inevitably lost.

During this period I was blacklisted by Aims of Industry and the Economic League, two Tory front organisations that warned employers of trade union militants and so-called ‘troublemakers’ like myself. This was confirmed to me by a journalist at *The Observer* who had seen my name on the blacklist. I was also witch-hunted in the centre pages of *The Daily Telegraph* and I remained unemployed for five years.

The lesson for me was that centrism, as represented by Militant, provided no answers to the concerted Tory attack. Instead of attempting to mobilise the working class through strikes and occupations to defend myself and those 22 Labour councillors, it preferred to go before the capitalist courts.

Laurence Humphries  
email

## Subjective

I don’t have time this week to reply in depth to comrade Peter Manson’s latest letter (August 2) in our exchange on sectarianism. But one point is, I think, critical.

The point I have been making all along is that sectarianism is not a matter of the *interests* of the small group (by which I have in my original article, and in every letter, meant its *objective* interests), but of its subjective choices. I am therefore pleased to see that Peter’s latest letter in effect accepts this point, when he refers to “separate and rival *perceived* interests”.

Mike Macnair  
Oxford

# ACTION

### CPGB podcasts

Every Monday we upload a podcast commenting on the current political situation. In addition, the site features voice files of public meetings and other events: <http://cpgb.org.uk/home/podcasts>

### London Communist Forum

**Sunday August 12, 5pm:** Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and *Capital* reading group. Caxton House, 129 St John’s Way, London N19. This meeting: Vol 1, chapter 3, section 2C, ‘Coins and symbols of value’.

Organised by CPGB: [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk).

### Their crisis, not ours

**Thursday August 9, 7.30pm:** Public meeting, The Melting Pot (conference room), 5 Rose Street, Edinburgh EH2.

Organised by Right to Work: [www.righttowork.org.uk](http://www.righttowork.org.uk).

### Organise building workers

**Saturday August 11, 2pm:** Unite construction national rank and file meeting, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1.

Organised by Siteworker: <http://siteworker.wordpress.com>.

### UK Black Pride

**Saturday August 18, 12noon to 8:30pm:** Black LGBT event, Ministry of Sound, 103 Gaunt Street, Elephant and Castle, London SE1.

Organised by UK Black Pride: [www.ukblackpride.org.uk](http://www.ukblackpride.org.uk).

### Home from home?

**Ends Friday August 31:** Exhibition, Swansea Museum, Victoria Road, SA1. Forced to flee because of violence or persecution.

In collaboration with Swansea City of Sanctuary, Swansea Bay Asylum Seekers Support Group: [www.swansea.gov.uk/swanseamuseum](http://www.swansea.gov.uk/swanseamuseum).

### Stop the EDL

**Saturday September 1, 11am:** Demonstration against English Defence League march, central Waltham Forest.

Organised by Unite Against Fascism: [www.uaf.org.uk](http://www.uaf.org.uk).

### Immigration deaths: end the impunity

**Wednesday September 5, 6pm:** Annual review and discussion, followed by a BBQ. Community Hall, Athlone Street, London NW5.

Organised by Medical Justice: [www.medicaljustice.org.uk](http://www.medicaljustice.org.uk).

### No deportations

**Saturday September 8, 10am to 5pm:** National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns annual general meeting, Praxis Community Projects, Bethnal Green, London E2.

Organised by NCADC: [www.ncadc.org.uk](http://www.ncadc.org.uk).

### TUC action call

**Sunday September 9, 12noon:** Lobby the TUC for a 24-hour general strike. Assemble 1pm, The Level park, Union Road, Brighton. March 1.30pm to Brighton Centre.

Organised by the National Shop Stewards Network: [www.shopstewards.net](http://www.shopstewards.net).

### Build for October 20

**Monday September 10, 7 pm:** Public meeting, Stockwell Community Resource Centre, Studley Road, Lambeth, London SW4. Build for national TUC demonstration.

Organised by Lambeth TUC: [www.lambethtradesunioncouncil.com](http://www.lambethtradesunioncouncil.com).

### Love Music, Hate Racism

**Saturday September 15, 1pm to 1am:** Anniversary event, Rich Mix, Bethnal Green Road, London E1. Day and evening: £12 waged, £6 unwaged. Day or evening only: £6 waged, £3 unwaged. From Rich Mix: [www.richmix.org.uk](http://www.richmix.org.uk).

Organised by Love Music, Hate Racism: [www.lovemusichateracism.com](http://www.lovemusichateracism.com).

### Free Miami Five

**Tuesday September 18, 6pm:** Vigil, US embassy, Grosvenor Square, London W1 (nearest tube: Bond Street). Speakers include Aleida Guevara, daughter of Che Guevara.

Organised by the Cuba Solidarity Campaign: [www.cuba-solidarity.org](http://www.cuba-solidarity.org).

### Facing the abyss

**Wednesday September 19, 9:30am to 4.30pm:** Conference, Tavistock Centre, 120 Belsize Square, London, NW3. Exploring the challenges for separated children seeking asylum as they turn 18.

Organised by National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns: [www.ncadc.org.uk/events/facingtheabyssflier.pdf](http://www.ncadc.org.uk/events/facingtheabyssflier.pdf).

### Save our services

**Wednesday September 19, 6pm:** Lobby - defend public services in Lambeth, town hall, Brixton Hill, London SW2.

Organised by Lambeth Save Our Services: <http://lambethsaveourservices.org>.

### Besiege the Lib Dems

**Saturday September 22, 12 noon:** Demonstration outside Liberal Democrat conference, The Level, Brighton.

Organised by Brighton Trades Council: [www.brightontradescouncil.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.brightontradescouncil.blogspot.co.uk).

### No to coalition austerity

**Sunday October 7:** Mass protest, Conservative Party conference, Birmingham. Times and location tba.

Organised by TUC: [www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.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.

## OLYMPICS

# Grasping the Olympic enigma

The hype and nationalistic overkill is enough to put off even the keenest of sports lovers, writes **Peter Manson**. But the left needs to maintain a sense of balance

As the Tory-led coalition government continues its attempts to impose austerity on the British people, the Olympic Games have provided the whole establishment with the opportunity to relentlessly, and with some success, push the message that David Cameron has been unable to convince us of directly: "We are all in it together."

The blanket coverage - so much so that newspapers from the *Mirror* to *The Daily Telegraph* have been leading with page after page of sports coverage, which has also relegated reports on the euro crisis and Syria to minor stories in BBC 'news' bulletins - is intended to enthuse the entire population. We can all be proud of both the British organisation and the British performances, which we, the people of Britain of whatever background, can all share in and feel associated with. Whatever our ethnicity, religion or class, we do, after all, share common interests by virtue of our Britishness - that is what we are meant to accept. Of course, the effects will soon begin to wear off, but the Olympics have definitely provided the ruling class with a much-needed boost.

Speaking as someone who enjoys sport, I can more than appreciate the talent, skill and artistry of athletes of every nationality. I can also feel an affinity with competitors who may speak and think as I do and may share a similar working class background to me (taking into account that around half the British medallists in Beijing four years ago were public school-educated and that this proportion is unlikely to have changed much in 2012). But I reject the nauseating 'God save the queen' nationalism which we are meant to swallow, as we watch every step, throw, jump or stroke. The record number of British medals, we are meant to infer, are won at the expense of - and in competition with, obviously - the athletes of nations less talented and less organisationally capable than ours.

Of course, the organisational success can hardly be put down to the 'free market' and private enterprise - no matter how much the ideologues of capitalism would have preferred that to be the case. True, the big transnationals paid millions for saturation advertising (sponsorship) and scores of companies, large and small, won lucrative tenders for the provision of facilities and services. But the G4S scandal exposed the reality of their dependence on the state. We have seen a gigantic, seven-year effort and vast expenditure by that state - not just to ensure the high-quality stadiums, velodromes, halls, pitches and pools were delivered on time, but to carefully target for special subsidy those disciplines where it was felt British athletes could challenge for medals.

As Mike Marqusee puts it, "These days our boxers, swimmers, gymnasts, etc are every bit as state-subsidised as the Cubans and East Germans of old, who were reviled for their spurious amateurism. Today, the advanced capitalist societies rally under the standard of elite ultra-professionalism, a state- and corporate-sponsored professionalism presented as the epitome of individualistic dedication, single-mindedness, self-will. Egocentric qualities from which, somehow, it's asserted, the community automatically benefits. There is a case for state support of elite sports performers, but in relation to the



Will the Olympic effect end with the closing ceremony?

overall objectives of 'sport for all' - ie, public health - it's as dubious a strategy as trickle-down economics."

Now we are expected to ignore the non-availability of sporting facilities for the masses and concentrate on celebrating the victories of Jessica Ennis, Ben Ainsley, Chris Hoy, Andy Murray ... without getting frustrated with those who 'let us down' by their disappointing performances. Like the 17-year-old who was arrested and handed a harassment warning after tweeting to diver Tom Daley: "You let your dad down. I hope you know that" (Daley, who recently lost his father, and his diving partner could only manage fourth place).

## Contradictions

Nevertheless, as everyone knows, Britain is heading for its biggest tally of gold, silver and bronze since 1908, and looks certain to finish third behind China and the US in the medal table. And these victories have come hot on the heels of another cause for celebration - Danny Boyle's spectacular opening ceremony. The headline of our article last week - 'Establishment's contradictory coup' - summed up its achievement. The ceremony was, Eddie Ford noted, "a complex and contradictory phenomenon that represented another attempt at rearticulating British national identity".

Comrade Ford put it this way: "It was a further elaboration of the post-World War II ideology of bourgeois anti-racism predicated on an 'inclusive' nationalism embracing the Smiths, Patels and Adebayos as equal subjects under the crown. With everyone safely herded into the big, official anti-racist tent, subscribing to the same, mythologised 'anti-fascist' British history, the real and hard-won democratic gains of the working class can then be being partially championed and appropriated by this new British nationalist paradigm." All in all, it was "a brilliant coup for the ruling class".<sup>2</sup>

It has to be said, however, that the contradictions and complexity of the occasion seem to have been lost on many comrades. Take the two main far-left groups, the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party in England and Wales. They both focused mainly on one side of the picture - opposite sides, as it happens!

SPEW, whose pre-Olympic coverage was along the lines of 'The money would have been better spent elsewhere' and 'What about the workers?', has now concluded that socialists should not be such "spoilsports" after all. Rather, we should enthusiastically join in the general celebratory mood.

It was the opening ceremony itself which caused this change of heart. As Sarah Wrack commented, "The usual format of this sort of event - the perfectly coordinated parades, intricate human pyramids, feats of pyrotechnics - leaves us impressed, maybe even awestruck." However, the July 27 extravaganza "didn't just impress: it engaged. Every working class person in the country could identify with bits of what they saw ..."

Comrade Wrack continues: "There were royals and celebrities, of course, but these were a side dish, not the main meal. The undisputed stars of the show were the 600 NHS workers swing dancing, the 500 Olympic site construction workers lining the tunnel as the torch made its entrance, the young volunteers jumping up and down on giant beds or dancing together in the two-up, two-down."

Admittedly "It wasn't a programme for socialism. But, in the main, it was a celebration of, by and for working class and young people." And "this fantastic event" has been followed by "amazing shows of human talent - Jessica Ennis, Mohamed Farrah, Usain Bolt - a cheer roared out whether they were 'Team GB' or not. *The Socialist* congratulates all competitors and medal winners."<sup>3</sup>

Despite their writing off of the Labour Party, even as a site for

struggle, the SPEW comrades come across as Labourites. It is right and proper apparently that working class gains should be celebrated as *part and parcel* of the achievements of Great Britain and the UK constitutional monarchy state. Just as our rulers would have it. In fact some have compared Boyle's show to a huge Labour party political broadcast - Miliband is more than likely to recall it lovingly when the next general election comes round.

For its part, *Socialist Worker*, while acknowledging the ceremony's contradictory nature in its brief comment, downplayed the significance of not just the spectacular, but the games themselves. Its article remarked: "There was a stunning depiction of the industrial revolution, a view of the suffragettes and some early trade unionists, recognition for multicultural Britain and a strong celebration of the NHS. There was even a glimpse of a lesbian kiss." However, "It was much more positive reinforcement for the monarchy than any of the jubilee events."

The article continued: "The Olympics remains dominated by corporations and nationalism. And it's surrounded by a militaristic regime of missiles on tower blocks and soldiers on the streets. It has absolutely nothing to do with saving the NHS, taking on the Tories or celebrating struggle. The ceremony didn't change that."

"But the reception for the opening ceremony tells us something about Britain today. There are lots of people who cheer when they see our class get any sort of good coverage - and who would love to see a big fight for the NHS. If the Labour Party and the union leaders were not so timid in their defence of public services then people might not project so much hope onto an Olympics opening ceremony."<sup>4</sup>

That was last week. But this week it was business as usual, with the meagre coverage noting only failure - in terms of the hoped-for economic boost, deserted shopping

centres, empty seats, etc. Not exactly profound. The internal *Party Notes* carried a paragraph which sums up the dismissive attitude:

"Whatever brief effect the Olympics have, it won't last. 'Team GB' medals won't be much of a consolation when news of crisis, cuts, job losses and pay cuts return to the front of people's consciousness. And the 'We are now all multiculturalists' line peddled by *The Sun* (!), etc will soon look ridiculous, as scapegoating and whipping up of division returns."<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the comrades are correct to say that the Olympic atmosphere will not last. But is it true that there will be *no* long-term effect? I doubt it. Events like the opening ceremony - not to mention big sporting achievements - tend to remain in people's consciousness for a considerable time. Our job must be to fully analyse and assess the contradictions of the establishment's coup, so as to be able to combat the nationalistic effect, not wish it away.

However, what really stands out from that brief comment in *Party Notes* is the final sentence. The SWP just does not get multiculturalism. Its prominence in the ceremony was not simply a concession, not just an acknowledgement of progressive advance. Multiculturalism is now an essential part of the *bourgeois* ideology of British chauvinism. For example, here is a snippet from the rightwing *Daily Telegraph* columnist, Michael Deacon:

"Mo Farah is an immigrant. Jessica Ennis is mixed race. Most of our gold-winning rowers are women. Clare Balding, the BBC's best and most popular Olympics presenter, is gay. In other words, these games are a triumph not simply for Britain: they're a triumph for modern Britain."<sup>6</sup>

Does the SWP really think that Deacon - and the overwhelming majority of mainstream commentators like him - will soon revert to "scapegoating" sections of the population on the basis of their ethnicity or sexual orientation? Nothing is impossible, but that is just as likely to happen as a renewed bout of anti-Catholic witch-hunting. It is not as though bourgeois multiculturalism suddenly made an appearance at the Olympics out of the blue: it has been part of the *dominant* ideology for at least two decades. Yes, the ruling class will look for scapegoats when it runs into difficulty, but it is not beyond inventing new ones more in keeping with current establishment thought.

I prefer the view of comrade Marqusee to those of either SPEW or the SWP: "The Olympic podium is a symbolic package: individual excellence at the service of the nation-state under the overlordship of multinational capital." He concludes: "Sport does offer a kind of escape, an alternative, exterior focus ... But it is not a vacation from critical thought. I find no difficulty thoroughly enjoying the best of the competition without compromising for a moment a necessarily critical perspective on what the Olympic enterprise has become" •

## Notes

1. 'At the Olympics: hype vs reality': [www.mikemarqusee.com/?p=1296](http://www.mikemarqusee.com/?p=1296).
2. 'Establishment's contradictory coup' *Weekly Worker* August 2.
3. *The Socialist* August 8.
4. *Socialist Worker* August 4.
5. *Party Notes* August 6.
6. *The Daily Telegraph* August 6.

## WORKERS' OLYMPIAD

# Our sport and theirs

Socialist Workers Party member **Keith Flett** contrasts today's corporate Olympics with the tradition of worker sport. This is an edited version of his speech to a CPGB London Communist Forum

**T**he workers' Olympiad is not a subject which has attracted a great deal of interest and I do not claim to be an expert on it. I am, amongst other things, a research historian who has no particular line to defend on the subject, but who merely has some thoughts to present. Frankly I would want to do a lot more research before putting forward some particular view. One thing this would involve, if anyone felt inspired enough, would be to look back over what the left press had to say about the 1908 and 1948 London Olympics.

In terms of where we are now, I am sure you will be aware of the huge fuss about all the gold medals won by Team GB. Labour politicians and so on have been pulled in and this atmosphere is not very good for the left. That being said, I was in a pub when Mo Farah won the 10,000 metres athletics final and everyone there stood up and clapped. It is interesting that ordinary people can celebrate the victory of this Somalian asylum-seeker, while the right did *not* celebrate it. The usual suspects on Twitter have bigged up this or that person who has "won a gold medal for Britain", but they did not have much to say about Mo Farah.

There are people around on the left - I will not name them, but you can use Google to find them if you want - who clearly have the view that sport is some kind of conspiracy against working people to divert their attention from the revolutionary struggle. There definitely has been a trend, particularly after World War II, of the left keeping its distance, at the very least, from sport.

However, conversely, a lot of people on the left are very interested in sport; they play it, organise it and so on. And there is a third, more recent trend of the left being involved in what you could call the 'spectator movements', particularly in football and cricket, but there are others. The 'Barny Army' in cricket is an interesting thing to touch on, which could take up a whole discussion by itself, because it *appears* to be a bunch of rightwing people, but I do not think that is necessarily the case at all: there certainly appears to be a left presence within it, which I found puzzling when I came across it.

### Worker sport

The origins of the working class sport movement go back to the battle for the eight-hour day in the last quarter of the 19th century. Before that you will find, for example, the Chartists taking part in football matches, but overall there really was not much working class participation. And the reason is obvious, frankly: workers are unable to engage in leisure activities, because they do not have any leisure time of note.

The anti-sports line of organisations like the Social Democratic Federation arose from the connection made between sport, drink, gambling and the Tories - they all went together. Even today those in the pub watching sports with a pint in one hand and a gambling slip in the other will probably be Tories. That was something that the labour movement noted.

However, towards the end of the 19th century the movement begins to fight for sport as part of the campaign for the right of workers to enjoy their own pastimes - for example, cycling and walking (the latter developed into the mass trespasses of the 1930s). The emphasis was on the setting up of



**British organisation was tiny compared with Germany**

separate cultural and sports structures and in Germany this occurred on a much bigger scale.

In 1914, there were 350,000 members of the German workers' sports organisations, and by 1928 the figure was two million. There were 60 sports papers with a readership of 800,000. These structures were organised by the Social Democratic Party of Germany. But by the early 1930s and the 'third period' turn, the Communist Party had separate bodies with 100,000 members. And behind such huge organisations there were things like the cooperative production of bicycles to supply the cycling clubs. In Austria in 1913 the workers' swimming association organised 100,000 free swimming lessons. It is difficult to imagine today's left being able to organise on such a scale.

It was the strength of the German movement which allowed the workers' Olympiads to develop. But it was the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 that provided both the material ability and the political motivation for establishing some kind of framework for a workers' Olympiad, boosted by the rise of organised labour and the development of revolutionary movements in other countries.

Figures from the 1924 Cooperative and Wholesale Society people's yearbook show that, while Germany had 1.3 million affiliated members of the social democratic Socialist Workers Sports International, there were only 2,220 in Britain. But the total membership of the SWSI was just over 1.5 million members, mostly in Europe obviously, so Britain's membership was by no means the smallest proportionally. By today's standards this is an amazingly large organisation.

The first official event was,

unsurprisingly, held in Germany in 1925, where 50,000 were said to have attended. Vienna in 1931 followed, with around 100,000 spectators and competitors from 26 countries. These games were organised by the SWSI - its wing in Britain being the British Workers Sports Federation.

During the 'third period' the communist parties set up their own rival Red Sports International, whose first festival was held in Moscow in 1928. This was followed by Berlin 1931, before the political line changed once again for the aborted Barcelona workers' games in 1936, on the cusp of the Spanish civil war. This was to be a united effort between the social democracy and the communists in opposition to the Nazi Olympic Games in Berlin.

There is more material available about Barcelona than earlier games because of its proximity in time to the start of the Spanish civil war. The idea was to put on a popular sports festival which was not aiming at the breaking of records, but at promoting a 'spirit of peace and cooperation between peoples and nations'. Which sounds worthy, but rather boring.

Nevertheless the political impact was huge. Avery Brundage - the US representative on the International Olympic Committee, who thought Hitler was a great bloke and was determined the Berlin games should go ahead - referred to Barcelona as "the communist games". There were 10,000 athletes from 20 countries. The United Kingdom had a small team of mostly Labour Party members playing tennis, chess and so on - the chess player was AR Northcott from the Acton Labour Party sports section. The team also included Welsh 100 yards champion EG Cupid and was even recognised by the Amateur

Athletics Association.

But, as the games were due to start, Franco launched his assault on Barcelona, making it impossible for them to go ahead. Many in the British team were shipped out by the Royal Navy, but I believe some participants did stay on and may have become part of the British battalion of the International Brigades - they certainly inspired some of that activity. The games were held instead in Antwerp the following year.

There was also a sort of counter-Olympics organised in 1932 by the Communist Party of the United States of America in Chicago. The CPUSA attitude was that sport was the opium of the masses and they saw the event as a way of promoting particular agendas of opposition around the whole issue of capitalism and sport. It must have been quite difficult to organise a counter-Olympics, whilst at the same time saying that sport is something you shouldn't be doing. It was not a huge success and indeed the American Athletics Association declared that any athlete competing in the counter-Olympics would be banned for life.

However, this led to a very interesting debate on the American left. The *Daily Worker*, despite the 'opium of the masses' line, ran a sports page - the more this was allowed to reflect the views of actual workers, the more it was realised that organised workers were really quite interested in sport and some of them watched and even took part in it. Eventually the *Daily Worker* abandoned its former line and went on to lead a very successful and high-profile campaign against segregation in baseball. The CPUSA reputation amongst black Americans was boosted as a result.

The British Workers Sports Association is the organisation which split off from the social democratic British Workers Sports Federation during the 'third period'. The BWSA was, of course, organised by the Communist Party. The interesting thing about this (and one that raises a lot of questions in my mind anyway) is that during World War II the BWSA became the centre of an attempt to re-establish international workers' sports, which had been utterly destroyed by the rise of fascism and the war itself. It tried to get the USSR, which had not participated in the official Olympics since the Bolshevik revolution, and American working class bodies to back the formation of the International Workers Sports Committee in 1947.

But the fact that this would include communists caused problems, leading the Labour Party and TUC to withdraw. Further splits occurred and there were no more workers' Olympiads. In other words, the attempt to start the thing up again after World War II foundered upon the cold war, the rise of McCarthyism and so on. There was an attempt in the 1950s to set up some sort of structure that excluded communists, but that did not work. So in 1954 the BWSA re-affiliated to the 'official communist' international sports organisation, and was finally closed down in 1960.

### Anti-sport

There remains a strand of thought on the left which sees sport as purely a distraction - and does so far more than the CPUSA. This trend, which gathered influence after World War II and especially in the 1960s, goes

beyond condemning sport as the opium of the masses, to expressing hatred of sport and ignoring it altogether. The reason for this, I think, is quite interesting. It is tied to the rise of a different kind of popular culture: the music industry, very different ways of spending leisure time, and so on.

From the late 19th century through to World War II, sport was one of the major outlets for workers' leisure time. However, once you move on to the rock'n'roll era from the mid-50s onwards, there are clearly other outlets competing with sport that were just not there in any real way previously. Some of these were associated with some kind of political rebellion which appealed to the left in a way in which sport perhaps did not.

The other factor here is the rise of a 'spectator culture' (as with the 'Barny Army' I mentioned at the beginning). It is particularly prominent in football, of course, where there are traditions in fan groups going back decades, based around a dislike of the rich and powerful owners of the football clubs. Usually they are strongly anti-racist, and generally pro-fan above all else.

The best known example is the Wimbledon football club, currently somewhere in the lower reaches of the Football League. Wimbledon FC rose from nowhere to win the FA Cup. But then it was taken over, moved to Milton Keynes and renamed MK Dons. This caused a big fan revolt and AFC Wimbledon was formed as a result. Despite a lot of moaning and groaning from the authorities, the new club actually succeeded in getting off the ground and getting back into the league, which is an interesting achievement. It was without question a fan-based movement against what was seen as the power of business to move sport around at a whim.

This was not an isolated case - the spectator movement has grown in strength. However, I do not think it is possible to say that all this is organised by or associated with the political left, but it is something coming from below and there are strong, potentially leftwing currents within it. This stems from the experiences of spectators, who feel they are paying money to somebody 'up there' who does not understand the game and has no real passion for the club itself.

This is connected to the phenomenon of *corporate* sport, which has been obvious around the London Olympics. There is no question that sports fan bases are now more middle class in composition because of the level of income required. Being a spectator is not a cheap activity these days. You cannot watch an international cricket match for less than £70 or £80 and football charges a similar kind of price. Not something within your reach if you are on Job Seekers Allowance.

This is true of the Olympics. There is no need for tickets to be so astronomical - they could be £5. But there has been a deliberate pricing structure to attract a certain kind of people. That is just for the ticket, mind you. If they want a disgusting fizzy lager that will cost them £7 or £8 a pint!

All this is a far cry from the workers' Olympiads. They belong to a certain historical juncture. And it is difficult to see how all that period could be recreated - or even if it would be desirable to recreate it. But that is a debate that needs to be had ●

## HISTORY

# Permanent revolution and

D Gaido and R B Day (editors and translators) **Witnesses to permanent revolution: the documentary record** Haymarket books, 2011, pp682, £25.99

**“The revolutionary movement that is flaring up in Russia may become the most powerful means of overcoming the spirit of flabby philistinism and sober-minded politicking that is beginning to spread through our ranks; it may reignite the flame of commitment to struggle and passionate devotion to our great ideals”**  
- K Kautsky *The American worker* (1907)

**W**itnesses is one of several excellent *Historical Materialism* publications of long forgotten documents. Despite some criticisms I have of Daniel Gaido’s and Richard B Day’s argument, this volume has the great virtue of providing an English-speaking audience with a priceless insight into the Second International and its debates on revolutionary strategy and the nature of revolution in Russia. Some of the International’s most influential leaders make an appearance - Rosa Luxemburg, Leon Trotsky, Alexander Parvus, Georgi Plekhanov, Franz Mehring and the ‘papal’ authority of Marxism at that time, Karl Kautsky. Gaido and Day have done a solid job of translating, editing and introducing the material (and this is not their only contribution to our collective understanding of the ‘Marxism of the Second International’ either: they have also produced an even larger volume on the question of imperialism, which was also published as part of the *Historical Materialism* book series).<sup>1</sup>

## What sort of revolution?

The backdrop is the powder keg of the tsarist “prison house of nations” - the Russian empire in the early 1900s. It was a hated regime presiding over a majority peasant country with a small, concentrated working class using some of the world’s most advanced technology - imported from abroad. What was the nature of the coming Russian Revolution? Was it to be a ‘bourgeois’ revolution, or a ‘socialist’ one? Or, given the sheer political cowardice of the bourgeoisie and the fact that socialism was impossible within the confines of Russia itself, was it a case of the Russian working class gaining hegemony over the peasantry and taking the *democratic* revolution as far as possible, thus sparking the European revolution? This, of course, brings us to the idea of permanent revolution. A phrase that over the years has become somewhat shrouded in mystery and subject to a multiplicity of (mis)interpretations and (mis)understandings.

It is commonly held that permanent revolution originates with the precocious Marxist, Leon Trotsky, and as such has furnished titles of a whole swathe of Trotskyist publications and even the name of several groups. Indeed, the blurb of Pathfinder Press’s reprint of Trotsky’s essays on permanent revolution lauds the “certain symmetry” of “the two famous theories”: Trotsky’s permanent revolution and Einstein’s theory of relativity.<sup>2</sup>

One strength of *Witnesses* is that it aims to provide more context to Trotsky’s writings and thought: not treating him as some sort of cult figure. It does so through a



**Workers were expected to lead**

“rediscovery and elaboration of the concept of permanent revolution in the years 1903-07” (pxi). Day and Gaido show that “Leon Trotsky, while certainly the most famous and brilliant proponent of permanent revolution, was by no means its sole author; indeed, several major contributions came from a number of other Marxists.” Some of these, like David Ryazanov,<sup>3</sup> “have rarely been mentioned in this connection, while others - Karl Kautsky in particular - have often been regarded as pseudo-revolutionaries whose real commitment was always to parliamentary politics” (pxi). As the editors appositely put it, “It is a remarkable irony that Karl Kautsky, who subsequently denounced the Bolshevik Revolution and was famously condemned by both Lenin and Trotsky as a traitor and a renegade, in fact played a key role prior to 1905 in inspiring Russian Marxists” (p60). Further, Kautsky was “the first west European Marxist to employ the theory of permanent

revolution in connection with events in the Russian empire” (p41).<sup>4</sup>

## Kautsky and Korsch

The editors state that “the task of historians is to clarify great issues first, but the very act of doing so poses new questions” (pxii). For the purposes of this short review, I will zoom in on one question that I hold to be far and away the most important posed by the volume: the legacy of Karl Kautsky and ‘Second International Marxism’ more generally. For me, the all too common dismissal of this legacy has resulted in a loss of historical memory, widespread theoretical impoverishment and a general absence of a viable political strategy.

The story goes that Second International Marxism was so imbued with fatalism, determinism and parliamentary reformism that it was of no use to any revolution at all, let alone the Russian Revolution. Oddly, this view represents a broad,

cosy consensus from anti-Marxists in the academy through to modern-day Stalinists, many Trotskyists and even anarchists.

Day and Gaido hope that the publication of Kautsky’s writings on the Russian Revolution will help to “overcome the stereotypical and mistaken view of Kautsky as an apostle of quietism and a reformist cloaked in revolutionary phraseology” (p569). They locate the near unanimity of this conception of Kautsky in “an over-generalisation drawn from Kautsky’s anti-Bolshevik polemics after 1917” and in “the ultra-leftist philosopher, Karl Korsch, in his reply to Kautsky’s work *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung* [‘The materialist conception of history’] (1927)”.

Their argument is buttressed by one constantly overlooked fact: the notion that Kautsky had more in common with evolutionary Darwinism than revolutionary Marxism was one that Lenin *never* entertained (the editors also say this is true of Trotsky,

although I think here the matter is a little more complicated, particularly in Trotsky’s later writings).

But the reasoning offered differs. For Lenin, Kautsky scabbed in 1914 because he recoiled from the political project he had previously committed himself to. For Korsch, and other similar thinkers, Kautsky scabbed because of the impoverished and vulgarised version of Marxist *philosophy* that had characterised him throughout his entire career. Lenin thought highly of Kautsky’s grasp of the dialectic. Korsch did not.

I agree that Karl Korsch is certainly one of the leading culprits of what Gaido himself deems the “throw the baby out with the bathwater” school of historical interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Yet I do wonder if the wedge that was driven between the Bolsheviks and their origins in the ‘Erfurt model’ of German Social Democracy actually happened slightly earlier. Perhaps it was a concomitant of the ‘Bolshevisation’ of the communist parties carried

# the battle for democracy

out under the leadership of Grigory Zinoviev.

## Löwy and ‘totality’

Nonetheless, some of Korsch’s conclusions simply become even more absurd in the hands of other left thinkers down the line. In his popular *The politics of combined and uneven development: the theory of permanent revolution* (reprinted, also by Haymarket, in 2010), Michael Löwy boldly states that there is such an affinity between anti-Marxists and the “evolutionist” Marxists of the Second International, that Karl Kautsky would agree with Karl Popper: “... according to Marxism, the proletarian revolution should have been the outcome of industrialisation, and not vice versa, and it should have come first in the highly industrialised countries, and only much later in Russia” (p1).<sup>6</sup>

Those like Kautsky, then, are seen as holding a stagist, mechanistic and thoroughly undialectical view of social development. “The theory of permanent revolution, first formulated by Leon Trotsky in 1905-06” (!), as Löwy puts it, was *uniquely placed* to understand the politics of combined and uneven development in capitalism, and thus postulate the need for “the uninterrupted transition from the democratic to the socialist revolution”. Uniquely, Trotsky understood this international “totality” of the revolutionary process.

This conclusion is flatly contradicted by this volume. Kautsky, like *all* the writers gathered together in this volume (including Plekhanov), is clear about both the uneven development of Russian capitalism *and* its implications for revolution in ‘backward’ Russia itself. Kautsky describes the peculiarities of capitalist development in Russia as follows: “The surplus value produced in Russia will thus serve to increase [the capitalist’s] influence in France, not in Russia.” Thus, unlike in the USA, where the intelligentsia is corrupted by imperialist booty and the workers’ movement is as weak as capitalist development is strong, “nowhere is the number of theoretically educated socialist agitators greater than in the land of the illiterates” (ie, Russia; p649). Or, to quote Kautsky’s 1909 *Road to power*, where he describes the interrelated revolutionary developments across the globe: “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.”<sup>7</sup> There was no social scale that ranged from countries ready for revolution to countries that were not. There was a globally concurrent revolutionary process. A “totality”, to use Löwy’s term.

But so what? Kautsky may not have been as rotten as he is often made out to be, but why does it matter? The problem is that views like Löwy’s are the precondition of a second - and, in my opinion, equally ahistorical - view about Lenin and the Bolsheviks commonly held on the left: ie, that the strategy of revolution they had developed was junked in 1917 when they finally cast away the fetters of the old ‘Second International Marxism’.

In her review of *Witnesses* for *International socialism*, Esme Choonara sums up an all-too-familiar argument: “But [Lenin] too accepted that there would need to be

a ‘democratic revolution’ before a socialist one. He rectified his position decisively in practice, if not explicitly in theory, in the 1917 revolution.”<sup>8</sup>

The material contained in this volume makes it clear that what was meant by ‘permanent revolution’ in the Second International debates was *not* the “uninterrupted transition from democratic to socialist revolution” (that was Trotsky’s unique take on the term), but an understanding of the need to push the democratic revolution uninterrupted forward against the bourgeoisie, maintaining revolutionary momentum to drive away any vestiges of tsarist oppression, and introducing the far-reaching democratic reforms needed to take the class struggle to a higher level.<sup>9</sup> A sanctification of neither the bourgeois order nor the ‘historical role’ of the bourgeoisie.

A good summary of this approach comes from Lenin in October 1915: “The task of the proletariat in Russia is to carry out the bourgeois democratic revolution to the end, *in order* to ignite the socialist revolution in Europe.” There could be no socialism within the confines of Russia. But this approach was hardly unique to Lenin.

## ‘Epistemological break’

And yet, before his alleged ‘epistemological break’ with Second International Marxism, Lenin’s strategy is often regarded as sowing illusions in the bourgeoisie, and as such was largely irrelevant to the actual course of the Russian Revolution itself. Once more these documents speak for themselves: neither Kautsky, Lenin, Luxemburg nor Trotsky held that the bourgeoisie would play any significant role in the struggle for democracy - it was too intimidated by the power of the burgeoning working class. To paraphrase Kautsky, the further east you look, the more cowardly and duplicitous the bourgeoisie.

Gaido and Day have provided us with ample material to blow this idea of an ‘epistemological break’ in Lenin’s thought out of the water. In addition, they have made available some of the key texts that moulded Lenin’s outlook. (A good example is Kautsky’s ‘Prospects and driving forces of the Russian Revolution’ - both Lenin *and* Trotsky wrote fawning prefaces for their Russian readers!) Yet the editors themselves appear not to have broken with this approach.

In his extensive review of *Witnesses*,<sup>10</sup> Lars T Lih makes this point with typical clarity: “In the traditional picture painted by writers in the Trotsky tradition, Trotsky stands alone in rejecting the fatalism and determinism of the Second International (Löwy, 2010). Day and Gaido do not really challenge this framework. All they do is shuffle the players, moving some writers from the ‘fatalistic’ slot over to the ‘dialectical’ slot. But someone is still needed to play the role of fatalist, and Plekhanov is picked to be the fall guy, whose obtuseness sets off everybody else’s brilliance.”

Perhaps it is no surprise that this should be the case, given that such an interpretation of the Russian Revolution is dominant on today’s far left. Yet in my opinion it is a view that is both historically and politically disarming. It throws overboard some of the central tenets of Bolshevism and the strategic lessons it assimilated from the ‘revolutionary wing’ of the Second International - not least on the question

of republican democracy and the need to win majority support for revolution. Indeed, today these fundamental tasks are often disdainfully described as sowing illusions in ‘completing the bourgeois revolution’ or engaging in some stagist Menshevik schema.

Following the ignominious collapse of the Second International in 1914, Zinoviev was adamant: “We are not *renouncing* the entire history of the Second International. We are not renouncing what was Marxist in it ... In the last years of the Second International’s existence, the opportunists and the ‘centre’ obtained a majority over the Marxists. But, in spite of everything, a revolutionary Marxist tendency always existed in the Second International. *And we are not renouncing its legacy for one minute*.”<sup>11</sup>

What is striking in reading the passages in *Witnesses* - and another blow to the ‘big man’ theory of history so beloved of cold war warriors on both sides of the barricades - is the sheer wealth of ideas in this “Marxist tendency of the Second International”. Our revolutionary tradition was not passed on by Lenin on tablets of stone, or invented by Trotsky in a laboratory. It was forged by the leaders of mass parties in the heat of open, fraternal and honest exchanges conducted at an extremely high political level.

Given the truly astonishing neglect of so many important documents from our movement in the 20th century, *Witnesses* is a significant contribution to the necessary effort to re-emerge from the deep slumber of Stalinism and to re-articulate the Marxist political project.

These texts should not be limited to those who devote their time and energy to the study of the socialist movement and its history. They are of burning, actual interest to our movement today, and can hopefully become - like Kautsky’s *The American worker*, which went through seven editions in Russia - basic educational texts and reading materials for new militants and activists worldwide. In his review of *Witnesses*, David North is right to point out the relevance of these debates to the tumultuous events unfolding in the Arab world.<sup>12</sup> Our brothers and sisters struggling for democracy and working class power will draw much inspiration from the ideas and innovations of these great Marxists. Kautsky’s description of Russia in 1907 could have been a description of Egypt or Tunisia in the upheavals of 2011:

“The struggle that we now see beginning in Russia involves more than physically pitting force against force. The revolutionising of minds advances alongside the revolution of fists. The now-awakening strata of the people are being seized by a passionate thirst for knowledge and are attempting to clarify for themselves their historical tasks, so that they might learn to resolve the most complex and difficult problems, rising above the small events of the daily struggle to survey the great historical goals that it serves” (p64).

Lenin was right: how well Kautsky wrote *when he was a Marxist* ●

**Ben Lewis**

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**This is an edited version of an article that was first published in the latest volume of *Revolutionary History*. Edited by Ian Birchall, the volume commemorates the 50th anniversary of Algerian independence by looking at**

**the response of the French left in particular. It costs £20 and can be ordered from [www.revolutionaryhistory.co.uk](http://www.revolutionaryhistory.co.uk). Copies will also be available at Communist University 2012.**

## Notes

1. D Gaido and RB Day (editors and translators) *Discovering imperialism: social democracy to World War I* Brill 2012, *Historical Materialism* book series, p951. For Mike Macnair’s review in this paper, see ‘Imperialism before Lenin’ *Weekly Worker* March 8 2012.
2. L Trotsky *The permanent revolution and results and prospects* New York 1969.
3. I do not ascribe the same importance to Ryazanov’s critique of the *Iskra* draft programme as the editors. Ryazanov’s article shares some of the misconceptions about Lenin’s supposed ‘party of a new type’ with the editors themselves. Perhaps Lars T Lih’s book on Lenin had not appeared by the time Gaido and Day were completing *Witnesses*, but it does seem a shame that they condemn Lenin, via Ryazanov, for the supposed “narrowness” of his organisational concepts. These were markedly different from the Mensheviks, who “hoped for a movement similar to that in Germany” (p73). In light of Lih’s research published on the same *HM* series, these all too familiar jeremiads jar somewhat.
4. Locating Kautsky as a theorist of permanent revolution builds upon the scholarship of Moira Donald in her excellent *Marxism and revolution: Kautsky and the Russian Marxists* Yale 1993. While many on the left fail to recognise any affinity at all between the outlook of Kautsky and Lenin before 1914, scholarship such as this points to the true relationship.
5. Interesting in this regard is Karl Kautsky’s review of Korsch’s *Marxism and philosophy*. It is published in translation for the first time in *Platypus review* No43, February 2012.
6. Against such a caricature of Kautsky’s ‘fatalism’, it is worth quoting the man himself: “The world is not so purposely organised as to lead always to the triumph of the revolution where it is essential for the interest of society. When we speak of the necessity of the proletariat’s victory and of socialism following from it, we do not mean that victory is inevitable or even, as

many of our critics think, that it will take place automatically and with fatalistic certainty, even when the revolutionary class remains idle. Necessity must be understood here in the sense of the revolution being the only possibility of further development” (p223).

7. If only to underline the absurdity of Löwy’s claim, it should be noted that even *the renegade* Kautsky stressed this basic point *in 1917*. While he expressed himself somewhat cryptically in order to circumvent the prying eyes of the censor, he does write: “... the international interdependence of state life for the peoples of Europe has already made too much progress for such a tremendous event as the transformation of the tsarist empire into a democratic republic to occur without repercussions for the other states”, including “a tremendous upswing in the political power of the working classes in the entire capitalist realm” (K Kautsky ‘Prospects of the Russian Revolution’ *Weekly Worker* January 14 2000).

8. Choonara argues that the book “overplays” Kautsky and his role. Yet just how the book does this remains Choonara’s secret. The review is revealingly entitled ‘Skipping stages’ (*International Socialism* No128, October 2010).

9. Pointing out, contra Day and Gaido, that Trotsky’s conception of permanent revolution was different from that of other writers who use the term does not in any way imply that Lenin then fully adopted his approach in April 1917. With his talk of ‘steps towards socialism’, Lenin believed that, in light of the world situation, the peasants could be won to socialist measures, and thus socialist transformation on the back of majority support was possible. This was new, and reflected a convergence between his and Trotsky’s views. Yet it is clear that Trotsky thought socialist measures were possible without the support of the peasantry. Thus without the internationally connected revolution they were all expecting, there would be ‘civil war with the peasantry’.

10. LT Lih, ‘Democratic revolution in *Permanenz*’ (forthcoming) *Science and Society* 2012. Lars’s expertise on the Russian movement allows him to provide a much more solid interpretation of the issues at hand, and I would recommend that readers study *Witnesses* alongside this article.

11. J Riddell *Lenin’s struggle for a revolutionary international* New York 1984, p105.

12. D North, ‘A significant contribution to an understanding of permanent revolution’: [www.wsws.org/articles/2010/apr2010/perma-a19.shtml](http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/apr2010/perma-a19.shtml).

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## HONOUR KILLINGS

# Rebelling against rural values in Warrington

Shafiea Ahmed's 'honour killing', writes **Eddie Ford**, highlights the importance of rights and individual autonomy for young adults - especially women

**F**ollowing a three-month trial both Iftikhar and Farzana Ahmed were sentenced last week to life imprisonment with a minimum term of 25 years for killing their 17-year-old daughter, Shafiea Ahmed. The jury heard that the couple killed Shafiea at the family home in Warrington on September 11 2003 because they believed she had brought "shame" on the family with her desire to lead a modern, "westernised" lifestyle.

Terribly, Shafiea had become another victim of what is generally known as 'honour killing' - the murder of women who in some shape or form defy patriarchal power relations, whether it be the parents, husbands or brothers or the extended family in general. The prosecution's key witness at the trial was Shafiea's 24-year-old sister, Alesha - then 15 - who recounted how she and her siblings had witnessed the murder. In February 2004, with her parents still claiming she had run away and that they had no idea where she was, her corpse was finally found on a remote Cumbrian riverbank.

As became more than clear during the trial, the Ahmeds may have lived in the UK for most of their lives - bringing up their family in Cheshire. But their social and cultural attitudes were firmly those of rural Pakistan. Or, as the judge put it, the couple wanted their family to "live in Pakistan in Warrington". And, of course, one fundamental feature of patriarchal power is systematic and institutionalised hypocrisy - which Iftikhar seemed to possess in spades.

He came to Britain when he was 10 and in 1980 married a Danish woman, Vivi Lone Anderson, whom he had met while visiting family members in Copenhagen. They had a son together and he even lived for a time in Denmark - almost a cosmopolitan lifestyle, you could say. Especially when you discover that as a young man he liked to be known as 'Bazza', enjoyed drinking alcohol (and getting drunk), regularly attended discos, dated numerous women and actually rejected an arranged marriage in order to be with the woman he eventually married - ie, Vivi Anderson. She described the 'Bazza' of those days as the "life and soul of the party" and "completely westernised", falling in love with him "because he was kind and fun to be with" (*Daily Mail* August 4).

But she left Iftikhar, hardly surprisingly, when she found out in 1985 that he made a trip back to Pakistan with the specific intention of marrying his cousin, Farzana - who, unlike him or his previous wife, had absolutely no experience or understanding of contemporary western culture. Therefore, we are forced to conclude, easier to exploit and intimidate. 'Family values', patriarch-style. He told Anderson that he "couldn't refuse" to marry Farzana, as he had been "promised to her by his family and so had no choice". The happy (or unhappy) couple - Mr and Mrs Ahmed, that is - returned to the

UK in 1986 when Farzana became pregnant. Now reinvented as a devout Muslim, his fun-loving and gregarious days behind him, Iftikhar set about the cruel task of imposing his new-found strict code upon his daughters - first and foremost, Shafiea.

However, she was always rebellious - a "determined, able and ambitious girl who wanted to live a life which was normal", in the words of the prosecution. In other words, born and brought up entirely in Britain, Shafiea's priorities and interests were radically different from her parents. She had a wide social circle, with many Asian, black and white friends - some of them boys, of course. Like many British girls, she was a fan of pop music - particularly Justin Timberlake - jeans, colourful t-shirts and spent an inordinate amount of time talking and texting on the mobile phone which she bought herself with the money earned from her part-time job.

Tragically for Shafiea, her parents would not countenance such a way of life - socialising with boys, wearing western clothes. Let alone having sex, drinking booze or smoking joints. Squeezed between two conflicting cultures - the culture she saw around her and wanted to embrace and that of her parents - her life became increasingly intolerable. In the final year before she was murdered, "intimidation, bullying and the use of physical violence" against her - to quote the court reports - stepped up to a whole new level. After running away in February 2003, Shafiea was recaptured by her parents, dragged off the street and forced into a car - where she was taken to rural Pakistan in order to be 'sorted out' and have her dangerously westernised ideas 'removed'.

She was meant to be married off to an older man in Pakistan, so he could abuse her - or 'discipline' her - in the same way that her parents had. She rebelled against the straitjacket of a life that had been arranged for her, but in a truly dreadful way - by swallowing bleach whilst in Pakistan.

Six months later Shafiea was dead. Killed by parents who no longer had any use for her and found her dissenting conduct too shameful and humiliating to bear. Just days before her murder, she wrote the following lines of poetry which expressed her yearning for freedom: "I don't pretend like we're the perfect family no more, desire to live is burning, my stomach is turning, but all they think about is honour."

### Patriarchal power

Regrettably, the plain fact of the matter is that for Muslim families, especially those from Pakistan, 'honour killings' and general terrorism is by no means abnormal. Rather, it has just come more into public view. According to the children's charity, Plan UK, a young woman like Shafiea is being forced into marriage every three seconds globally - with 8,000 cases every year in the UK alone. A big problem.

Hoping to combat such oppression, this year Plan UK has launched the country's first specialist film and lesson plan for use across UK schools. You can see why. Traditionally, for one reason or another, schools have long shied away from properly discussing the issue, despite hundreds of girls going suddenly missing from classrooms every year due to being married off. Almost inevitably, the summer holidays are the most dangerous time of the year for girls at risk of forced marriage - seeing how they can be more easily taken abroad and wed against their will.

For a hint of what might await them if dragged back to Pakistan, just look at the recent 'scandal' concerning the sacking of several Pakistani policemen in Gambat - a town of Khairpur District in the Sindh province of Pakistan. According to witnesses and mobile phone footage, the policemen made the man (Mumtaz Mirbahar) and an unnamed woman walk to the police station naked as punishment for the heinous crime of having sex outside marriage. The phone footage shows a naked man being beaten by police and a woman begging them to let her cover herself up. They did not listen.

Mirbahar, "deeply scared" by the event, has been released on bail but

the woman - it almost goes without saying - is still in detention. Her crime is obviously greater. A senior local police officer in the area told Reuters on August 5 that the main arresting officer's "mistake was that he should have covered them up" - if they had been *clothed*, so as not to offend public decency and Islamic modesty, then parading and humiliating them in public for the crime of having sex would have been perfectly acceptable. The law and local custom has to be rigorously policed. Similarly, last year several men were arrested for stripping a middle-aged woman naked and parading her round the village as punishment for her son's alleged affair with a woman in their family.

Many of the victims of 'honour killings' are from petty bourgeois backgrounds - the parents may be shopkeepers or own some other small business. Such a culture emphasises and lauds patriarchal power because that is the actual reality of the social, commercial and business relations - which as a matter of *necessity* requires the exploitation of family members, especially females ones, if they are to avoid bankruptcy and ruination.

In Pakistan this petty bourgeois exploitation is more likely to be of a rural nature. Its ideologisation

has taken a religious form, which has been carried over into Britain and elsewhere, placing the crime of honour killing within a particular context. That is why we do not agree with the approach of *Socialist Worker*, whose report of the "horrific case of Shafiea Ahmed" focuses entirely on the hypocritical "outrage" of the press:

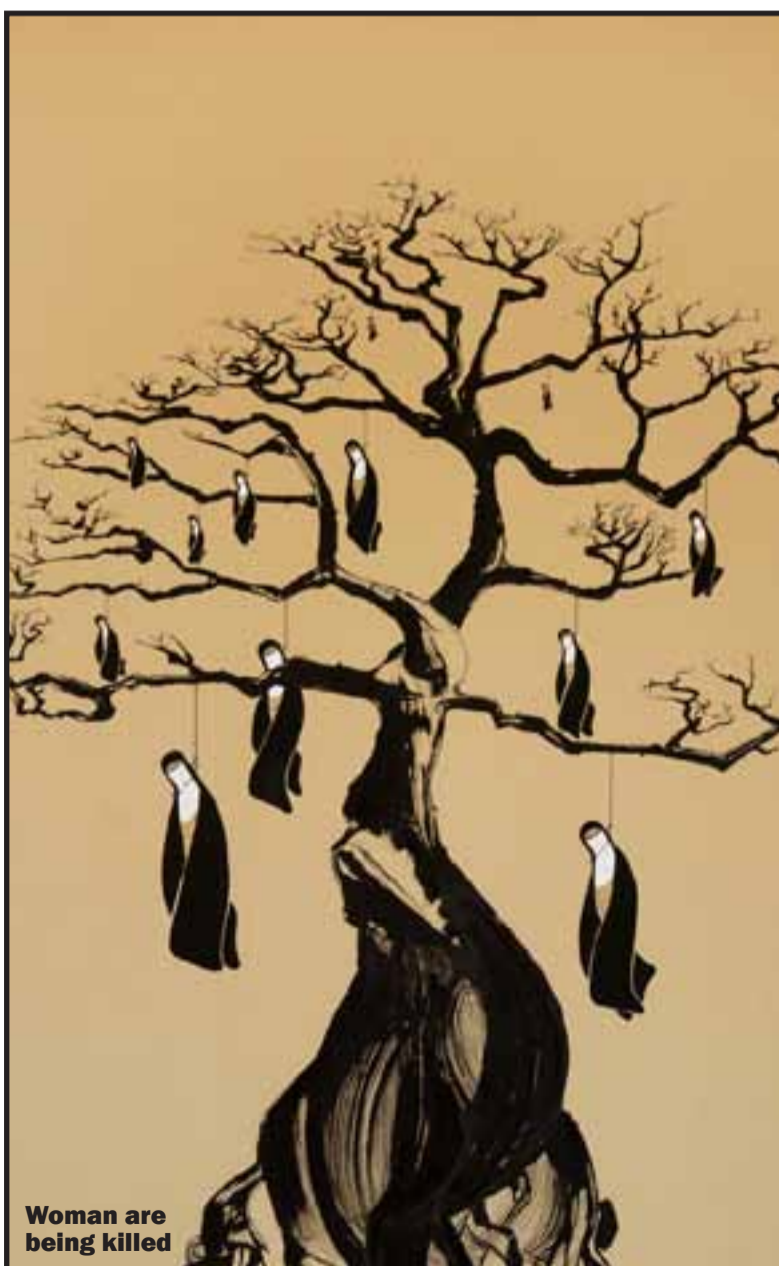
"About two women a week are murdered in Britain, usually by a family member. The vast majority are neither Asian nor Muslim. Just this week David and Frances Champion were jailed for repeatedly and brutally beating up their daughter. She had 'disgraced' her white family by going out with a black man." Despite this, "Killing family members is presented as a peculiar crime of Pakistanis .... This scapegoating just increases racism, while doing nothing to help victims" (August 11).

It seems the Socialist Workers Party has nothing to say on youth rights, nor on patriarchal abusive practices. It pretends there is nothing "peculiar" about honour killings requiring specific answers. Unlike *Socialist Worker* we communists insist on the rights of young people - of whatever nationality, ethnicity or religion. Young adults, women in particular, must be *empowered* as autonomous individuals. Communists fight for a situation where people aged over 16 *automatically* receive an adequate income of some description and hence have the means to leave home if they so wish - not remained trapped in a state of dependency upon their parents (or anyone else). Armed with such a basic right, young women will no longer be ruled over by oppressive fathers, uncles or brothers ●

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**From the CPGB Draft programme, section 3.13 ('Youth and education')**

- Provision of housing/hostels for youth to enter of their own choice for longer or shorter periods when they lose their parents or choose to leave them.
- The right of every young person on leaving education to a job, proper technical training or full benefits.
- Remove all obstacles to the participation of youth in social life. Votes and the right to be elected from the age of 16.
- The provision of a broad range of sports and cultural centres under the control of representatives elected by youth.
- Abolish age-of-consent laws. We recognise the right of individuals to enter into the sexual relations they choose, provided this does not conflict with the rights of others. Alternative legislation to protect children from sexual abuse.
- The extensive provision of education and counselling facilities on all sexual matters, free from moralistic judgement, is an essential prerequisite to enable youth to develop themselves in all areas of sexuality and reproduction.

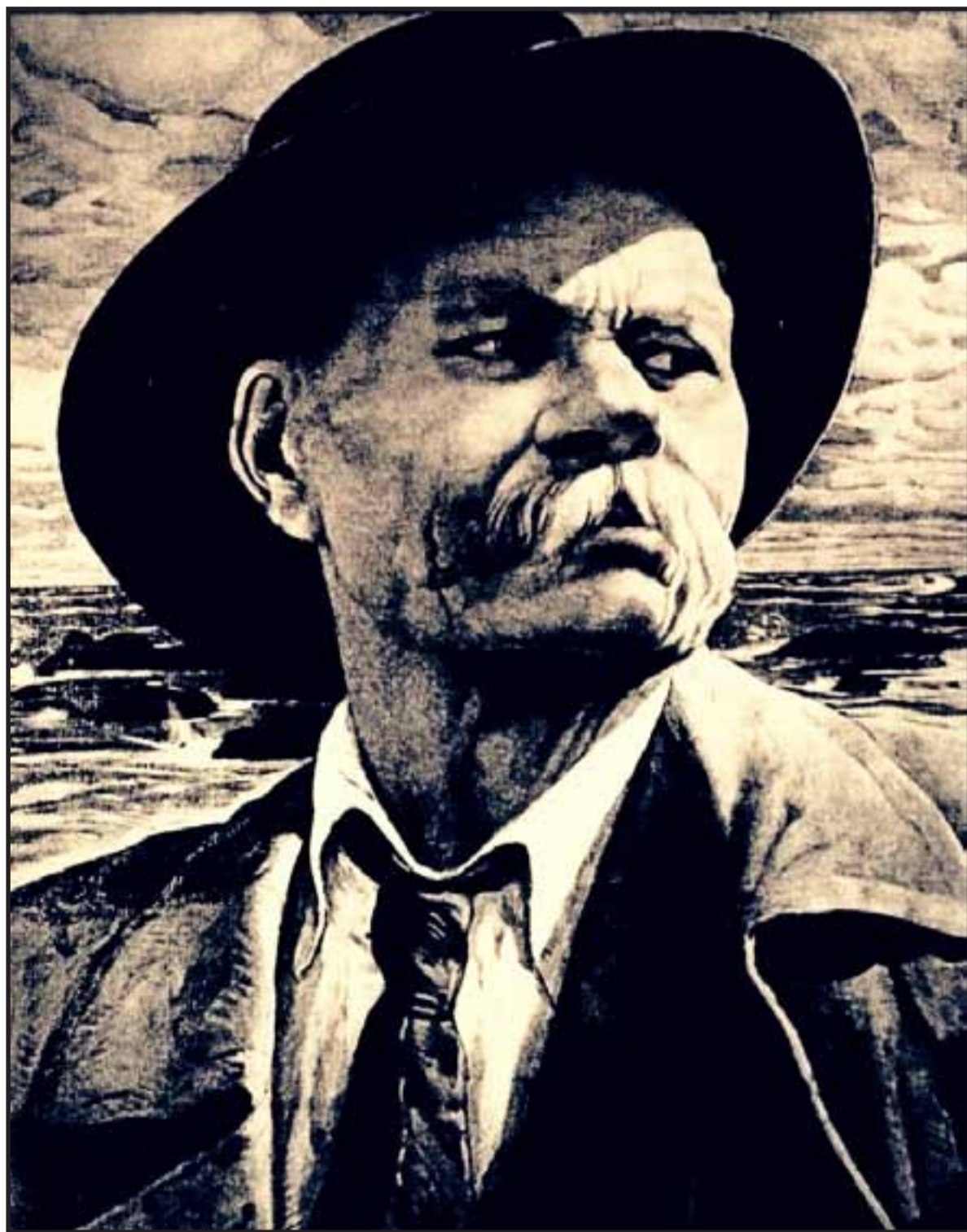


Woman are being killed

## REVIEW

# Artistic engagement

Philip Bounds **British communism and the politics of literature 1928-1939** Merlin, 2012, pp322, £18.95



**Maxim Gorky: engineer of the soul**

It has been quite a long time since a book has given me such unalloyed pleasure as this one. This study of the CPGB and literature by Philip Bounds, a member of the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain, is a superb piece of research. It is also excellent that the theoretical implications of writers such as Christopher Caudwell, Alick West and Ralph Fox are fully explored, as opposed to merely having a label plonked on them (although the literature on the so-called 'English Marxism' of the 1930s is steadily growing).

The key to this book's success, I think, is its dialectical presentation. The influence of Soviet cultural theory of the 1930s is sketched not through an abstract, reductive encounter between two fixed poles (which usually has a strong element of anti-CPGB moralising), but working out, through a precise analysis of a particular writer's intellectual labour, where that influence was most marked and where such work started to escape the bounds of that influence and move beyond it.

Alick West produced a work of literary theory in 1937 entitled *Crisis*

and criticism. Bounds characterises this book as "extending the insights of Soviet theory in innovative directions, but rarely seeking to challenge them" (p115). However, other parts of West's *oeuvre* pushed him into a critical confrontation with the 'official communist' movement's popular front strategy of the period. West was unhappy (as recorded in his beautiful 1969 memoir, *One man in his time*) with the practical subordination of communist politics to the tasks of defending 'bourgeois democracy', which led him to take a tougher ideological stance against the likes of 'progressive' Christians, the Auden circle and other leftwing writers (in the pages of journals such as *Left Review*), when the major tone of CPGB politics was to blur obvious demarcations in the cause of 'unity'.

Similarly, in relation to the party's adoption of the *British road to socialism* (1951), "there were many British communists who feared that an intermediate programme of left-Keynesian reforms ... represented the height of the CPGB's ambitions" (p127). West interpreted this in predominantly cultural terms, arguing that 'official communists' were merely

interested in culture as an *instrument* to achieve something else, rather than seeing it as an end in itself - what West called the "heightening of human life" (p128) under communism. Bounds asserts, however, that West was a "cautious dissident" and the parallels with the career of Georg Lukács are obvious, albeit on a less dramatic scale.

Part of the issue with some of this theory, and of the reasons why it is of limited practical use, is its conservative anthropological thrust. Some of this was embodied at the Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934, where the likes of Maxim Gorky, in an attempt to harness the expression of the policy of socialist realism to the dubious ideological needs of Soviet 'planning', argued that the primary function of myth among primitive societies "was to express a plebeian yearning for the domination of nature" (pp71-72). The likes of West and Christopher Caudwell extended and embroidered this argument. West used various pieces of anthropological data to suggest that language and poetry had their origins in the economic activity of primitive societies; while Caudwell, in *Illusion and reality*

(1937), argued that poetry, "far from reflecting the private moods of the isolated individual ... was originally a collective form which functioned as a stimulus to hunting or agriculture" (p168 - although Caudwell grouped this with a highly unorthodox emphasis on the instinctual elements in poetry).

The problem with these highly impressionistic, speculative accounts is, to paraphrase Raymond Williams, they were not specific enough to even be wrong. But this masks a deeper critique that they functioned primarily as a source of *historical consolation* to the improbabilities of Soviet orthodoxy in the 1930s, which itself was an attempt to grapple with the deep-seated chaos and irrationality of the Soviet Union. This function has carried through to the current day, where all manner of impressionistic anthropological theories are fielded as a buffer to contemporary life; and quaint theories of 'what it means to be human' are seemingly employed as metaphysical blunderbusses against a crushing sense of disappointment with modern life.

Crass and simplistic as the theory of socialist realism was, the rather obvious point that arises from this book is that it galvanised the work of literary theorists in the CPGB; it did not end a debate, but started one that, ultimately, became problematic for the party.

This leads me on to the final point that I wish to make in this short review: there should not be a problem with a Marxist political organisation having a clear preference for certain types of cultural practice, with a roughly corresponding theory (given that the nature of such theory may be to question that ordering of priority); the problem tends to arise when the implementation of that view moves in a bureaucratic and sectarian fashion. Further, the example of the CPGB's latter years would appear to show that when an organisation declines such a preference, then its ability to galvanise artists and theorists disintegrates in a commensurate fashion.

In 1950-51, CPGB intellectuals were engaged in the 'Caudwell discussion' (openly published in the pages of *The Modern Quarterly*), where philosopher Maurice Cornforth declaimed that Caudwell's work had an 'idealist' bent. Bounds correctly locates this controversy in a struggle then underway between CPGB cultural activists and 'Zhdanovist' "machine politicians" on the party's national cultural committee

(p129). He argues that "Cornforth was perceived as the voice of party authority whose demolition of Caudwell was effectively a warning to party 'creatives' that they should follow the NCC line" (*ibid*). Bounds is right to point out the undermining effect of such pantomimes on the cultural work of the CPGB in the post-war period (p128). However, the problem with Cornforth (and allies such as Emile Burns and Sam Aaronovitch) was not his preference for this or that 'orthodoxy', but the sectarian and bureaucratic manner in which those views were orchestrated. Actually, Cornforth's frothing critique was met with further debate, as more than 20 of Caudwell's admirers (including Alick West) jumped into the pages of *The Modern Quarterly* to defend their man.

Compare this to the rather sad state of affairs after the CPGB had issued 'Questions of Ideology and Culture', a statement from its executive committee in 1967. It said: "... the Communist Party, during the fight for and under socialism, does not see its task as being to direct what should be written, painted or composed - either in terms of subject or of style; it does not see its role as laying down laws governing literary and artistic creation." As critics duly noted, this was the CPGB paying penance for the era of Zhdanovism and a clumsy attempt to recreate the era of popular frontism. But what was unique about this era, as alluded to above, was that CPGB writers were being given the space to engage with 'bourgeois' art *alongside* a specific aesthetic outlook and direction in the form of socialist realism. While I am a protagonist of neither, it is a point of fact that this did provoke an engagement from CPGB artists and writers.

'Questions of Ideology and Culture' provoked the opposite state of affairs. In 1972, Betty Reid drew up a report on the CPGB's specialist groups (which included those working in the artistic sphere) for the political committee. Of the statement she admitted: "Many of the most active people are totally in disagreement with it". Judging from the rest of the report, 'Questions of Ideology and Culture' (a collection of essentially empty platitudes), after an initial burst of criticism in the pages of *Marxism Today*, had merely led to a widespread disengagement on the part of artists and writers ●

**Lawrence Parker**

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## OBITUARY

# Consciously political

Gore Vidal, 1925-2012

**"Is Howard R Hughes the most boring American? Admittedly, the field is large: over 200 million of us are in competition" - Gore Vidal *The New York Review of Books* 1972**

If you had a mind to create an ideal hate-figure for the hard right in America, you might well come up with someone like Gore Vidal: liberal, witty, bisexual and East Coast. International enough to live in Italy, but earning his bread and wine by books about his country of origin; insider enough to tell you what the Kennedys were really like; and distanced enough to distinguish which topics were distractions and which crucial; a patrician satirist writing novels, plays, films and essays, frequently appearing on TV and radio to poke fun at every clod, from reactionary politician to conservative writer, and, for this correspondent at least, a trusted guide to the US - its shameless right and timid left - these last 40 years.

Gore Vidal was born a political insider. In 2007 he said: "I've been around the ruling class all my life and I've been quite aware of their total contempt for the people of this country."<sup>1</sup> Born in 1925 at West Point military academy, son of Eugene Vidal, the academy's first aeronautics instructor, and Nina Gore, who had appeared on Broadway and was later a delegate to the 1940 Democrat convention (Vidal's grandfather, Thomas Gore, was Democratic senator for Oklahoma). His father, to whom he was close, went on to become general manager of the first transcontinental airline, which eventually became TWA.

At the height of the depression, the young Vidal lived in a house with white servants - "a sign of wealth unique for Washington in those years".<sup>2</sup> In World War II he served as first mate of an army freight-supply ship and in 1946 wrote his first novel *Williwaw*. His third novel, *The city and the pillar* (1948), was notorious for its story of two gay athletes (and reminiscent of the film *Brokeback mountain*). Undeterred by the hostile reaction, Vidal went on to write more novels,

as well as plays like *The best man* (1960) - later made into a film with Henry Fonda. In this, two candidates for the presidential nomination of an unspecified party cancel each other out, leaving the field open for what both consider a third-place mediocrity to have a crack at the most powerful post on earth.

In 1960 Vidal entered electoral politics himself - he stood as an "unconventional Democrat" for New York state's 29th District. In this safe Republican seat, he polled 20,000 votes. He got to know another young candidate that year, John Kennedy, as Vidal shared a stepfather with Jackie. As can be seen, he was very much involved with the Democratic Party, but not above aiming his wit at its leaders: Lyndon Johnson was the "great Khan"<sup>3</sup> and the Clintons "lawyers from the moderately well-off middle class ... with little knowledge of how the ruling class operates."<sup>4</sup> He did not even spare Franklin Roosevelt, closest to his liberal politics, whose sanctions against Japan, Vidal argues, provoked Pearl Harbour.

Vidal's later novels are either historical or social satire, showing a particular interest in the role of religion (as in *Messiah*). His novels, *Washington DC* (1967), *Burr*

(1974) and the bestseller *Lincoln* (1984), explore the submerging of a federal isolationist confederation into a state striving for empire (or "new frontiers").

Some of Vidal's last remarks - made in a video interview on [www.therealnews.com](http://www.therealnews.com) - specify Abe Lincoln, the imperial president, as the model for a constitutional dictatorship which could be looming over current conditions of bankruptcy and depression. It was Lincoln who declared that the confederacy had no right to leave the union (regardless of the slavery issue) and so, as he had the right as president to "defend the constitution", he could proclaim martial law.

"When I was a boy, I lived in somewhere called the United States," Vidal has said - not in a fascist-sounding "homeland".<sup>5</sup> He has suggested culprits for this change of state, like the federal expansion in World War II. But, as Hegel remarked, the "limitations of the finite do not merely come from without; that its own nature is the cause of its abrogation, and that by its own act it passes into its counterpart".<sup>6</sup> It is in his US historical novels that Vidal shows the corruption has been a long time growing.

He has also written a wide range of other fiction, including the gender-satire *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), the new-religion satire *Kalki* (1978) and the shamefully ignored *Julien* (1964) on the clash of paganism and Christianity. He was as interested in movies as books, having worked on screenplays like *Ben-Hur* (1959) and *Caligula* (1979).

## Sex is politics

As well as profiling writers and politicians (and even examining French literary theory as early as 1967), Vidal's essays have consistently dealt with sexual obsession: that is, the obsession of quite a few Americans with what is the 'right sort' of love-making. Whether reviewing popular novels, sex advice books or the campaigns of the religious right (Save the family!), Vidal has always argued that, as the title of one of his most famous pieces puts it, 'Sex is politics': "Although our notions about what constitutes correct sexual behaviour are usually based on religious texts, those are invariably interpreted by the rulers in order to keep control over the ruled."<sup>8</sup> He was fond too of arguing that most human beings are bisexual and used references to classical texts like *The twelve Caesars* by Suetonius to show that nobody then worried who you did it with: just how.

Later in the same essay, he avows that sexual correctitude is not the only way to keep voters excited about the wrong things. There is also the hot issue of the (costly) criminalisation of narcotics: "It is good politics to talk against sin - and don't worry about non-sequiturs. In fact it is positively un-American - even communist - to discuss a real issue such as unemployment or who is stealing all that money at Pentagon."<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the right does get round to talking about money too, especially taxation. Vidal, and the PR people he is quoting, refer to all these as 'hot buttons'. In this code, 'welfare' means poor people, mostly of colour, while 'elitist' means the liberals in Washington: the elitists are taking your money and using it for welfare. On this peak in human philosophy the Republican Party has built an alliance of working class whites and the business class. The Democrats' response, as Vidal too

acknowledged - in writing about Jimmy Carter, for example - was to assert just how 'responsible' they were. As Vidal himself famously put it, the US doesn't have two main parties, but one - the Property Party, with its two right wings, Republican and Democrat.

For Vidal, the culture wars were always part of the politics war. He was proud to refer to ideas from Kate Millett, Eve Figs and Germaine Greer to show how the attitudes to women of writers like Norman Mailer and Henry Miller dovetail nicely with the making of war and the bossing around of people: "Figs feels a change in the economic system will free women (and men) from unwanted roles. I have another idea. Free the sexes first and the system will have to change. There will be no housewife to be conned into buying things she does not need."<sup>9</sup>

Of course, history came up with a new trick: publicise shopping as liberation (not compensation) and ban sexist and racist banter in the boardroom, but not all varieties of discrimination, and underpayment, in the job market. Through the scented mists of confusion the point is now plain: the struggles for sexual and social liberation are indivisible.

Some of the techniques Vidal mentioned have a habit of showing up in Britain. Like accusations of elitism and the worship of invigorating privatisation. They sometimes sound silly, though, in their Tory context: private care homes do not have the best of reputations, while the accusation of elitism can sound ridiculous once you register that it is usually being made by one Oxbridge graduate against another. But the main weapon is fear. Defenders of capitalism do not have much to say for themselves, except that you won't be better off with the other lot: the extreme Muslims, the puritanical politically correct, the unreconstructed admirers of Mao and Stalin (whoever they are).

In the 60s Vidal became preoccupied with 'overpopulation' and debated the idea of setting up an "authority" to command birth control.<sup>10</sup> Later he suggested that 'we' should call a new constitutional convention - rejigging the articles being a radical proposal in a nation where everybody from martial presidents to Midwest terrorists claims to be defending that 18th century document.

## Moralities

In his last years, Vidal continued to write and talk, often in memoir form, but also in TV lectures and web interviews, about how even farther he thought the States had fallen. His tone was often more world-weary than scathing - even desperate. Understandable enough in the face of so much recent mass destruction, which others who thought him "loco" (like Christopher Hitchens<sup>11</sup>) considered a necessary part of the west's



Gore Vidal: from the ruling class

‘interventions’.

Maybe his mood wasn’t helped when in November 2003 his long-term partner, Howard Auster, died, leaving him with “the blankness of familiar rooms, lacking their usual occupant”.<sup>12</sup> By this time, however, Vidal had sold his home in Italy and had been living permanently in Los Angeles. It was here, in the Hollywood Hills, that he died from complications of pneumonia on July 31 2012.

His best political pieces were on the Kennedys,<sup>13</sup> the Reagans,<sup>14</sup> ‘Paranoid politics’<sup>15</sup> and *The American presidency*.<sup>16</sup> These sparkling, but firm essays mixed anecdotes and ‘insider gossip’ with an overview of why office-holders are smart not to act clever: rather, a code is used (see above) and familiar notions invoked. When was ‘Yes, we can’ (B Obama) not an American sentiment? Though Vidal did show interest in conspiracy theories surrounding the Twin Towers (and plotting before Pearl Harbour), he concluded in 2007 that the Bushites “could never have pulled off 9/11, even if they wanted to.”<sup>16</sup> Nor was he afraid to call Christian evangelists Anti-Semites or New York intellectuals Zionists.<sup>17</sup>

In his last volume of memoirs, Vidal was sure that war-making for profit had not ended with Iraq: “Now we are creating air bases in central Asia to seize Iranian oil reserves? Or, more dangerously, to take on China *en route* to North Korea or vice versa?”<sup>18</sup>

He often seemed to refer to a golden age: “I am a lover of the old republic and deeply resent the empire our presidents put in its place.”<sup>19</sup> He used many names for what he detested: the “Bushites”, the “national security state”, “the Bank”. Each president was “that loyal retainer of the Chase Manhattan Bank.”<sup>20</sup> In the 70s he could sense some broad dissatisfaction in the audiences he spoke to: “Lowly consumer-depositors now speak of a national ‘crisis of confidence.’ The ordinarily docile media have even revealed a few tips of the iceberg - no glacier - that covers with corruption our body politic. Now the masters of our third republic are striking back.”<sup>21</sup> Namely, as Vidal then outlines, by increasing the powers of the CIA and FBI - long before 9/11.

“Meanwhile,” Vidal concludes, “a new constitutional convention is in order. The rights guaranteed by the founders of the old constitution should be reinforced; the presidential form of government should be exchanged for a more democratic parliamentary system ...”<sup>22</sup> Of course, “those conservatives known as liberals have found this notion terrifying, because they are convinced that the powers of darkness will see to it that the Bill of Rights is abolished.”<sup>23</sup>

The argument for rights, though, has been won: it is just that sometimes they are confused with entitlements (exclusions being immigrants or ‘enemy combatants’). But the morality of treating people as ends, of basic equality and respect, is now supposed to be sovereign. After all, who approves of exploiting children? Violations of this principle therefore have to be justified, as in war, and any exemptions, even made in the name of ‘economic efficiency’, are open to challenge more than ever before. The point then is to insist on generalising this morality of ends - of rights, love and respect, even to the economy. It is the only universal and respectable way of arranging things (however ignored in actuality).

Society already depends on non-exploitative relationships (caring for children, for example), which is why conservatives of the *Daily Mail* type fear that women might become merely paid workers and not do their ‘second shift’ of caring for dependents. They are right - society would collapse if we did not have unpaid, caring (non-exploitative, non-‘economic’) relationships, but it is just that we have to arrange them more equally. The tendency of capitalism is against this: exploitation rules, but the alternative is not a return to a ‘golden age’, even in an isolated republic. Throughout the ages, cooperation was always threatened by alienation and it was a constant struggle to find a better arrangement, sometimes

by force, in desperation and tragedy, but sometimes winning gains - liberties and benefits, which even now are under threat in the name of ‘security’ and ‘austerity’.

In the end what we can praise about Gore Vidal is that he wanted to discuss such arrangements - moralities of sex, art and administration. He observed, criticised, informed. He subjected his community to conscious examination. As the young Marx observed, unlike other animals, the human being “makes life activity itself the object of will and consciousness. He has conscious life activity.”<sup>24</sup>

Gore Vidal was a consciously political animal, in the broadest sense ●

Mike Belbin

## Notes

1. ‘Gore Vidal on the media’: [www.therealnews.com](http://www.therealnews.com).
2. G Vidal *Point to point navigation: a memoir* London 2006, p21.
3. G Vidal, ‘Paranoid politics’ *Collected essays* London 1974, p267.
4. p76.
5. ‘Gore Vidal on the media’: [www.therealnews.com](http://www.therealnews.com).

6. GWF Hegel, ‘Logic defined and divided’ *Logic*.
7. G Vidal, ‘Sex is politics’ *Pink triangle and yellow star, and other essays* London 1983, p190.
8. *Ibid* p191.
9. G Vidal, ‘Women’s liberation meets Miller-Mailer-Manson man’ (1971) *Collected essays* London 1974, p402.
10. G Vidal, ‘Manifesto and dialogue’ (1968) *Collected essays*.
11. C Hitchens, ‘Vidal Loco’ *Arguably* London 2011.
12. G Vidal *Point to point navigation: a memoir* London 2006, p75.
13. G Vidal, ‘The holy family’ *Collected essays* London 1974.
14. G Vidal, ‘Ronnie and Nancy: a life in pictures’ *Armageddon?* London 1989.
15. G Vidal, ‘Paranoid politics’ *Collected essays* London 1974.
16. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gore\\_Vidal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gore_Vidal).
17. G Vidal, ‘Pink triangle and yellow star’ *Pink triangle and yellow star, and other essays* London 1983; ‘A cheerful response’ *Armageddon?* London 1989.
18. G Vidal *Point to point navigation: a memoir* London 2006, p160.
19. G Vidal *The American presidency* Boston 1998, p87.
20. G Vidal, ‘The state of the union revisited’ (1980) *Pink triangle and yellow star, and other essays* London 1983, p284.
21. *Ibid* p302.
22. *Ibid* p305.
23. *Ibid* p291.
24. K Marx *Economic and political manuscripts* Moscow 1977, p73.

## Summer Offensive

# Above our weight

In last week’s column, I put out a “special call for support” to address a cash flow problem in this year’s Summer Offensive, our annual fundraising drive. I estimated that we needed £3k in hand by Monday August 6 to enable us to square up to some “rather large, ominously looming bills”. Well, we didn’t make the full target for this mini-campaign within our overall two-month period of financial work. Some £1,200 was hurried in to us by the deadline which, combined with some imaginative financial plate-spinning, was just enough to keep the wolf from the door before we finished with a total of £2,563 for the week. (In fact, if financial plate-spinning were an Olympic sport, ‘Team CPGB’ would by now be weighed down with tacky glitter ...).

Special mentions go out to the comrades who were prompted by this call to come forward with their payments for attendance at this year’s Communist University, our annual school that runs for seven days from August 20 in south London (the full agenda for the event is on our website - just click the CU banner at the top of the home page and follow the link through to the timetable). In particular comrades LC, JC and PBS, who, as an act of solidarity, coughed up their fees promptly despite not actually being members of our organisation - many thanks to them. And particularly to PBS, who added a small donation onto his CU payment and resub to the paper - exactly the sort of approach we are looking for, comrade.

Also, comrade JPC who told us that her ‘guilt’ had spurred her to send us £30 via our website’s PayPal facility - she reads the paper online every week, but does not donate with anything like the same regularity. Well, *absolvo te* comrade - consider your donation the Marxist equivalent of 30 Hail Marys. If only more of those online readers who have sinned as you have (9,632 last week alone, our webs stats facility tells us) would repent with some cash, we could fight the good fight with a little more vigour. Seriously, many thanks, comrade.

Readers - whether of the print edition or online - will be amused by some idiotic red-baiting our organisation is attracting at the moment. Comrades will have read of the parallel splits that played themselves out in the Labour Representation Committee and the *Labour Briefing* magazine at the latter’s AGM on July 7 around a motion (successfully carried) that *LB* should “become the magazine of

the LRC”. I won’t go into the details of this spat (comrades can follow the reportage of Stan Keable of Labour Party Marxists to get the back story - see *Weekly Worker* July 5, July 12 and also the LPM website). What is truly odd is the approach taken by comrade Christine Shawcroft - a member of the Labour Party’s national executive committee and an opponent of the ‘merger’.

If you follow the ‘Real Labour Briefing’ button on her personal site you will be presented with just one article. The bitter opening paragraph of this reads:

“On Saturday July 7, members of the LRC - aided by members of the Communist Party of Great Britain, which produces the *Weekly Worker* - attended the AGM of Labour Briefing and forced through a vote to close down Labour Briefing after 32 years of publication. The LRC now intends to launch its own ‘house journal’, using the same name - *Labour Briefing*” ([www.christineshawcroft.co.uk](http://www.christineshawcroft.co.uk)).

Actually, ‘CPGB’ and ‘*Weekly Worker*’ are simply scare words that today’s degenerate left - inside and outside the Labour Party - deploy to discredit arguments for openness, democracy and adherence to working class principle. Comrade Shawcroft is *actually* of the opinion that our brand of politics is truly bizarre and capable only of repelling working class people (ironically, an attitude she shares with the leaders of the left groups outside the Labour Party she is on record as professing utter contempt for).

And yet these ideas - though still championed in this country by our communist collective that I wrote candidly of last week as “extremely fragile in terms of core personnel and resources, especially its financial resources” - punch way, way above its weight by dint of the simple fact that they are *true*. They are vital prerequisites for the workers’ movement to begin the long process of reconstituting itself as a viable challenge to capitalism.

That’s the inspiring task that every penny donated to the SO 2012 will feed into. The £2,563 donated this week brings our total up to just shy of £15,000. Another £10k by August 26, comrades! ●

Mark Fischer

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

# 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 readied 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.**

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# weekly worker

## All-time low in strike action

# Where's the action?

The Tory-Lib Dem government has not produced a spike in industrial action, notes **Paul Demarty**. So what should be made of the left's strike fetishism?

**T**wo and a bit years in, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government has panned out more or less as expected. One or two diplomatic wobbles between the partners have not ever spilled out into open discord; the business of the state has carried on more or less unobstructed.

The ruling class left us in little doubt as to what that business was back in 2010. The nation was overdue on its credit card payments - the incoming administration had to rein in spending radically. The state, considered absurdly as a narrow quantitative measure, had to be shrunk. We would all suffer, yes - but sometimes, the pinch of a tightened belt is preferable to the alternative.

We are all the victims of this programme - anyone who relies on any basic public services, or conceivably could in the future, will suffer from the mangling of such services in due course. More immediately in the frame, however, are the millions of workers in the public sector - not to mention all those in the private sector who face further attacks on their own basic conditions and living standards, under the watch of a government pathetically desperate to prove to the City and the Confederation of British Industry its intent to destroy what remains of the 'red tape' supposedly dooming Britain to mediocrity.

So, one is entitled to ask, where is the industrial action? Strikes over public sector pensions, peaking with the reasonably impressive November 30 day of action last year, have attracted a good deal of attention, and taken very significant contingents of workers into action. Yet November 30 was, precisely, a peak - we saw the government looking very worried in the run-up, and then the trade union bureaucracy falling over itself to sell the struggle short for a few miserable concessions.

The *Financial Times* reports that 2010 saw the least days lost to strikes since records began - the Office for National Statistics keeps them back to 1931.<sup>1</sup> The ONS itself records that 1,388,000 strike days were lost in 2011 - no fewer than 1,269,000 of them resulting from the two public sector 24-hour protests in June and November. Compare that to 30 or 40 years ago, however. In 1985, for example, there were over six million strike days lost, while in 1972 the figure was just short of 24 million. So far 2012 has been a pretty quiet year - 112,000-odd days lost in May, and not much else to speak of, is hardly indicative of a great upturn in industrial struggle. Over the last couple of years, there has been a close correlation between days lost and numbers of workers out - suggesting that most stoppages are either brief or isolated.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the far left seems ever more wedded to a single strategic idea, which is - broadly speaking - escalating the scale and scope of industrial action. That there are many competing



What about the politics?

versions of this idea obscures, but does not deny, its underlying unity.

The Socialist Party in England and Wales seeks to build its forces in the broad lefts and official positions of the union bureaucracy, to prod the union machines into calling actions and hoping ultimately to win their support for a new 'workers' party' (read: Labour Party mark two). Smaller, nominally more leftwing groups, call instead for a new rank-and-file movement to build a network of union militants actually prepared to take action. The Socialist Workers Party, which seems over the last year to have reached a new pitch of disorientation and confusion, lurches from one pole to the other - horse-trading in the broad lefts one day, and calling *de facto* for an indefinite general strike the next.

The point of unity between the two perspectives is simple: both take it as read that the fundamental obstacle to effective working class politics is that the masses are not in motion. It is necessary to get people into action - whether through collecting union posts or leading from below - to break the deadlock. Once the masses move, the ground opens up beneath bourgeois rule, and the unthinkable becomes thinkable.

All this remains purely notional at the present time. The trade unions have not been stirred into a long-term industrial battle against the government; they continue to tip-toe

around the anti-union laws like mice on a floor littered with traps; and, despite all the calls in the world for rank-and-file coordination (and, in the case of the SWP's Unite The Resistance and SPEW's National Shop Stewards Network, attempts to wish one into existence), the initiative remains with the union tops ... who have never been known for their speed and decisiveness in calling out their members.

The problem with this dilemma is simply that it is a false one: the fundamental divide is not between 'realistic', broad left horse-trading and 'principled' rank-and-fileism, but rather between apolitical trade unionism and *working class political action*.

The strategy of slowly but steadily taking over the unions, on the basis of being the 'best fighters' - ie, the militants most committed to successful industrial action - hits a serious historical limit: part of the job of the capitalist state is to intervene in the workers' movement, rendering its practice less threatening to capital. There thus arise political and juridical obstacles to trade union militancy, around which the union bureaucracies have to work.

The obvious example is the steady extension of anti-union laws. To any union official, leftwing or rightwing, on the whole it seems like a good idea to avoid having the union's funds sequestered. Yet there are more insidious threats too: the increasing

juridification of industrial disputes, which are now far less frequently settled through worker militancy than various sorts of tribunals and inquiries, is in fact one of the most effective attacks on the working class in recent memory - partly because it does not appear as an attack.

The bottom line is the same: the union bureaucracy becomes ever more bureaucratic; which is to say, becomes more empowered through its monopoly on 'technical' *savoir faire*. It requires people who are prepared to play by an ever more labyrinthine set of rules, and thus breeds legalists. What starts out simply as an obstruction ends up positively shaping the labour movement.

As for left rank-and-fileism, the same problem presents itself in a different way. From this perspective, it *appears* that the bureaucratisation of the trade unions and official workers' organisations manifests itself in routinism and timidity; and so the obvious answer is to unleash the spontaneous energy of the rank and file. Yet the institutional power of the bureaucrats rests in the last instance not on a dynamic endogenous to the workers' movement, but on its relationship with the state - about which our lefts have nothing much to say.

This process of incorporation into official politics is not as new as has been suggested above: indeed, prototypical forms (mostly concerning the avoidance of union organisation at all) are as old as the capital-labour contradiction itself. It thus forms an *absolute limit* to 'pure' (ie, apolitical) trade unionism - both in its rightwing and leftwing forms. In order to break through that limit, political action is needed, and a serious political strategy.

Sustained militant action in contravention of some anti-union law may render that law a dead letter - but only if the workers coming out have been convinced that this is a

law worth breaking (and breaking for good). That, in the face of an actual dispute, is a relatively easy argument to make. Indeed, it is not too hard to imagine anti-union laws becoming so restrictive that they simply become unenforceable.

What is *more* difficult is to link the proscriptions to their complement - the *positive* legalisation of industrial disputes. On this apparently technical matter, all manner of questions turn: it issues ultimately from the innumerable ties of the state machine, which invariably presents itself as a neutral arbiter over all of society, to the ruling class and its objective interests. Forget this strike, that strike or the other strike - the fight for effective trade unionism, *a fortiori* with the movement in its present condition of decrepitude, already includes a *political* fight to delegitimise the bourgeois state order.

No communist, if they wished to be taken seriously, would sniff at an exemplary industrial action which brought out serious numbers - no matter how politically bankrupt its leadership, or limited its goals - still less an industrial confrontation of major strategic significance. Rank-and-file organisation, equally, is a crucial means for rebuilding at the base the essential defensive organisations of the working class - not just trade unions, but cooperatives, credit unions, educational societies and so on - that have degenerated into bureaucratic inertia.

The problem with the standard left approaches to trade unions is rather that industrial action is not (as it should be) enriched by the broad strategic vision of Marxist politics, but rather comes to replace the latter as the alpha and omega of political work ●

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## Notes

1. *Financial Times* August 3.
2. [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/re/lms/labour-market-statistics/july-2012/table-lab01.xls](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/re/lms/labour-market-statistics/july-2012/table-lab01.xls).

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