



weekly worker

Eric Gill's Prospero and Ariel vandalised yet again. Mike Macnair examines the politics of attacking soft targets

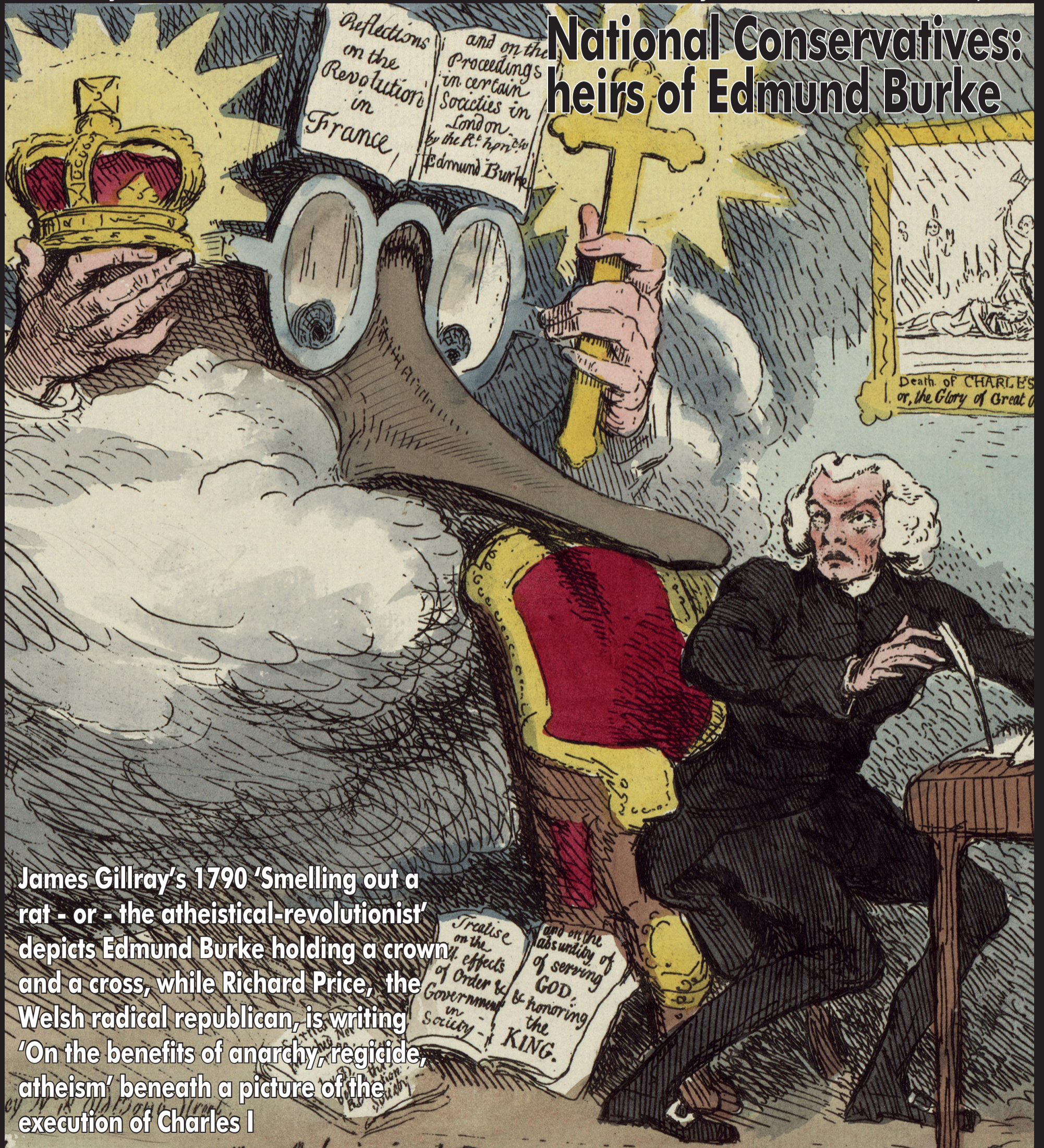
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Towards a mass Communist Party

£1/€1.10

National Conservatives: heirs of Edmund Burke



James Gillray's 1790 'Smelling out a rat - or - the atheistical-revolutionist' depicts Edmund Burke holding a crown and a cross, while Richard Price, the Welsh radical republican, is writing 'On the benefits of anarchy, regicide, atheism' beneath a picture of the execution of Charles I

LETTERS



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

Finance whip

Arthur Bough's explanation of the current inflation issue is bizarre in the extreme (Letters, May 18). Instead of analysing the concrete events, recent history and empirical data, he resorts to the textbooks of a 19th century economist, whom he distorts completely, and then applies that distortion to concrete events in the here and now. As if Marx had a final and permanent theory of inflation to apply here, there and everywhere and to all points in time.

Not once in his explanation of the current inflation did Bough mention the demented proxy war against Russia and the bizarre and futile strategy of curtailing China! China is a nation of 1.4 billion highly industrious people, whose society is led by the Communist Party applying logic and directed planning - as well as being ruthless in its exploitation of Mother Earth and Father Labour. A nation that applies for more patents than the entire imperialist centre combined, and that regularly wins the maths and science Olympiads, and who lead the world in green technology. I could most definitely go on!

The fact they are so deluded to think this is a winnable strategy just shows the desperation of the empire to hold onto its hegemony. And the client states hold on for dear life.

So once again Bough is wrong. Current inflation is being caused by the west's demented attempts to manage its relative decline, its demented woke ideology, its demented sanctions regime and its demented proxy wars. Of course, this being the capitalist epoch, the masters and rulers of the world use monetary and financial instruments to crack the whip. They do this because, short of the actual whip, this is all they have - well, that and ideology.

As an aside, the growth in asset prices is not primarily the result of inflation, as Bough presents it. For example, in the stock market, most of the growth in the last 40 years has been as a result of financialisation and not inflation - ie, the transfer of capital and money from bank deposits and the like into stocks and shares and financial instruments. This explains the history of banking and global institutions for the last half-century.

To illustrate for simplicity, if you were to move £100 from your bank account and into shares, this would count as growth, even though it is existing money. And if you were to then add in another £100 from your bank account the following year, this would be seen as 100% growth year on year, even though it is all existing revenue! This explains the majority of so-called asset inflation Bough talks about. It is a derivative.

We are currently in a grand and epic battle of historic significance, where the 'oppressed' nations are throwing off the masters' finance whip, and are attempting to replace it with their own financial regime. Notice they are unable to get rid of the whip, as no nation has ever succeeded in doing that - not even the Soviet era managed it. Nowhere near. But this is currently where the class struggle resides and will reside for years to come.

I have long argued that what we

are seeing now is the first phase of a prolonged war - but not one that is ultimately between the empire and its rivals, but is instead a war against the masses at the imperialist centre, who are being softened up for immiseration.

For the moment we are in phase one, which is primarily aimed at the rivals, but already the precursors for phase two are emerging via woke ideology, with its zero tolerance of criticism and its assertion of irrationalism, and the construction of a degrowth police state.

When phase two arrives in earnest, the war will well and truly be brought home. Maybe at that point the communists at the imperialist centre will finally wake up and smell the Kool Aid?

Steve Cousins
email

Lynching rights

Dan Lazare's article on the killing of Jordan Neely is shameful ('Blame the system itself', May 11). In his effort at a contrarian take, Lazare manages to offer a confused position of self-defence absolutism.

In fact, Jordan Neely's killing is fraught with the long history of lynching in the United States, and inextricably bound up with the longstanding threat of vigilante violence from the political right. By eliding these features, Lazare appears to defend Neely's death - 'blaming the system', but overlooking just these key features of that system. By defending Daniel Penny against demands for prosecution, while staying silent on the lynch-like features of his killing of Neely, Lazare winds up defending the right to kill under similar circumstances. This is unacceptable. Socialists must be the most ardent and reliable supporters of democracy and resistance to the vigilante violence of the right.

The event has been a sort of Rorschach test. Across the press, politicians see crystallised their cherished issues. Cynical liberalism sees an opportunity to promote its divide-and-rule identity politics, which became its official programme in 2016. The right sees one more in a long line of violent crime justifying the virtuous, property-holding citizen's vigilance - attack, destroy, root out evil directly. Lazare's pathology is manifest upon his response to the stimulus: 'Dangerous! Neely was dangerous! Penny was justified!' Any other response is a violation of socialist principle! This places him in the latter camp.

Lazare hand-waves about due process and the presumption of innocence, but neither of these issues are remotely in play with respect to Penny. Contra Lazare's implications, Penny is not threatened with a violation of any rights to which socialists assign primary importance. Penny was questioned by the police at the station and released. No mention is made by Lazare of the police infringing on Penny's fourth, fifth or sixth-amendment rights. He is not in need of defence, as he has counsel. No socialist principles were violated there.

Instead, what Lazare complains about are the cries that prosecutorial discretion should not be exercised to favour vigilante violence. Presumably, Lazare thinks that, even if Penny was lawfully deprived of his liberty by being sentenced to a prison term after a trial, it would still be unjust. What Lazare can't explain is why socialists should accept an act of extrajudicial

violence in these circumstances. Rather, Lazare retreats into making an absolute form of self-defence into a principle. This is a grave mistake.

Any criminal or tort law must permit the argument that force was used only in defence of oneself, it's true. However, any cursory study of the law reveals that contained in that principle are the logical corollaries: the duty to retreat before the application of privileged force in defence of yourself or another, and the duty to use proportionate force in self-defence.

When viewed in the light of self-defence-doctrine corollaries, it becomes clear that none of the facts that Dan recites in his letter justify the degree of force used by Penny. It is very difficult to see what Neely could have done that would merit killing him. He would have had to threaten great bodily harm or death, and done so credibly. Slamming your jacket on the ground and screaming do not give private persons licence to kill, nor should it. Maybe there are other facts, but we don't have them.

It gets worse. It is just these components of self-defence doctrine which are at issue in the media fracas, but which seem to have eluded Lazare. The qualifications to self-defence are age-old doctrines, which have only recently come under scrutiny from none other than Lazare's own lifelong foes in the National Rifle Association. Lazare seems unaware that the very people he's critiqued have been on a multi-year project to promote gun ownership as a response to the corporate media's lies that violent crime is on the rise. How are they promoting this? In part, by citing approvingly any high-profile examples of self-defence, no matter how patently evil their deeds, including figures like George Zimmerman. But they don't stop there.

The vigilante right draft, lobby for and sponsor legislation in the US that not only removes any duty to retreat, but affirmatively bars a trial, where the defendant claims self-defence. The NRA is largely responsible for the passing of Florida's infamous 'stand your ground' law, for example, which gives defendants immunity from criminal prosecution for use of force in self-defence from harm. This is different from a standard self-defence claim, which is raised at trial and permits a jury to weigh all the evidence. So-called stand your ground laws are deranged - they encourage the exchange of bullets and blows, rather than de-escalation. Lazare seems oblivious that key components of self-defence law at issue here relate back to the very system he entreats us to blame. Thus, if Dan Lazare's self-defence absolutism was accepted, then a judge would rule on the question as a matter preliminary to trial, and keep the material facts from going before a jury. An interesting position for a socialist opposed to the second amendment to take. Even more interesting for one concerned about due process.

With his self-defence absolutism, Lazare can't bring himself to suggest that what Penny did was wrong. Instead, Lazare writes, "Make no mistake about it - Neely was both desperate and dangerous", before reading us his rap sheet. The central issue with this is that not a single one of these past wrongful acts is material to the issue of whether Penny used self-defence. Instead, it aims to make the victim's character an alibi for the killer's crime.

In this way, Lazare reminds us of the age-old technique of vigilantism. For an example of this, we might consider Rebecca Latimer Felton, who was the first woman member in the US Senate. She was a staunch suffragist, but also a despicable, white-supremacist celebrator of lynchings - that quintessential form of bourgeois American vigilantism:

"When there is not enough religion in the pulpit to organise a crusade against sin; nor justice in the court house to promptly punish crime; nor manhood enough in the nation to put a sheltering arm about innocence and virtue - if it needs lynching to protect woman's dearest possession from the ravaging human beasts - then I say lynch, a thousand times a week if necessary."

After all, wasn't Penny merely putting "a sheltering arm about innocence and virtue"? Wasn't he protecting the public from a "ravaging beast"? The essence of vigilantism in US history is the extra-legal use of force to secure the 'safety and virtue' of the class of white property-owners. While vigilantism is not unique to America, its form has a familiar and bleak outline - the lynching of a black man by a white mob, whipped up by a demagogic press. Lazare's focus on Neely's past, wrongful acts is well summed up by Eugene Debs' remarks on the evils of white supremacy - it is easier to forgive the man who robs you than to forgive the man you rob. Having abetted robbery of Neely's life, the rightwing press can't bring themselves to forgive him - and so it must heap scorn and ridicule on top of the basest wrong, as appeal to justification for the crime. Lazare disastrously follows suit.

We might guess at why he got it wrong. Three blind spots can be suggested. First, he misses the military connection. Penny was an ex-marine. Why wasn't he adequately trained in the non-lethal use of force in a tough situation? Easy - because the US military isn't interested in that. Empires aren't built on respect for the dignity and humanity of their subjects. They're built on lethal force - aerial bombardment if they can get it; ground troops if they must.

Aside from churning out killing machines on an annual basis to police (the worldwide capital accumulation process), the fact of American empire has decimated our cultural soul. Ex-military people languish in depression, suicide and drugs. The entity itself cultivates a fatuous and evil sense of global entitlement, which domestic conditions can never satisfy. This apparatus, which underwrites the US claim to visit death and destruction to any people across the globe, sends home a mass of broken people - and the lies which it must peddle domestically constitute demagoguery on a scale unprecedented in human history. Every few years there is a new people against whom we must make amends with bombing indiscriminately, because they've made peace with being led by a foe or foes we must dislodge. Alongside every other atomising aspect of capitalist social relations this tips the scale further away from empathy.

Second, Lazare criticises liberal 'race-baiters' and "social-justice warriors" who vote for war but decry the failure to charge Penny. Fine. But where is his criticism of the utterly despicable problem of vigilante violence that has characterised the US bourgeoisie

from its very beginning? This vigilantism is the cell form of settler-colonialism and slavocracy. It has occurred in the US to oppress racial minorities and destroy the working class's aspirations for political liberty and self-rule. Lazare's indifference to the fundamental principles of self-defence sees him carry water for a disgusting acid reflux of lynch sentiment in the modern day.

Lazare can't see this event for what it is - the drive to vigilante violence in its modern form. While vigilantism in the form of lynching was mostly smothered out in the United States, that outcome took major sacrifices by the American working class, with black workers in the vanguard. The peak of this struggle was the department of justice's partial and limited attacks on conspiracies to deprive black citizens of their democratic rights in the hallmark case of the murder of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner in 1964. Here we see that resistance to lynch law is a matter of socialist principle. Three voting rights organisers - two Jewish and one black - promoting voting rights in Mississippi directly by registering people to vote were murdered by the local sheriff, some deputies and private citizens.

As early as 1871, the US Congress recognised the problem such crimes posed - and they passed a law to regulate it: the Enforcement Act of 1871, known colloquially as the KKK Act. It criminalises deprivation of rights under the colour of law. Related legislation also criminalised conspiracies of private persons or public officials for the same purpose. The law went unenacted for decades, as Republicanism collapsed under corruption and the contradictions of the labour question during and after the US Reconstruction.

The FBI reluctantly got involved in the case of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner after much pressure. Similar cases may get prosecuted from time to time in the US, as this established some degree of precedence. The result, in part, is that extrajudicial killings now typically take the form of either police excessive use of force or private citizen conduct like George Zimmerman.

We have no reason to believe that Penny was formally engaged in anything like the KKK. But we can't deny that the gloss on this by the right is that it is further evidence in support of their full-throated vigilantism. Lazare might be encouraged to read about the history of organised labour in a place like Tampa, Florida. Workers there suffered under lynch law for a variety of reasons - their race, their nationality and their political association as workers and socialists. Among the nameless masses of people lynched in US history stand labour leaders like Frank Little. But, even were this not so, it wouldn't adjust the issue one bit. Marxists stand for the democratic rights of oppressed people, as the only possible basis for socialism to come into being. This shows clearly where vigilantism stands - opposed to working class self-rule.

Finally, Lazare might be implored to handle carefully sharp-edged, fundamental rights like 'due process'. These cut both ways. Sure, Penny is entitled to a presumption of innocence and due process. But where was Neely's due process? Police shoot unarmed suspects they claim are dangerous all the time and socialists understand that to

be a deprivation of life without the due process of law. Does it change when a vigilante does it? Isn't the deprivation of the constitutional rights of workers and oppressed minorities under colour of law a classic feature of 'the system'?

Due process - requiring notice and a fair hearing before depriving anyone of their life, liberty or (personal) property - is a matter of socialist principle. What process did Neely receive before being denied healthcare? Housing? Food? The answer is none, because, however capacious 'due process' is under bourgeois law, it does not provide any protection from a deprivation of these necessities. Changing this is also a socialist principle.

But the major impediment to changing this is the formation of a working class political movement in the United States. In turn, a central barrier to such a movement's growth is the ineffective and fair-weather character of socialists' defence of democratic rights. The right cowers socialists into tailing the liberals by constantly threatening vigilante violence. That problem requires our opposition to such violence, and that we take leadership of such opposition from the do-nothing liberals - who mouth platitudes, but offer nothing of substance.

If socialists can't do this, then we deserve to lose.

Anton Johanssen
USA

Lukács's faults

Following up on Mike Macnair's article last week ('A hundred years of muddle', May 18), let me make the following comments.

In his 1967 introduction to his work, *History and class consciousness* (1923), György Lukács is clear himself about the faults in the book: his neglect of the objective existence of the economic world and natural science. This doesn't mean that cancels out his contributions on social alienation and class-consciousness. Nor should we give in to the inadequacies of interpretation his work has suffered over the years.

HCC and his book on Lenin are not 'western Marxist' in the way Theodor Adorno went. Lukács rejected the fatalism of the Second International and the ultra-leftism exposed by Lenin and also wrote about Rosa Luxemburg and the "spontaneous" mass strike. "Her mistake", he writes in HCC, "was merely to overestimate the organic nature of the process [of revolution], while underestimating the importance of conscious organisation." Yet in his Leninism nor does Lukács make class-awareness something only the party injects; instead, it's initially produced by the effect of the objective world on the proletariat and the struggles to which class society subjects the human being.

Consciousness is something that develops - sometimes manifested in lashings out, like the Luddites smashing factory machines (mentioned by Lukács), or even support for the right (like Brexit). This can, however, reach "trade union consciousness" - a high form, but which nevertheless neglects the need to change the system. "The revolutionary form of consciousness of the proletariat is a process by nature," he writes, and it is finally in working for a party (or the possibility of such) that enables consciousness to continually develop, to understand and move against the "totality": that is, the system and history of capitalism.

In HCC, Lukács counsels that "the development of society constantly produces

new phenomena", and "every communist organisation must be prepared to increase as far as possible its own sensitivity and its own ability to learn from every aspect of history. It must make sure that the weapons used to gain a victory yesterday do not become an impediment in future struggles." Later, Lukács may have sided with the Stalinist bureaucracy as the only alternative to fascism, but from 1923-25 he neither followed an ethic of little organisation (as with the new left in the 1960s) nor became a contemplator of alienation without class-consciousness like the Frankfurt school. Theory and practice - *praxis* - is what matters, using the study of the open-ended interaction that is human history, which, because it's open, cannot be just a copy of the physical sciences.

"The Communist Party," he wrote, "does not function as a stand-in for the proletariat even in theory." Meanwhile one of his opponents at the time, Abram Deborin, went on to support the iron determinism of 'diamat', as imposed by Stalin, while in China, Einstein's relativity was officially declared 'idealist'.

Mike Belbin
London

Mish-mash

I would like to thank Ansell Eade for his support for my suggestion that the *Weekly Worker* registers the name, 'Communist Alternative', with the Electoral Commission (Letters, May 18). This would allow readers and supporters of the *Weekly Worker* to stand as Communist Alternative candidates in local elections. Whilst the aim would be to garner as many votes as possible, a secondary (more important) aim would be to sell the *Weekly Worker* to as many people as possible.

I agree with Ansell when he applauds the Socialist Party and the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition for standing 254 candidates across 64 local authorities in the May 4 local elections. Amongst the candidates were members of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party of Britain, the Socialist Workers Party and the Anti-Capitalist Alliance.

For Marxists the best result for the next general election would be a hung parliament leading to a minority Labour government dependent on Liberal Democrat support. As a condition for their support, the Lib Dems would ensure that proportional representation would be introduced for both parliamentary and local elections. Proportional representation has the support of the last few Labour conferences as well as being the policy of most trade unions. PR would allow leftwing parties to get their candidates elected in local and national elections. Standing Communist Alternative candidates would be part of this process.

However, I am sceptical that Tusc will get the support of major trade unions following the next general election. Whilst the doctors in the British Medical Association and the nurses in the Royal College of Nursing have widespread support in the population, this cannot be said of trade unions generally. Having the words 'trade unionist' in the Tusc name puts people off - especially the older, retired voters, who make up the bulk of people who vote in local elections.

The Socialist Party, rather than wasting time trying to establish a Labour Party mark two through their Tusc front, would be better off standing under their registered name, 'Socialist Alternative'. The same goes for the Socialist Workers

Party, which should register their name. Similarly, Socialist Appeal should register their name, given they are no longer in the Labour Party. I'm sure there must be many dissenting voices within the Socialist Party, the Communist Party of Britain and the SWP who disagree with being involved in a Labour Party mark two project.

There is a growing constituency of young people who see themselves as communists. Socialist Appeal now recruits people by asking, 'Are you a communist?' in its paper and website. It is therefore heartening to have someone like Ansell Eade support my suggestion that the *Weekly Worker* registers the name: 'Communist Alternative' with the Electoral Commission.

John Smithee
Cambridgeshire

Hydra-headed

I write this in the conviction that we should concentrate more on practical measures to meet the hydra-headed challenge we are facing. What is the CPGB's policy in this area? My friend, Martin Carroll, argues for an emphasis as follows:

- Currently workers in pay disputes should hold out for accepting settlements that match the rate of inflation (9%?): there must be no further fall in real wages, with a flat rate increase for lower-paid workers plus a fair differential for those on a higher rate.

- Negotiations to be conducted under full democratic control by the relevant workforce.

- State promotion of more widespread collective bargaining.

- A negotiated agreement to bring the conflict in Ukraine to a halt is imperative, meaning that the Russian government needs to be persuaded that they have made significant political gains and can concentrate *pro tem* on reviving international trade.

- Profits of energy companies resulting from the supply crisis should be taxed - hedge funds likewise. Bank nationalisation.

- Reduction of taxes imposed on smaller, less competitive enterprises.

- Public ownership of key resources, such as energy and water. Promotion of public transport.

- Development of sustainable food production within the UK and beyond with the aim of creating a global economic plan.

- Concrete steps to create a socialist international in order to effect these measures.

I would very much like to hear other comrades' ideas (the status quo means famine years).

Chris Gray
London

Rare books

Another year, another international rare book fair at the Saatchi Gallery in Chelsea. Of interest are a handful of items.

A week after the coronation, it's good to see a letter from Oliver Cromwell commanding a price of £68,000! A first Chinese edition of Chairman Mao's thoughts - ie, the 'Little red book', offered for £22,500. Sticking with political economy, for £250,000 you could acquire several pages of handwritten notes about Adam Smith's *The wealth of nations*, penned by a young French artillery officer - one Napoleon Bonaparte.

Head and shoulders above all others, in every sense, is a first edition of *Das Kapital*, signed and with a brief inscription to the Belgian leader of the First International: £800,000!

Paul Russell
email

ACTION

Not my bill

Saturday May 27, 12 noon: Protest, Parliament Square, London SW1. Repressive policing is part of how the system operates - but it is getting worse, with sweeping new powers and an authoritarian government. Don't be intimidated - organise and get on the streets! Organised by Republic and 12 other campaigns: www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/not-my-bill-tickets-638186873117.

The world at war: a trade union issue

Saturday May 27, 12:30pm: University and College Union conference fringe meeting, Pacific Room, Hilton Garden Inn, Finnieston Quay, Glasgow G3. Cut war, not welfare. Speakers include Andrew Murray (Stop the War), Sean Vernell (UCU). Organised by Glasgow Stop the War Coalition: www.facebook.com/events/169291799429119.

What it means to be human

Tuesday May 30, 6.30pm: Series of talks on social and biological anthropology. This talk is online only, via Zoom: 'Conceptual tools from anthropology for thinking about early reactions to Covid-19'. Speaker: Mark Jamieson. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: www.facebook.com/events/1443248916413971.

Founding of Amazon Labor Union

Thursday June 1, 11am: Public meeting, Unison Centre, 130 Euston Road, London NW1. A discussion with American union activist Chris Smalls, who led a walkout of Amazon workers in Staten Island, New York in 2020. Registration free. Organised by Unison: www.unison.org.uk/events.

Jesus: a life in class conflict

Thursday June 1, 7pm: Online and in-person book launch, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. James Crossley and Robert Myles discuss their new book, which provides a materialist take on the historical Jesus. Registration £5 (£3). Organised by Marx Memorial Library: www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/429.

Stop the war in Ukraine: peace talks now

Public meetings organised by Stop the War Coalition. The proxy war between Nato and Russia is causing misery for the people of Ukraine and plummeting living standards across Europe.

Leeds: Thursday June 1, 6.30pm, Mill Hill Chapel, 9 Lower Basinghall Street, Leeds LS1. Speakers: Prof Paul Rogers, Shelly Asquith (Stop the War) and Reece Goscinski (Leeds UCU). www.stopwar.org.uk/cities/Leeds.

Liverpool: Thursday June 1, 7pm, Quaker Meeting House, 22 School Lane, Liverpool L1. Speakers: Andrew Feinstein (author), Andrew Murray and Jenny Clegg (Stop the War). www.stopwar.org.uk/cities/Liverpool.

Canterbury: Thursday June 15, 7.30pm, Friends Meeting House, 6 The Friars, Canterbury CT1. Speakers: Prof Richard Sakwa, Kate Hudson (CND) and Chris Nineham (Stop the War). www.stopwar.org.uk/cities/Canterbury.

50th anniversary of Critique

Saturday June 10, 10am to 5pm: Online and in-person conference, Thai Theatre, New Academic Building, 54 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2. Celebrate 50 years of *Critique journal of socialist theory*. Sessions include Hillel Ticktin on 'Back in the USSR' and Mick Cox on 'Russia, China and the war in Ukraine'. Entrance free. Organised by Critique: www.facebook.com/critiquesocialistjournal.

How we fight, how we win

Saturday June 10, 10.30am to 5pm: Rank-and-file organising conference, Rich Mix, 35-47 Bethnal Green Road, London E1. With the biggest strike wave for 30 years, workers are rediscovering the power of collective action. Workers from across the strikes and the unions meet to discuss how to coordinate, link the struggles and escalate the fights. Registration £5. Organised by Counterfire: www.facebook.com/events/703891511738707.

Oppose Nazis in Leeds

Saturday June 10, 12.30pm: Counter-protest against the neo-Nazi 'Yorkshire Patriots', Victoria Gardens, The Headrow, Leeds LS1. Organised by Leeds Stand Up To Racism: www.facebook.com/events/3455053531400025.

Jarrow rebel town festival

Saturday June 17, 10.45am: Parade, speeches and musicians. Assemble pedestrian tunnel, Tyne Street, Jarrow NE32. Led by Felling Silver Band. Speakers include Jeremy Corbyn MP, Kate Osborne MP and Alex Gordon (RMT). Organised by Follonsby Miners Lodge Banner Heritage and Community Association: www.facebook.com/southshieldstuc.

National Shop Stewards Network

Saturday June 24, 11am to 4.30pm: Conference, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Bringing together active rank-and-file trade unionists from across the movement. All union members are welcome to attend and to participate in the discussion. Registration £6. Organised by National Shop Stewards Network: www.facebook.com/events/1595519607615141.

Marxism 2023

Thursday June 29 to Sunday July 2: SWP annual school, SOAS University of London, Thornhaugh Street, London WC1. Over 100 sessions including debates, workshops, panels, live music and a culture tent. Tickets: day £22.38 (£11.55), full event £44.04 (£27.80). Organised by Socialist Workers Party: www.facebook.com/marxismfest.

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.

SIX COUNTIES

Demography is not destiny

Sinn Féin is now the biggest party in local government. But, asks Kevin Bean, what does this mean for the prospects of some kind of national reunification?

Last week's Northern Ireland council elections generally followed the pattern predicted by recent opinion polls and confirmed the trends from last year's assembly results.

The headlines were made by Sinn Féin, which became the largest party in local government, securing 30.9% of first-preference votes and 144 councillors - representing a gain of 7.7% and 39 seats since the last elections in 2019. In second place was the Democratic Unionist Party, which polled 23.3% of first preferences and secured 122 councillors, largely maintaining their 2019 position, although their vote fell by 0.8%. There were also gains for the third-placed party, Alliance, which won 13.3% of the poll and secured 67 seats - an increase of 14 councillors on its last showing.

There were mixed fortunes amongst the other, smaller parties; the fourth-placed Ulster Unionist Party had 10.9% of first preferences (a fall of 3.2% since 2019) and 54 councillors (21 seats less than in the last elections), while the fifth party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, secured 8.7% first preferences and 39 councillors, a reduction of 20 seats. The unionist ultras of Traditional Unionist Voice fared a little better by increasing their vote by 1.7% to reach the dizzy heights of 3.9% and a total of nine councillors. The Greens lost 0.4% to stand at 1.7%, whilst People Before Profit (PBP), closely linked to the Socialist Workers Party in Britain, fell back by the same percentage to stand at 1.0%. It lost two council seats in Belfast and one in Derry and now has only one councillor in each city.

Inevitably the main focus following the count was on the surge in support for Sinn Féin and its new standing. As with the emergence of SF as the largest party in the 2022 assembly elections, the political and psychological impact of these results was not lost on anyone. For Michelle O'Neill, Sinn Féin's vice-president and first-minister designate in the Six Counties, the results were 'momentous', the product of an election campaign that had "resonated with the electorate" by focussing on "positive leadership" and "making politics work" by "getting an executive restored and



Reunification will not be delivered through the womb

getting our councils up and running again".¹

The DUP's leader, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, understandably tried to emphasise the positives for his party by correctly arguing that its vote had held up well and had largely contained the challenge of TUV. While he correctly attributed the surge in support for SF to the collapse of the SDLP and the ability of the party to mobilise its (nationalist) electorate, other unionists suggested that 'unionist disunity' was a major factor in the changing electoral fortunes of unionism in the Six Counties.

Squeeze

Even a cursory glance at the results reveals the old truism that there are always at least two elections - one within the nationalist electorate, the other within the unionist - when Northern Ireland goes to the polls. The usual psephological analysis of

swings and movements of opinion generally does not apply across the electorate as a whole here, but is only really relevant within the broad currents of nationalist or unionist politics.

Moreover, the transfer patterns and preferences of a single-transferable-vote election allow us to see how these politics actually work in practice. These in turn can reflect the degree of party electoral organisation and how far parties can 'efficiently' maximise their vote and ensure transfers to other candidates on the list. This certainly explains the 7.7% growth in Sinn Féin's support: not only did SF 'manage' its vote very effectively, but did so by squeezing the SDLP and other parties that largely draw support from the nationalist population, such as PBP in Belfast and Derry. This squeezing of PBP might be partially explained by a continuing Brexit hangover - it had backed Brexit and so became identified by many nationalists with the unionist flag-wavers of the DUP and TUV. Of much greater salience was that in a polarised election, in which nationalists were enjoined to fully support the only party that could really put it up to the DUP and firmly assert nationalist demands, meekly tailing behind Sinn Féin's border poll politics and advancing a very limited anti-austerity programme was not enough to maintain its existing support, much less expand it.²

Despite Michelle O'Neill's claims, the only "positive leadership" she really offered was an appeal to nationalists to rally behind her party and strengthen its position within the communalised politics of the Six County sectarian statelet. Far from being an appeal for national democracy or the reunification of Ireland, it was simply part of a jockeying for position by what has been an openly constitutional nationalist party since the 1990s. So, in these elections, SF's appeal was, as ever, not to overthrow the system, but to secure the place of nationalists within it and to ensure that, when devolved government does get up and running again, the politics that

really will work for O'Neill and co are those that guarantee their seats at the top table at Stormont. During the period of contacts and negotiations in the coming months involving the London, Dublin and Washington governments and the Northern Ireland parties, Sinn Féin will bank these electoral successes, especially as a means of applying pressure on the DUP to return to Stormont and accept O'Neill as first minister. Moreover, with an eye on the coming elections south of the border as well, her position as head of the government at Stormont will do no harm to SF's chances of becoming the largest party in Leinster House.

As it stands, the main players in London, Dublin and Washington all want to see the return of the assembly and the executive, and the restoration of the status quo in Northern Ireland. Despite calls for significant changes to the operation of the Good Friday agreement that would prevent one of the larger parties, such as the DUP or SF, collapsing the institutions of devolved government, this would be a can of worms that both London and Dublin want to avoid. So the focus turns back once again to the DUP and how it can be persuaded back into Stormont. Donaldson's assessment of its election performance was broadly accurate, as far as it goes. It withstood TUV's attempt to outflank it from the right, and the unionist anti-protocol vote has consolidated around the DUP. This strengthens his position when it comes to making a deal with London and Dublin - probably in the autumn after the marching season, when potential pressure from the loyalist population would be off the DUP.

Donaldson and probably a majority of the DUP's assembly members want to go back to Stormont and are now simply looking for a politically acceptable way to cover their retreat. If the resolution of previous crises are anything to go by, this will not require the wholesale abandonment of the Windsor framework or substantial renegotiation of Brexit with the European Union. Rather,

all that will be required will be some further tweaks to the protocol, the necessary nonsense of warm words and guarantees about Northern Ireland's place in the union and - most importantly - plenty of promises of further financial support and spending from the British government.

Off the hook?

If that gets the DUP off the immediate hook, these elections have only heightened the debate within the unionist parties about their long-term position and future strategy - a debate which has been given added urgency by nationalist demands for a border poll and calls for a wider discussion on preparations for reunification.

The debate within the unionist parties is increasingly framed by fears that a seemingly inexorable demographic determinism will produce a nationalist majority in the Six Counties: the 2021 census and the declining vote-share of unionist parties in elections from the 1990s all seem to point to inevitable political decline and the transformation of the former majority into just one of several minorities in Northern Ireland. From the point of view of those unionist ultras who want a return to the good old days of the 'great wee province', when nationalists knew their place and Westminster governments backed Stormont to get on misruling the place as they saw fit, this is a frightening glimpse into the abyss.

However, even if Sinn Féin and other sections of nationalist opinion play on these fears as an encouragement for unionists to come to terms with the new situation and consent to some form of negotiated reunification, there is no inevitability that this is how things will turn out. Demography is not destiny and the electoral decline of explicitly unionist parties does not guarantee a majority for parties favouring some form of united Ireland. For example, the recent successes of the Alliance Party - usually described in the media as a 'cross-community party', but in reality largely a liberal unionist party - have been used as evidence that the 'tribal' politics of the north, rooted in the constitutional question, are breaking down to a certain extent. But how would these 'liberal unionists' vote in a hypothetical border poll? Would all Catholics - especially the middle class, who found their place in the sun following the Good Friday agreement - support reunification in the privacy of the polling booth, should a referendum ever be held?

This focus on the internal political balance within the Six Counties also ignores the crucial role of other, more important external state actors in London, Dublin and Washington. Does reunification serve their interests and strategies? So, for all the ostensible dynamics of potential change revealed by these elections, there are other, more powerful forces and state structures which, far from unleashing radical change, simply maintain the status quo of communal division and prolong the sectarian stasis that passes for politics in Northern Ireland ●

Notes

1. www.rte.ie/news/ulster/2023/0520/1384655-ni-local-elections.
2. www.pbp.ie/people-before-profit-statement-on-2023-local-government-election.

Fighting fund

Urgent question

With exactly a week to go before the end of the month, we still need £735 if we are going to reach our £2,250 fighting fund target for May. This is now an urgent question in view of the recent shortfalls we've suffered, so let's hope that this time our readers and supporters will put us back on track.

Of course, it goes without saying that the *Weekly Worker* relies absolutely on you comrades to keep us going and with just seven days to go we really need the donations coming in. I'm pleased to say that a very useful £533 has come our way since last week, but that takes our running total to just £1,515. So let's make sure that we break through that £2,250 barrier by the next issue!

I'm very pleased, in particular,

by three donations received since last time - each for three-figure sums! (thanks go to comrades SK, PM and GB). But, apart from that, contributions were very few and far between - the best of them being from OG (£42) and DR (£20). Nevertheless, we are within reach of that target, provided a good number of other comrades now help us out.

To ensure we get there before the end of the month, use either the PayPal facility on our website (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate) or make a bank transfer (sort code 30-99-64, account number 00744310) ●

Robbie Rix

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

POLITICS

Cancelling the dead

Eric Gill's Prospero and Ariel has been vandalised yet again. Mike Macnair looks at what is involved in attacking soft targets

In the early hours of May 20 a man in a Spiderman mask was arrested for vandalising the statue of Prospero and Ariel by Eric Gill at the entrance to Broadcasting House, the BBC offices on Portland Place, London. He obtained access via the scaffolding which had been put up for the purpose of restoration of the statue after a very similar attack in January 2022.

The arrested man may be merely a publicity-seeker. The January 2022 attacker was a 'fathers' rights' campaigner, who had previously scaled a construction crane dressed as Spiderman (a not untypical 'Fathers 4 Justice' stunt). Assuming this is not the same guy, May 2023 looks like a copycat. However, more serious arguments have been offered that the Gill statue should be taken down or left in its vandalised condition. The essential basis of these arguments is that Gill was a sexual abuser - shown to be so by his own diaries, as explored after his death by his biographer, Fiona MacCarthy. And hence the statue should not be on display, or should not be restored after the 2022 vandalism.

There are, in fact, slightly stronger arguments possible for 'cancelling' the statue in this specific case. The first element is that the BBC as an institution notoriously enabled and covered up sex abuse by celebrities - notably Jimmy Savile and Rolf Harris.

The second point is that the statue itself appears to be a piece of paedophile imagery. Ariel in Shakespeare's *The tempest* is a supernatural entity - an air-spirit who has been bond-servant to the witch, Sycorax, before she imprisons him in a tree and leaves him there for 12 years; Prospero releases him from the tree, but holds him as a debt-bondsman for enough time before the opening of the play that in act 1 Ariel is already grumbling about Prospero's delay in releasing him. The character is not a child or childish, but is, on the other hand, gender-ambiguous (in later scenes Ariel can appear as female). Hence Ariel was originally played by a teenage boy, but from the Restoration period by a woman; this casting norm reflects the 'agelessness' of spirits, like elves/fairies and angels, as well as the gender-ambiguity.

Gill, however, represented Ariel in the Broadcasting House sculpture as a pre-pubescent boy (albeit with slightly enlarged genitals, which were remarked on when the statue was new), being hugged by his creditor-master, Prospero. This specific representation is certainly not required by the link of broadcasting to Ariel as a spirit of the air. It thus does seem to be best explained by Gill's sexual obsessions.

That said, these arguments do not appear to be the reasons offered for why the statue should be taken down or left unrepaired. On the contrary, the main arguments seem to be simply on the basis of Gill's sexual abuse of his children, and that the act of leaving the statue in place, and restoring it to an undefaced state, would be in effect a BBC endorsement of Gill's conduct (the view of the original attacker and of Katherine Tyrell on her blog *Making a Mark*). Even Jake Kerridge, who in the *Telegraph* on May 20 argued against taking the statue down, poses



Eric Gill at work on what was even then a controversial sculpture

the arguments in terms of the case for 'cancelling' Gill's work in general, rather than in terms of *this dodgy image* at the front door of *this guilty institution*.²

Gill's individual case should remind us that a lot of sexual abuse takes place within the private space of families and along the lines of their internal authority relations.³ The Savile and Harris cases should remind us that, outside this context, abusers are commonly facilitated by the operation of bureaucratic hierarchies; and that they are also protected by the denial of justice and routine sale through the "free market in legal services". The focus on attacking the work of 'paedo' Gill proceeds on the assumption that sexual abuse is mainly the work of an identifiable sub-class of paedophiles and so diverts attention from the institutional forms which protect abusers.

Soft targets

The underlying political method involved is going after soft targets. In this case Eric Gill, who is long dead, and his artwork, are seriously soft targets. No-platforming the dead is rather an easy job. In contrast, parental authority in the family, which facilitates child abuse, is a much harder target. Jimmy Savile was a very hard target while he was alive. The phenomenon behind that - the sale and denial of justice by the free market in legal services - is a very hard target, being part of the core of the capitalist constitution. The BBC as an institution is intermediate: it is a hard target insofar as it is a large institution, with major funds and lawyers at its disposal. It is a somewhat soft target in that the advertising-funded media would like to see it abolished, so that, in so far as targeting the BBC takes a form which can be exploited by the press barons, it may get some sympathy.

Going after soft targets is much more widespread and is not uniquely leftwing - it has been noted that the *de facto* bloc which calls for taking down the Gill statue includes Tommy

Robinson. The technique of Tory witch-hunting of trans people, and of illegal migrants, has the same character: in both cases, the Tories go after people who are politically unlikely to be able to fight back, in order to use them as an entering wedge for ulterior purposes.

In the trans case the Tories are going after the Scottish National Party, Liberal Democrats and Labour, and in the long run for some of the National Conservatives seeking to get back more parental control of teenagers, and the traditional Tory policy for women of *Kinder, Kirche, Küche* (children, church, kitchen - an old slogan from the German Second Reich, but the underlying idea far more widespread on the traditional right).

In the case of illegal migrants the Tories are blaming migrants for poverty which is, in fact, caused by deindustrialisation, 'efficiency gains' and anti-union laws, and in the long run aiming to get back the Home Office's freedom of arbitrary action before the Wilson government in 1966 accepted individual petitions to the Strasbourg Court of Human Rights (as always it is necessary to note that the European Convention and Court of Human Rights are quite separate from the European Union).

In both cases there is a short-term aim of dishonestly obtaining a marginal electoral advantage.

The left is equally prone to going after soft targets - but considerably less successful with it. Going after 'Nazis' (soft target) rather than state oppression of migrants (hard target) has been a staple since the 1970s. The left's (predominant) support for Scottish and Welsh nationalism has been a soft-target approach to the question of political democracy in Britain. And so on.

Why soft-target policy fails to work for the left is simple enough. Which targets are hard and which soft is ultimately defined by the bribe-taking classes, in particular the lawyers (providing impunity for the seriously wealthy) and the advertising-funded media (playing up

some issues and playing down others). Hence the policy of going after soft targets is to be led by the nose by the press barons, who can abruptly shift the political agenda if left soft-target hunting looks like getting out of hand. Chasing the soft targets then serves as a useful (to the regime) distraction for the left from doing what it *could* do to undermine the legitimacy of the political regime and build up the self-organisation, confidence and political leading role of the working class.

Grasping the past

Both these projects - undermining the legitimacy of the political regime, and building up the workers' movement as a potential alternative leadership for society - require that this movement endeavour to grasp the past, in order to understand the dynamics which play into the future.

Henry Ford famously said that "History is more or less bunk. It is tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present ..."⁴ The claim may have been mere cover for Ford's personal ignorance, but expresses the more general idea that we only need to know history which is *useful to present policy*. This would, of course, make it impossible to *criticise* present policy. Joseph Stalin famously rewrote history with each tactical zigzag. George Orwell satirised this policy in 1984 as "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past."

Applying this policy, the Tories have, through the 'national curriculum' introduced in 1988, massively cut down the *range* of history taught in schools and the diversity of interpretations. The result is a sanitised version of British history which centres, on the one hand, on the supposed antiquity of the constitution and the fantasy of "our island story" without invasions or revolutions; on the other, on "our finest hour" (1940) versus the European "age of the dictators". Today, Policy Exchange's 'History Matters' complains of the "rewriting" of history - by which it means its

partial deToricification, to reduce the extent of public *celebration* of the British empire. Its agenda is to re-secure Tory Party control of the past, which it takes to be "non-partisan".⁵

However, if the alternative to this is to *erase* the British empire, we erase with it British imperial and war guilt, and offer in its place either mere silence or the liberal fantasy version which New Labour promoted, and which is still within the frame of 'national curriculum history', but merely spun slightly towards the 'equality and diversity' agenda. And the result is just as much being led by the nose by the press barons as it is with the 'soft targets' approach generally.

There are practical political consequences. Britain used to be the global hegemon in the 19th century and down to 1940. In that capacity, and in the run-up to achieving that status, Britain committed dreadful crimes. But this is not a *fully past and over* story. In 1940 the UK agreed to hand over world leadership to the US, though there were unsuccessful attempts to slide out of the consequences in 1944 (Keynes at Bretton Woods) and 1956 (Suez). As part of that deal, the UK became a second-rank power directly subordinate to the US, but continued to operate as a military attack-dog in the colonial world. 1968 was the only year in the 20th century when UK troops were not engaged in either overt war or counter-insurgency operations. With the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, it became clear that Britain no longer had large-scale military capability; but it still serves, as in the Ukraine war and in other fields, as the US's *yap-dog*.

London, moreover, runs a worldwide network of offshore centres through British continuing and former colonial possessions, and City "invisible earnings" from skimming global financial transactions to pay for the £16 billion deficit in trade in goods and the 46% of the food we eat which is imported.

In this context, to sanitise British history towards 'equality and diversity' agendas is not to wake up to the imperialism which underlies racism, but to fall asleep in the face of it. One visible present result is that part of the left which, extraordinarily, though ostensibly feminist, anti-racist, and so on, cannot see the hand of *US and British imperialism* in the war in Ukraine - or the imperialist character of the coverage of this war offered by both the advertising-funded media and the BBC ...

This may appear to have taken us a considerable way from the efforts to vandalise Eric Gill's dodgy statue and the arguments these have led to. But the underlying soft-target politics are the same ●

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Notes

1. makingamark.blogspot.com/2023/05/what-should-bbc-do-about-eric-gill.html.
2. 'The BBC's Eric Gill statue is hard to defend' *The Daily Telegraph* May 20.
3. Eg. www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/childsexualabuseinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2019; www.csacentre.org.uk/resources/key-messages/intra-familial-csa.
4. www.hemmings.com/stories/2018/01/14/fact-check-what-henry-ford-meant-when-he-said-history-is-bunk.
5. policyexchange.org.uk/publication/history-matters.

UKRAINE

Notes on the war

Yevgeny Prigozhin maintains that every centimetre of Bakhmut has been taken, but Ukraine's much heralded spring offensive is still to come. **Jack Conrad** looks at the military and political situation

Everything tells us that the war in Ukraine ought to be entering a new stage. Winter is long over and with it the below-zero temperatures that brought hell for civilians huddled in cities such as Kyiv, which, because of air strikes, suffered from repeated outages of mains electricity.

Spring is now well and truly advanced and the mud season - known in Ukraine as *bezdorizhzhia* - is finally over. In the south the soil has been dry since mid-April and the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts usually dry out completely from mid-May. Generally, it should be noted, prefer fighting on solid ground - even if it is frozen. Mud bogs down tanks, troop carriers and artillery pieces. Crucially, unpaved roads become impassable. Wheels spin and spin, and dig vehicles deeper and deeper into the thick mud. Lorries cannot deliver fuel, ammunition and food to the front. Sustaining any significant forward movement becomes impossible.

So, with the changed weather, Ukraine is now under pressure to launch an offensive, thus avoiding a stalemate and Ukraine becoming another of those 'forever wars'. Failure to make some progress by taking back Russian-occupied land, or inflicting a serious defeat on Russian forces, could harm morale at home and certainly test the patience of Ukraine's US, Nato and G7 backers.

After all, Ukraine has not only been receiving real-time intelligence, wall-to-wall propaganda support, massive financial subsidies and infantry kit and equipment, assault rifles, mortars, rocket launchers and land mines, costing billions of dollars. A whole range of high tech military equipment has been donated besides. Shoulder-launched Nlavs and Javelins from Britain and the US famously wrought havoc on vulnerable Russian T-72s and T-80s. The road from Kyiv was clogged with their wrecked carcasses. The US supplied 38 multiple-launch M142 Himars. Their surface-to-surface missiles hit targets with pinpoint accuracy and have had a devastating effect on Russian massed artillery and ammunition dumps, forcing generals to constantly move their forces or pull back out of their 50-mile range. This has further stretched supply lines. Now the Russians have another headache, with the British-made Storm Shadow cruise missile. They have a range of 300 miles, fly low and can avoid radar detection. Logistical hubs, storage points, railheads, bridges and command posts can be hit. Unless they are deeply bunkered in, Russian generals fear for their own lives - an important psychological factor in any war.

Then there are the many hundreds of fighting vehicles - armoured cars, troop carriers and light tanks - the Ferrets, Scorpions, Fenneks, Marders, Strykers and Bradleys. Ukraine has also received, or is about to receive, Leopard 1 and Leopard 2, Challenger 2 and M1 Abrams battle tanks. True, the 14 Challengers from Britain and 31 Abrams from the US are mainly of symbolic value. However, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark have combined to donate some 200 Leopards. On top of that, former Warsaw Pact Nato countries have given Ukraine large numbers of refurbished, Soviet-era



Between the lines: no man's land

T-72s. If sufficiently concentrated and logistically supported, massed tank formations might well puncture Russian lines.

Ukraine's air defence systems have been revolutionised by Nato-supplied jammers, radar and surface-to-air missiles. Stingers, Stormers and Hawks have clipped the wings of the Russian airforce - that is for sure. Instead of exercising air superiority and bombing when and where they please, as might have been expected at the beginning of the war, Russian MiG and Sukhoi fighter planes have been reduced to making ground-hugging lightning strikes or launching long-range missiles from the safety of their own air space. Even then, with the US-made NASAMS and Patriot systems, Ukraine has been successfully intercepting incoming planes, missiles and drones. Eg, since April 28, Russia has reportedly launched a total of 67 missile and 114 drone attacks. Only seven missiles and 11 drones got through, and none hit Kyiv. And a week or so ago Ukraine says it shot down Russia's most advanced hypersonic missile, the Kinzhal-47 - a weapon previously considered unstoppable.

Drones come in a wide variety of forms and guises, and have transformed aerial warfare. Ukraine's Turkish-built Baykars and loitering US Switchblades are capable of taking out tanks and pose a constant threat to Russian troops. However, new supplies are vital. Russia has an electronic warfare unit stationed every six miles along the front line and they are mainly focused on neutralising drones by bugging up their navigation systems. The Royal United Services Institute reports that Ukraine is losing 10,000 drones every month.¹ Most are small, commercial, used for surveillance purposes and come reassuringly cheap. Ironically, the most common Ukrainian drone,

the DJI Mavic, is made in China and has an extraordinarily modest price tag of just £1,615.²

Now we have Joe Biden's say-so, allowing US allies to send F-16s to Ukraine. This highly effective, US-designed, fourth-generation multirole fighter plane is standard Nato equipment (with the exception of Britain and France, which each has their own semi-independent aerospace industry). Well over four thousand have been produced since the late 1970s and, with the shift to fifth-generation F-35s, there are plenty going second-hand. US reluctance to go-ahead supplies of F-16s, till the Hiroshima summit announcement, is easily explained. The proxy war with Russia is carefully calibrated. The US administration wants a war of attrition that slowly drains Russia's life blood until the point where it triggers regime change in Moscow. It does not want to provoke a full-scale European, let alone a world, war. That would be to invite Mutually Assured Destruction.

Will the F-16s be a game-changer? Though they can be delivered double-quick and there is an ample supply of weapons and spare parts, it will take three or four months of basic training to get Ukrainian pilots to safely take them up and down - and much longer before maintenance crews are ready to do their job ... and F-16s need a lot of maintenance (16 hours for every hour of flying³). So F-16s are unlikely to enter a 'dynamic threat environment' any time soon. Low-altitude night/all-weather ground-attack missions, using infrared systems and laser-guided bombs, take years of experience. Without that Ukrainian F-16s will be sitting ducks for Russian MiG-29 and Su-27 pilots and S-300 surface-to-air missiles. And, while we still have no real idea about how many will be donated (though the talk is of

200), the chances are that a beefed-up Ukrainian airforce will prove no more effective than the much stronger one Russia has. Probably then that Ukraine's F-16s will be largely confined to relatively safe operations such as air defence.

Bakhmut

Yevgeny Prigozhin insists that his Wagner group has "taken every centimetre" of Bakhmut - something hotly disputed, of course, by Volodymyr Zelensky. Seemingly Ukrainian forces still have a toehold in the outskirts. While winning the battle of Bakhmut has been celebrated in Moscow "as a victory that brings final victory nearer", this is surely something of a "Pyrrhic victory".⁴ After nine months of bitter street-by-street fighting and almost uninterrupted artillery bombardment, Russia has gained a completely wrecked town. True, there are nine million bottles of sparkling wine stored in deep underground cellars, but that prize hardly compensates for the toll in human life.

Naturally, estimates of deaths and injuries vary considerably. Russian sources put Ukrainian fatalities at between 15,000 and 20,000. Ukraine, on the other hand, gives Russian casualties at around 100,000. Whatever the exact figure, it represents an enormous slaughter and is testimony to the barbaric tactics employed, in particular by the Russian army and the Wagner group.

Human waves - including former prisoners - have been thrown at Ukrainian fixed positions.⁵ Allegedly, it was the ex-convicts who constituted the first wave. Getting them to charge into the jaws of almost certain death required, of course, either fanaticism or terror (doubtless, in this case terror).⁶ Reportedly deserters were summarily executed by barrier troops - an unattributed piece of savagery inherited from

Leon Trotsky's civil-war Red Army.

But what is true of the Russians is also true of the Ukrainians. Military commentators talk of Zelensky being lured into a trap. He made Bakhmut into a sacred national cause - a fortress with its own official YouTube music video. He even handed the town's flag to the US Congress. Tens of thousands of men were committed to a battle which they could not win. Instead of fighting on other fronts, probing Russian weak-points, organising hit-and-run raids, everything that could be spared was shovelled into Bakhmut. Battle-hardened veterans and raw recruits alike were sent into a Wagner meat grinder. While on the Ukrainian side it seems clear that national fanaticism, not terror, provided motivation, the end result was the same - huge numbers of troops tied down, injured or dead.

Probably the death ratio would be something like 5:1. By occupying tunnels, mining drains, preparing strong points, traps and surprise attacks, urban warfare acts as a force multiplier for defenders. But from Prigozhin's point of view the whole exercise has been more than worthwhile. Far from being a Pyrrhic victory, for him Bakhmut was Wagner's version of the Soviet army taking Berlin in May 1945. He wanted, he needed, he had to take Bakhmut, if he was to further his political ambitions. That is why Prigozhin publicly ranted and raved against the Russian high command on Telegram, demanded more and more artillery shells and even threatened to take his forces back home to Mother Russia.

The regular Russian army - demoralised by defeat in the Kharkiv oblast and the forced withdrawal from Kherson in the south - required time to recuperate and reorganise, time to train up hundreds of thousands of conscripts, time to integrate the challenges of drone warfare into military doctrine: in other words, time to make ready for the much-fanfare Ukrainian offensive.

For his part, Prigozhin had to have a victory if he was going to grow his public profile and maintain Vladimir Putin's protection for his mercenary army, which, it should be added, operates on pretty shaky legal foundations. So Wagner attacked and attacked and attacked again. Perhaps he fancies himself as Russia's version of Napoleon Bonaparte and establishing a personal dictatorship after Putin dies or is eased aside. A risky game and unlikely to succeed, unless he can win over the Federal Security Service (FSB). Either way, for the moment at least, Prigozhin is the best Russia has, when it comes to a conquering hero. Meanwhile, he has made many enemies in the Russian defence ministry and the Russian army, who will be eager to use any opportunity to bring him down.

Despite Prigozhin's triumphalism, Ukraine's defence ministry tops claim that Wagner forces in Bakhmut are "semi-encircled".⁷ Though there is little evidence of that on theatre maps, a Ukrainian offensive could try for a Stalingrad scenario.

Under general Friedrich Paulus the German 6th army finally took Stalingrad in southern Russia, after gruelling street fighting. Adolf Hitler was ecstatic. However, in the winter of 1942-43, Soviet forces mounted a massive counterattack

with operation Uranus. The 250,000-strong Sixth Army found itself surrounded in Stalingrad and eventually surrendered, that in spite of the specific instructions from the Fuhrer demanding a fight to the last man. Defeat at Stalingrad was a pivotal moment in World War II. But whether or not the Ukrainian army could pull off such a feat remains an open question - certainly, though, it is important for Zelensky that the battle of Bakhmut continues, even if conducted outside the city's limits. There is also the war against Russia itself. Western hardware comes with the proviso of no use against Russia itself. However, Zelensky must have given the nod for the attack on Belgorod by the Ukrainian-based Freedom for Russia Legion and Russian Volunteer Corps - both fascist groups with more than a whiff of Nazi ideology about them.

Zelensky's dogged defence of 'fortress Bakhmut' has, however, served a number of purposes. Morale was boosted not only at home, but abroad too. Joe Biden, Emmanuel Macron and Rishi Sunak all take public pride in Ukraine's fighting capacity and regularly burnish their tarnished reputations with visits to Kyiv and meetings with him. There is also the message it sends to the Russian military: if chief of the general staff Valery Gerasimov decides to push on from Bakhmut towards Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, both fortified at least as well as Bakhmut, it should expect the loss of a similar amount of men and materiel - a message that is likely to be heeded, at least in the short-to-medium term. Unlike Wagner, which needs a unique fighting reputation if it is to avoid being absorbed into the regular army, the Russian defence ministry and army high command seem to be going for a war of attrition and that means digging in.

Trenchant

After examining hundreds of satellite images, the BBC says it has identified a "significant build-up of trenches and other fortifications" since October 2022. Its report gives us a real insight into what any Ukrainian offensive will encounter. The first line of Russian defence usually consists of a deep anti-tank ditch, followed by rows of 'dragons teeth'. These pyramid-shaped concrete blocks are also designed to stop tanks and other military vehicles. Next there comes successive lines and networks of trenches and bunkers. Likely there will be hidden mines too. Behind those defences there are well-protected artillery positions. The Russians will no doubt attempt to "funnel Ukrainian forces down certain routes which are heavily mined and pre-targeted by Russian artillery."⁸ The BBC provides a useful map, which shows such defences guarding the whole of Russia's front line in Ukraine and all the way up the internationally recognised border between the two countries.

In other words, the Ukraine war much nearer resembles World War I than World War II. Successful surprise attacks are less and less likely. Instead we have entrenched positions and siege warfare. In World War I artillery was said to conquer and infantry occupy the ground (the battle plan of French commander Joseph Joffre). That required railways, the accumulation of huge stocks of artillery shells, prolonged bombardments and then concentrated infantry assaults.

The Germans, having been forced onto the defensive in 1915, responded by fortifying their front line with some considerable skill and ingenuity. They put in place an outer trench with infantry and machine guns and connected that

trench to a second one 200 yards to the rear. Behind those two lines they placed machine guns in concrete bunkers. German chief of staff Erich von Falkenhayn promulgated a military doctrine that allowed for no retreat. As with a city under siege, the "standard response" was that any breach of the walls had to be met with swift counterattacks, no matter what the cost.⁹ Given that German forces had behind them a thousand square miles of captured French territory, such a doctrine was militarily unnecessary, but helped to ensure that the final outcome ultimately depended on who could produce the most ammunition and who could sustain the greatest losses.

What we have in Ukraine is World War I trench warfare with the addition of drones and missiles. Tanks and manned fighter aircraft seem to have gone the way of the cavalry. In 1914-15 the French and British allies kept cavalry divisions in reserve in the expectation of the breakthrough that never came. When the British cavalry did charge German fixed positions, they were mown down. Few survived the hail of bullets.

Will the expected Ukrainian offensive result in a sensational breakthrough? Unlikely, even with Leopard, Challenger and Abrams tanks. Even if Ukraine was to be supplied with a thousand top-grade western battle tanks, even if it got a whole airforce of F-16s, everything points to a long, bitter, grinding war of attrition.

The US and its UK rottweiler are quite prepared for the Ukrainian people to fight such a war for the sake of their imperial ambitions: reining in France and Germany, degrading and dismembering the Russian Federation and strategically surrounding and strangling the People's Republic of China.

There were those in Russia who feared just such an outcome. Amongst the military, political and business elite most preferred to keep their counsel to small circles of trusted friends and colleagues. However, 150 prominent individuals - including Leonid Ivashov, a retired senior Russian general - did put their names to an open letter, issued just before the launch of the 'special military operation'. It warned that an attack on Ukraine would be "pointless and extremely dangerous" and would threaten Russia's existence.¹⁰

As should have been expected, Ukraine's armed forces proved to be no pushover. By late March Ukraine was on the counteroffensive and Russian forces were hightailing it back to the border. On April 2 2022 Zelensky's government announced that the entire Kyiv oblast had been retaken. True, Putin and his generals launched their phase two almost immediately afterwards. But then, in September 2022, came the twin-front Ukrainian counteroffensive, which opened what I have called phrase three of the war - for the first time things were being actively shaped by Ukraine.

Sanctions

So what has Putin got to show for his war? Given the considerable budget, size and once awesome reputation of Russia's armed forces, in terms of territory the answer has to be, precious little. True, to much Kremlin trumpeting, four Ukrainian oblasts - Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson - were, "forever" incorporated into the Russian Federation on September 30 2022. However, about half of these supposed Russian lands were either held or regained by Ukrainian forces in phase three - not least Kharkiv in the east and Kherson in the south. Humiliating reversals for Putin that

are hardly made up for by the Wagner group finally capturing Bakhmut.

What about the cost in lives and suffering? Well, to date, there are 100,000 Ukrainians dead and wounded and perhaps a much greater figure on the Russian side. There are moreover some 8 million internally displaced Ukrainians, 7.8 million Ukrainians and 500,000 Russians fleeing abroad. And on top of that Mariupol, Volnovakha, Rubizhne, Popasna, Lyman, Sievierodonetsk and now Bakhmut have been turned to rubble.

Then there are western sanctions, the EU, G7+Australia oil price cap, ousting Russian banks from the Swift system and the confiscation of assets owned by so-called oligarchs. The initial expectation was that sanctions would break Russia. Joe Biden predicted, back in March 2022, that the Russian economy was "on track to be cut in half", while Annalena Baerbock, German foreign minister, boasted that sanctions were "hitting the Putin system ... at its core of power" and European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen promised that the EU was "working to cripple Putin's ability to finance his war machine".¹¹

Their model is unmistakably Germany and its defeat in two world wars. Rubber, iron ore, nickel, manganese, aluminium, oil, cotton, tea and food were all put in short supply, as a blockaded Germany was cut off from the global market. It was not just the unmatched power of the Royal Navy, but control over international shipping, insurance and money markets. Of course, for woolly-minded liberals sanctions are often regarded as a civilised alternative to war. Famously, American president Woodrow Wilson credited sanctions with being "something more tremendous than war". But, in fact, sanctions are the very essence of "total war".¹²

Not that sanctions alone should be expected to bring about the "dissolution of the Russian empire" (George Soros).¹³ Russia is no Germany. It is a continent in its own right and behind it there lies the "no limits partnership" with the world's second largest economy. Note, Anthony Blinken's ominous threat, made at the Munich Security Conference, about the serious "consequences" if China provides "lethal support".¹⁴ And, interviewed by *Die Welt*, Zelensky warned that "if China allies itself with Russia, there will be a world war, and I do think that China is aware of that".¹⁵

Predictably, Russia's electronic and car industry has tanked and there is an acute shortage of high-tech chips, castings and connectors - vital in modern weapons systems.¹⁶ However, after an initial plunge, the rouble has been successfully stabilised and all manner of loopholes in the sanctions regime found and exploited. Crucially Russia has plenty of oil and gas to trade. Not only is China quite willing to get Russian oil and gas on the cheap, but so are India and Turkey. As a result, Russian gross domestic product is reported to have shrunk *only* by between 2.2% and 3.9% in 2022 - and is expected to *grow* by 0.3% in 2023 (International Monetary Fund figures).¹⁷

Unsurprisingly the social-imperialist 'left' complains about an "out of control" Putin, ineffective sanctions and the lack of will shown by "western powers" (Simon Pirani).¹⁸ The implication is clear: the G7+ must be urged, persuaded, forced into imposing *effective* sanctions - presumably of the kind that led to the premature death of some 567,000 Iraqi children in the run-up to the second Gulf war (*The Lancet*).¹⁹ If only they were listened to, put in charge, then the "western

powers" would conduct an effective, not a phoney, war.

But Biden's strategy is perfectly clear: combine an economic war - which doubtless inflicts harm on Germany and France, but largely leaves the US unaffected - with a Ukrainian proxy military war against Russia. Zelensky's forces are to be gifted enough military equipment and financial support to ensure that they do not lose, but not enough to trigger a desperate Russia into widening the conflict or going nuclear. In other words, America is willing to pay for Ukrainians and Russian to die in a war that was, from the start, an elephant trap designed to bring about regime change in Moscow.

By giving covert approval to Kyiv's dramatic upping of its artillery bombardment and military preparations to retake the 'people's republics' in the Donbas, by demanding the return of Crimea, by supplying military hardware, training and advisors, by holding out the *distant* prospect of Nato and EU membership for Ukraine, Putin was, yes, tricked into ordering a full-scale invasion. A staggeringly stupid miscalculation.

Strategically Russia is now in a very bad position. Far from the eastward march of Nato being halted, Putin - the man who oversaw the defeat of Georgia in a mere five days, who reunited Crimea with Mother Russia and who faced down the US over Syria - has seen France, Italy and above all Germany thoroughly subordinated to US strategic plans, Finland and Sweden apply for Nato membership and Ukraine act as a militarily effective proxy in what is a (Nato-armed) *people's war*.

That is why Zelensky has not been pleading for a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement. Quite the opposite, in fact. Zelensky speaks of wanting "everything back". This means the whole of Donetsk and Luhansk, Kherson, Mariupol and the Crimea too. In other words, total Russian defeat. An uncompromising stance, which owes as much to geo-strategic calculations being made in Washington, London and Brussels as it does to growing Ukrainian military prowess.

It is not hard to imagine the thinking of imperialist policy-makers. In another year or four, with an exhausted Russia still bogged down in an unwinnable war, the conditions needed to bring about regime change will align: Prigozhin marches on Moscow at the head of his private army; the *siloviki* retire Putin to a sanatorium; back from prison, Alexei Navalny launches a colour revolution; anti-Russian 'national liberation wars' break out in Belarus, Moldova and Georgia; separatist movements within the Russia Federation press for independence - in particular the Chechens, Ingush, Dagestanis, Crimean Tatars, Yakuts and Volga Tatars (CIA options that are already surely operative).

If the US state department could get its man into the Kremlin - say, the already presidential Navalny - there could well be a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement. But that would be Russia's Versailles. The *defeated* country would face war crimes tribunals, crippling reparations, termination of its high-end arms industry and being reduced to an oil- and gas-supplying neo-colony.

There is already excited talk of demilitarising, denuclearising and decentralising a post-Putin Russia, so as to "remove" it as a threat to world peace and make it safe for neighbours.²⁰ More sober voices warn of a Pax Sinica: that is Russia throwing itself into the arms of China and becoming its Austria-Hungary. While China remains officially neutral there can be no doubting the support China is giving in what is

clearly a highly unequal relationship. Trade between the two countries has surged by 41.3% in the first four months of 2023 alone. Chinese vehicle companies have certainly been more than willing to substitute for the western companies such as Toyota which have pulled out from Russia due to sanctions - helping to make China the world's biggest car exporter for the first time. China has also gained access to Vladivostok - formerly Haishenwai under the Qing dynasty - the home port of Russia's Pacific fleet. This will greatly enhance the fortunes of China's Jilin province. All that and more goes to explain why it has almost become a journalistic cliché to write of China being the 'biggest winner of the Russia-Ukraine war'. Precisely the reason why America's main strategic target remains China. Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong and Xinjiang are already set up for such purposes.

It is certainly worth recalling Joe Biden addressing the Business Roundtable of top American CEOs back in March 2022. He talked of instituting a "new world order", led, of course, by god's blessed US of A.²¹ In his brave new world order the US would be able to "manage" at last the Eurasian world island - as envisaged by Zbigniew Brzezinski.²²

In reality, however, the result would not be a new age of democracy, peace and prosperity, as he promised: rather the imposition of breakdown, warlordism and social regression. The *declining* US hegemon is the bringer, nowadays, not of new heights of (capitalist) civilisation: eg, the post-World War II social democratic settlement (in western Europe, Japan and, with a final flourish, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore). Instead it brings barbarism (eg, the contras in Nicaragua, the mujahedeens in Afghanistan, sectarian fragmentation in Iraq, civil war in Syria and Libya). Fear of the pending US new world order, surely, at least in part, explains why, despite Zelensky's pleadings, a whole raft of countries - and not only the 'usual suspects' (eg, Belarus, North Korea, Iran and China), but Turkey, India, South Africa ... even Saudi Arabia - have refused to join the anti-Russia crusade ●

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USA

14th amendment threat

The debt-ceiling crisis is the direct result of the antiquated constitution, argues Daniel Lazare, but 'emergency measures' would be a gift for Trump

Under the heading of "Be careful of what you wish for", Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are calling on Joe Biden to solve the US debt-ceiling crisis by invoking a constitutional clause declaring that the "validity" of US public debt "shall not be questioned".

The clause is part of the 14th amendment - one of three post-Civil War amendments adopted between 1865 and 1870 that were designed to seal the union's victory over the south. By rendering US federal debt inviolable - and by simultaneously declaring that not one penny would go to paying off the Confederacy's wartime obligations - it supposedly allows Joe Biden to declare a century and a half later that Republicans are violating the constitution by pushing the country to renege on its debts and that he therefore has a perfect right to lift the debt ceiling on his own.

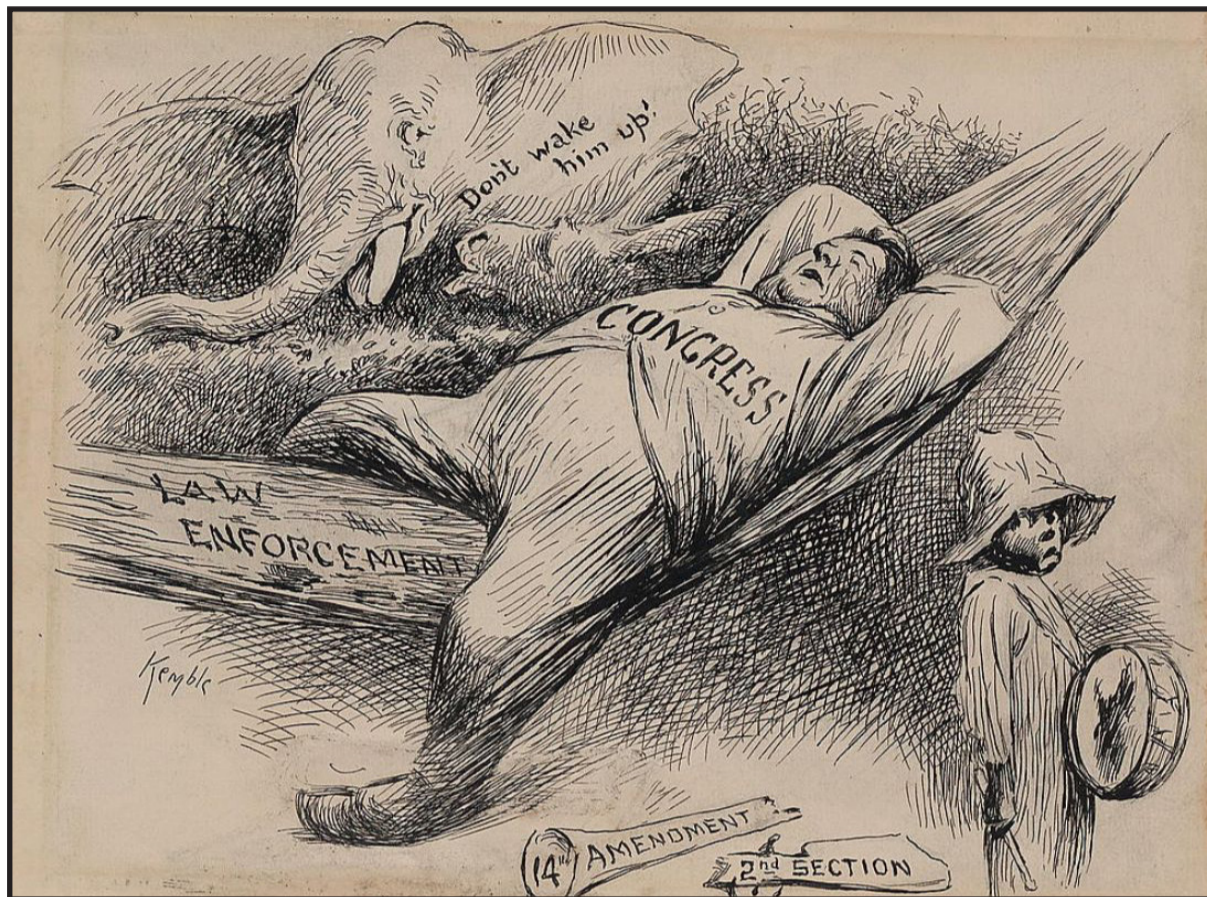
It is a bold stroke that would cut Republicans off at the knees - not undeservedly, since the party's position is so hypocritical as to beggar belief. After voting for a string of budgets that have enabled the federal government to consistently spend approximately \$5 for every \$4 it takes in, Republicans are now shocked - *shocked* - that federal debt now stands at \$31.4 trillion, or 120% of GDP, even though they authorised the build-up in the first place.

Not that the Republican position is without a certain logic of its own. They figure that America's governing machinery is so broken after 30 years of trench warfare on Capitol Hill that they may as well use what is left of it to ram through spending cuts and rightwing 'reforms', like imposing work requirements on Medicaid and food-aid recipients. The goal is to use gridlock in order to turn America into a larger version of Ron DeSantis's Florida - a state in which state schools are forbidden to teach about racial oppression or gay rights; in which corporate taxes have been slashed; in which abortion is effectively banned; and in which courts have been packed with conservatives so as to eliminate political opposition.

If a Florida school principal can be fired for showing students a photo of Michelangelo's *David* - yes, this really happened¹ - then the goal is for two, three, many such dismissals from sea to shining sea. And if pushing US finances over a cliff is what it takes, then so be it. Or so Republicans say, even though it is hard to believe they really mean it.

In which case, as Sanders pointed out in a press conference last week, it will not be just bondholders who pay the price, but ordinary working people as well:

If the rightwing Republicans force a default, it will mean the loss of millions of American jobs, interest rates on mortgages and credit cards will soar, and Americans will lose trillions of dollars in household wealth ... Up to 21 million Americans will lose Medicaid, ripping away the healthcare they need to stay alive. Over a million women, infants and children would not receive the nutrition they need ... Nutrition services ... would be cut for more than one million low-income senior citizens in this country. Over 640,000 families would lose access to rental assistance and more than 400,000 low-income families would be evicted from [federally-subsidised] section 8 housing.²



Drawing by EW Kemble shows a sleeping Congress with a broken 14th amendment. It makes the case that Congress ignored its constitutional obligations to black citizens

Given the enormous attack on the working class this represents, it is no surprise that he and AOC are clamouring for extraordinary measures.

Undemocratic

But there is a problem: conferring emergency power on the executive branch is something that socialists should never do. Assuming that the Supreme Court goes along with it - and it is hard to imagine even today's super-reactionary court blocking a White House effort aimed at preventing default - the result would be a major shift in favour of the presidency at congressional expense.

It is an undemocratic move that will set the stage for more crises to come. So furious will be ultra-right members like Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and Lauren Boebert of western Colorado - extremists who increasingly call the shots in Congress - that it is a sure bet they will engineer another budget confrontation in the fall. Prospects of a government shutdown on October 1 will loom larger and larger as a consequence. The pressure on Biden to take emergency action will loom large as well.

But what will Sleepy Joe do in response - govern by decree? Impose martial law? Biden may be above such things. But rest assured: Donald Trump will not be, if he takes power in January 2025 - a prospect that is by now far from impossible. Indeed, he would relish the opportunity to use emergency powers to quell Democratic resistance - and the fact that he would be following up on a Biden precedent would render the experience all the sweeter. By resorting to emergency powers now, Democrats are paving the way for more emergency powers down the road.

Bottom line: you cannot use broken-down constitutional machinery to fix a problem that the breakdown helped create. Instead of calming financial markets, Biden will undermine confidence by demonstrating how ineffectual US

governing mechanisms have become. Rather than reinforcing US global hegemony, he will weaken it as well by demonstrating how the American government is unable to perform basic tasks that other states take for granted. Paradoxically, US behaviour will likely grow more dangerous and erratic, as it struggles ever more desperately to maintain its position of global dominance.

The US has survived so many near-death experiences in recent decades - stolen elections, an attempted coup, government shutdowns, a similar debt-ceiling crisis in 2011, and so on - that it is hard to say whether it will stagger through yet another. The latest crisis could end tomorrow with Biden and Republican speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy jointly announcing that a deal is in hand. Or it could drag on for a week or more, at which point it will become progressively clearer that the US treasury lacks the cash in hand to pay its bills. The more desperate the plight, the greater the likelihood the White House will resort to the 14th amendment to cut the Gordian knot.

"I'm looking at the 14th amendment, as to whether or not we have the authority," Biden told the press at the G7 conference in Hiroshima on Saturday. "I think we have the authority. The question is could it be done and invoked in time ... That's a question that I think is unresolved."

In other words, he will invoke it if he has to and then worry about cleaning up the mess after. Republicans will no doubt cry bloody murder. But, deep down, they will not be displeased that a financial Armageddon has been forestalled, while Trump-style Bonapartism has received another boost. The system is moving toward authoritarianism, and both wings of the bourgeoisie are helping in their own way to speed it along.

How did America's ancient constitution cause a problem that it will now supposedly solve? The answer is simple. Thanks to the document's elaborate checks, balances and divisions of power, the

system is festooned with chokepoints that allow minor factions to gum up the works. Instead of rule by the democratic majority, the result is recurrent breakdown, as smaller and smaller minorities make the most of their ancient constitutional privileges to get their way. The far-right Freedom Caucus contains just 45 congressmen who mainly hail from the deep south, the west or rural districts up north. That is just 10% of the House, which in turn is only one of three players required to pass a budget. But it does not matter. The system gives the Freedom Caucus more than enough leverage to hold the rest of it up for ransom.

Solution

The solution, if only in the narrow technical sense, is to reform the system in order to eliminate such bottlenecks, so that the machinery can function more smoothly overall. The aim would be to strengthen democracy by curtailing special privileges. But, since the constitution's amending clause is as frozen as the rest of the document, structural change is effectively impossible. So nothing can be done. Republicans are having a field day, while Democrats struggle to make do with a system in a growing state of collapse.

McCarthy, the 58-year-old speaker who purportedly controls the House's slim Republican majority, is a hack from rural southern California, who would like nothing more than to reach an agreement that bolsters his own power. So would Biden - a glad-hander from the micro-state of Delaware (population: 1.02 million), who is never happier than when engaging in the mutual back-scratching that is the stuff of politics on Capitol Hill. Although Sanders and AOC see Biden as their hero, he is a centrist Democrat who has long served as a water boy for hundreds of top US corporations that have made Delaware their home, thanks to the state's notoriously lax corporate laws.

As a member of the Senate judiciary committee, Biden helped shepherd through a major financial 'reform' in 2005 that made it more difficult for over-stretched

homeowners to work their way out of bankruptcy - and downright impossible for college students to dig out from under a mountain of tuition debt, now estimated at more than \$1.6 trillion. He has tried to chip away at Social Security and Medicaid - two programmes at the heart of America's severely underdeveloped welfare state. In 1984, he proposed eliminating cost-of-living adjustments that enable social security benefits to keep pace with inflation. In 1995, he endorsed a balanced-budget amendment that, as he put it, would "freeze every single solitary programme in the government ... [so] that we not spend a penny more - not even accounting for inflation - than we spent the year before". In 2007, he proposed raising the social security retirement age and cutting cost-of-living adjustments as well.³

All would penalise workers, while benefiting a rapacious corporate class. But, if giants like Alphabet (parent company of Google), Amazon, CVS Health and Comcast - all headquartered in Delaware - want stricter bankruptcy laws and smaller social security outlays, then a Delaware senator's job, regardless of party, is to snap to attention and say "Yes, sir!" - something that Biden has done time and again.

Delaware is a rotten borough straight out of the 18th century. Where Britain set about eliminating such relics beginning in 1832, America's supposedly more modern system has allowed them to fester and grow. The result has been nightmarish levels of injustice and corruption. Yet 'progressives' now look to the same antiquated system for emergency relief.

Behind the House Freedom Caucus lies Donald Trump, who represents the most massive structural crisis of all. Trump could not have been more explicit in his May 10 'town hall' meeting on CNN: "I say to the Republicans out there, congressman, senators, if they don't give you massive cuts, you're going to have to do a default."

He went on: "Republicans should not make a deal on the debt ceiling unless they get everything they want (including the 'kitchen sink')," he added on Truth Social, his personal platform, last week. "That's the way the Democrats have always dealt with us. Do not fold!!!"

So McCarthy not only has Greene and Boebert breathing down his neck, but a once and perhaps future king as well. He is paralysed, while Trump follows a classic 'strategy of tension' aimed at sabotaging US finances, so as to make Democrats look feckless and weak. If successful, the goal is to then make his way through the wreckage on the way to a White House victory in November 2024. It is an ultra-risky gambit that fairly ensures that Trump will be even more of a risk-taker second time round - and hence even more extreme and confrontational.

The working class should do everything it can to prevent such a takeover. But it cannot defend democracy with a decrepit constitution dating from the age of slavery. And it should not fall for emergency measures by the Democrats that will pave the way for even worse ●

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TECHNOLOGY

Patterns, prejudices and interests

It can be fun to discover the limits of chatbots, says **Yassamine Mather**, but democratic control is vital. AI will be used as a weapon in the class war

In recent weeks, the media has been full of alarming headlines about artificial intelligence.

For example, in *The Guardian* we have: “‘Godfather of AI’ Geoffrey Hinton quits Google and warns over dangers of misinformation” (he says the “dangers of chatbots were ‘quite scary’ and warns they could be exploited by ‘bad actors’”).¹ Then there is *The New York Times* with “OpenAI’s Sam Altman urges AI regulation in Senate hearing”.² He explains: “I think if this technology goes wrong, it can go quite wrong. And we want to be vocal about that ... We want to work with the government to prevent that from happening.”

With the advent of and easy access to the ‘chatbot’ - a computer programme which imitates human conversation - many have reported obvious, at times dangerous, errors in this latest AI tool. One of the most talked about recent examples is that of a US law professor, wrongly accused of sexual harassment. Jonathan Turley claims he was falsely accused by the ChatGPT chatbot of assaulting students on a trip he “never took”, while working at a school he “never taught at”. Turley added: “What is most striking is that this false accusation was not just generated by AI but ostensibly based on a [*Washington Post*] article that never existed.”³

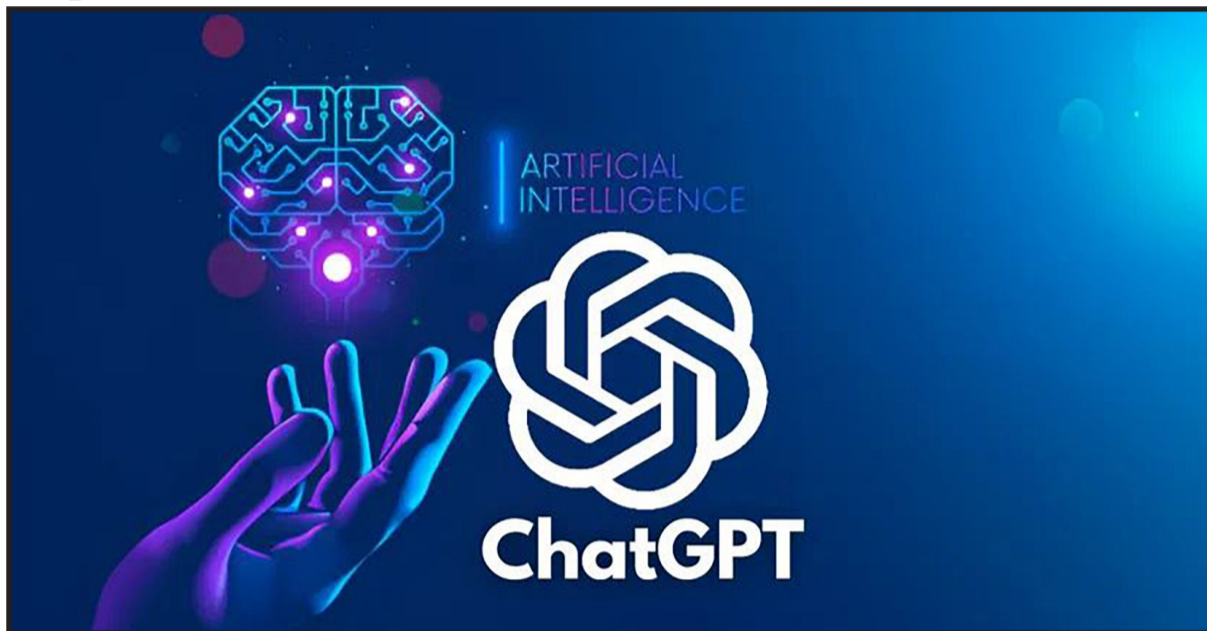
All this at a time when stories about prospects of mass unemployment caused by AI are also making headlines. According to the *Financial Times*, quoting Goldman Sachs,

The investment bank said on Monday that “generative” AI systems such as ChatGPT, which can create content that is indistinguishable from human output, could spark a productivity boom that would eventually raise annual global gross domestic product by seven percent over a 10-year period ... They calculate that roughly two-thirds of jobs in the US and Europe are exposed to some degree of AI automation, based on data on the tasks typically performed in thousands of occupations (May 23).

Of course, the defenders of AI will tell you the exact opposite. According to these people, AI improves efficiency, brings down costs and accelerates research - they say its development is the most influential invention ever, it will revolutionise human development and, when it comes to job losses, it will create many new jobs, so there is nothing to worry about.

The truth lies somewhere in between. My own investigation of ChatGPT has shown mixed results. Although replies to technical or mathematical questions are pretty accurate, those relating to more general information can be bizarre. Incredibly, the response to the same question can vary minute by minute - presumably as machine learning updates the system’s database.

In reply to my question about the academic journal *Critique*, ChatGPT gave reasonably accurate information about founder Hillel Ticktin, the journal’s origins and its analyses of the Soviet Union. It went on to say I had been the acting editor, but died in 2020! Yet this was described as a current journal, so I am not sure who is supposed to have acted as editor in the last 2.5 years. A



Fallible

question on the Middle East Centre in the University of Oxford gave completely false information, telling me that a well known professor of Iranian studies in the University of St Andrews was working at Oxford University.

Of course, this latest AI tool, learning from the more publicised mistakes of the last few weeks, is covering its back by adding the comment that you should visit/consult the relevant university/publisher ... page, as it will have more up-to-date information. ChatGPT is far more modest if you ask a medical question, telling me: “I’m not a doctor, but I can provide some general information that might be helpful”. It went on to inform me: “Ultimately, the decision to operate should be made after careful consideration of your individual health history, risk factors, and discussion with your healthcare provider.”

Limits

Contrary to all the hype, AI is obviously nowhere near being able to take over decision-making. It works best, not as capitalism wants us to believe, as a replacement of the human brain, but in conjunction with it. And the current danger is not simply from AI itself, but from state and other institutions that are willing to allow AI in its current infantile state - with all its mistakes, doubts and constant self-corrections - to create ‘definite’ final data sources, which can determine the plight of human beings. The disasters recorded so far have been the direct result of failing to check AI-generated data.

In the US, AI-based information on a Malaysian academic’s alleged membership of an Islamic group that was affiliated to a terrorist group led to a long court case. Rahinah Ibrahim, who had been a postgraduate in Stanford University, ended up on a US-based ‘Muslim no-fly’ list and her US visa was revoked. The US government has since been forced to accept that Ibrahim - currently the dean of architecture at University of Putra Malaysia - was never a national security threat. In her case false AI information, which was entered into a government database, led to her travel ban. Basically AI confused two similar-sounding, but very different, names of Islamic organisations - one associated with a professional Malaysian academic group that happened to have the word ‘Islam’ in it and the other an Islamist group. It is likely that if a

human had checked the two names, they would have detected the very obvious difference - not something that an algorithm designed to identify spelling mistakes can do!

An integral and crucial part of artificial intelligence has been the development of ‘machine learning’ (ML) - often described as a subset of AI. However, ML in reality means feeding large amounts of data into algorithms, with the aim of teaching machines to recognise similar patterns, to learn from them and use this learning to make predictions. Obviously errors can occur in the gathered data - not to mention prejudices in terms of race, gender, accent, etc, with these faults becoming embedded in the algorithm. Yet the ML used in a wide range of daily applications - ranging from image and speech recognition to immigration controls and fraud detection - remains ‘supreme’ and is often unchallenged.

A simple example of ‘prejudice’ - in this case the influence of Eurocentrism - is provided by YouTube’s transcribing service, which converts recorded audio to plain text. It works reasonably well for North American or standard English accents, but you hit problems if the speaker has a strong regional accent and you might as well give up if they have an Indian or African accent. This is a direct consequence of the training material used by code writers who relied on audio files recorded in California. All other AI prejudices, including Islamophobia, have the same source. In other words, it is not simply AI, but the errors resulting from human input - which often remain unchallenged.

Another important AI development has been ‘deep learning’. This is more sophisticated, in that it makes use of neural networks - algorithms inspired by the more complicated structure of the human brain. Deep learning models can recognise complex patterns in pictures, text, sounds and other data to produce accurate insights and predictions, making them very useful for tasks like image and speech recognition.

However, some scientists have criticised reinforcement learning, which is a trial-and-error process. Basically an AI agent performs a number of actions in a given environment, and in each unique moment has a particular state, moving from one such state to a new one. The ‘software agent’ learns through trial and error, in that, when

it takes a desired action, it receives a ‘reward’, in the same way as a pet is rewarded for good behaviour (or is punished for bad behaviour). In AI the rewards and punishments are calculated mathematically. For example, a self-driving system could receive a ‘-1’ when the model hits a wall, and a ‘+1’ if it safely passes another vehicle. These signals allow the agent to evaluate its performance.

The algorithm learns through trial and error to maximise the reward - and ultimately complete the task. This has been compared to what biological intelligence systems do. Therefore, we can say that each learning episode (sometimes called an ‘epoch’) can be represented as a sequence of states, actions and rewards. Each state depends only on the previous states and actions, as the environment is inherently stochastic (in other words, the state that follows next cannot be accurately predicted). The problem with all this is, of course, that trial and error is not very sophisticated - there is no room for pausing and reassessing the algorithm, the fundamental suppositions, etc.

There are plenty of examples of deep-learning AI going wrong. One such example was Amazon’s AI-based recruitment solution, which was supposed to be able to process résumés sent by job applicants, analyse their qualifications and other details, and provide a list of those who should be hired. However, it was soon discovered that the AI was ‘biased’ towards male candidates! Why was this? For the simple reason that Amazon’s engineers had bench-marked the neural network training data for an engineering job applicant’s résumé with the current (largely male) employees of engineering teams.

Employment

Capitalist use of AI has one fundamental aim: the maximisation of profit - often at the expense of reducing human involvement. We should, of course, be concerned about this - not just in terms of solidarity with those who will potentially lose their jobs, but also because this short-termism will inevitably lead to automation mistakes, if not disasters, and will ultimately have a damaging effect on the development of AI.

Let us look at the consequences of AI mistakes in some of the jobs known to be at risk. We are told, for instance, that AI will take on many of the tasks of a paralegal, including preparing legal documents, research,

admin, providing quotes to clients, preparing questions for clients and witnesses, providing legal information ... It will take just one case to go wrong for a legal firm to be taken to court, with subsequent litigation costing tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of pounds to stop this in its tracks.

Take the example of the driverless automated car. After billions of pounds were spent developing the AI for this to construct driving patterns and create databases, using data gathered by hundreds of thousands of Uber drivers, a couple of deaths caused by driverless cars in the US ended the practical deployment of such cars. I would hazard a guess that the first successful litigation against an AI-operated paralegal system would put an end to its use - despite all the current hype.

On the other hand, using AI to gather information, to categorise and analyse data in conjunction with a human paralegal, makes sense. Human beings can benefit from AI tools - as long as they remain in charge, rather than giving full control to mistake-prone AI decision-makers.

No doubt some jobs will be lost. We have recently seen pleas by supermarket checkout workers in the UK for shoppers not to use automated checkout points. Of course, all these automated points require regular human intervention, but one employee can oversee several checkpoints. Similarly, in airports the automated passport control, despite its many initial problems, seems to be working reasonably well, with face recognition software able to do the work previously carried out by a number of staff.

Supporters of AI claim it will actually create many new jobs. This may be true when it comes to developing new algorithms, but these jobs require highly trained staff and are currently mainly male. In the UK less than 10% of code writers are female. According to a statement on the United Nations website, *UN Women*, published in February 2023,

Today, women remain a minority in both STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] education and careers, representing only 28% of engineering graduates, 22% of artificial intelligence workers and less than one third of tech-sector employees globally. Without equal representation in these fields, women’s participation in shaping technology, research, investments and policy will remain critically limited.⁴

Ironically the percentage is much lower in advanced western capitalist countries and, of course, this explains to certain extent the gender bias of many algorithms.

However, no-one seems to pay any attention to another bias in AI algorithms - that based on class! ●

Notes

1. www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/may/02/geoffrey-hinton-godfather-of-ai-quits-google-warns-dangers-of-machine-learning.
2. www.nytimes.com/2023/05/16/technology/openai-altman-artificial-intelligence-regulation.html.
3. eu.usatoday.com/story/opinion/columnist/2023/04/03/chatgpt-misinformation-bias-flaws-ai-chatbot/11571830002.
4. www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/explainer/2023/02/power-on-how-we-can-supercharge-an-equitable-digital-future.

CONSERVATISM



Heirs of Edmund Burke

For all its incoherence, the National Conservatism conference in London is indicative of a worrying direction of travel for the global right, argues Paul Demarty

A flutter of excitement rippled through the punditocracy last week, as details of speeches at the inaugural National Conservatism UK conference leaked out.

A copy of an existing series of such conferences - in Florida, Rome and Brussels so far - it gathered a rum old crew to denounce the general state of affairs in wider society. There were the cabinet ministers and the former cabinet ministers: Suella Braverman, Michael Gove and Jacob Rees-Mogg. There was the man who set the whole thing rolling: Yoram Hazony, the Israeli-American chairman of the Edmund Burke Foundation. The Old Whig, Edmund Burke, it should be noted, is a hero of the right, being considered, especially in the USA, as the philosophical founder of modern conservatism, not least because of his writings attacking the 1789 great French revolution. There were intellectuals: the counter-jihadist and anti-woke bore, Douglas Murray; and ex-leftists Frank Furedi and Nina Power. There were the wonks: Matthew Goodwin and David Goodhart, whose whole careers as political scientists have consisted of telling politicians to *actually* cut immigration numbers rather than pretending to; Michael Anton, an American ghoul of the species, 'west-coast Straussian'; Brexit bureaucrat David Frost; and innumerable others.

The headlines were, of course, dominated by the statements of ministers and MPs. A certain amount of pearl-clutching attended to Miriam Cates's use of the phrases, "cultural Marxism" and "neo-Marxism"; both needed to be expurgated as part of an effort to improve the birth rate, and both - especially the 'cultural' variant - have been interpreted as essentially

anti-Semitic dog whistles, for blaming present-day identity politics somewhat bizarrely on the largely Jewish intellectuals of the Frankfurt School.¹ Suella Braverman argued that mass immigration was a threat to "national character",² although Braverman herself is evidence of the robustness of that "character", showing that it is possible for a second-generation immigrant to meld seamlessly with the philistinism and narrow-mindedness of provincial little-Englanderism - indeed to become its most doughty champion. Jacob Rees-Mogg breezily admitted that voter ID laws were a bungled attempt at gerrymandering, apparently unaware of the peanut-throwing throng in the press gallery.

Beyond the headlines, though, it is worth thinking a little about what all this *means*. The first matter of note is that it is not long since the only British politician to attend the first of these little jollies - the MP, Daniel Kawczynski - was criticised discreetly for bringing the Tories into disrepute; this was in 2020 (the glory days of Boris Johnson, mind you). How things change ... The fact that so many Tory grandees, including cabinet ministers, felt free to show up and tell us their interesting thoughts last week is a mile-marker on a road. It remains to be seen where the road leads, exactly, but the destination is unlikely to be pleasant for the left.

Definitions

Then there is the question demanded by all this: what *is* national conservatism? On the basis of the speeches given, you would have to call it a hopelessly incoherent hodgepodge, with one rock-

**First Florida, then Rome,
then Brussels and now
London**

**Here's a 'big idea':
let's blame 'cultural
Marxism', 'neo-Marxism',
migrants, low birth rates,
'the woke left'**



solid point of unity: visceral hatred of the left. Yet that appearance may be deceptive - a matter of failing to resist the lure of celebrity, and precisely packing the running order with stock Tories. There is something like a coherent intellectual-political project that you might call national conservatism, within which there are major disagreements about strategy (one could say the same about Marxism, for that matter).

It is perhaps easier to get a hold of by first of all zooming out: there is a cluster of ideologies emerging that are grouped together as 'post-liberalism'. This amounts to the idea that - especially since the 1989-91 'end of history' - a pervasive culture of liberal individualism has been dominant in the west, but has essentially run out of road. Successful political projects in the future must go beyond the deracinated anthropology of liberalism, proposing a stronger conception of the common good and deliberately using the state to build that consensus.

The question immediately arises: *what* common good? Just as immediately, we are returned a barrage of different answers. Post-liberals include Christian communitarian 'socialists' (John Milbank, Adrian Pabst, perhaps Alasdair MacIntyre, and the whole Blue Labour project); so-called reactionary feminists (Power, Mary Harrington, Louise Perry, all of whom were NatCon UK speakers); Catholic integralists (Adrian Vermeule, Patrick Deneen); the list goes on. It is worth noting, in passing, that there is a certain Marxisant current in the post-liberal milieu too, which

is sometimes identified as 'post-leftism', which consists of people at least of leftwing origins, whose opposition to identitarianism goes to the point of adopting 'conservative' critiques of conventional leftwing policies like open borders, trans rights and the like.

It may be objected that this is an amalgam, but, in my defence, representatives of all these trends are happy to self-designate as post-liberal. They seem to enjoy being part of a wider political *demimonde*: and who are we to deny people the right to identify however they like?

National conservatism, then, is a strand within this tangled mess. Its advocates take socially conservative stances on gender roles and sexuality, and object to the neoliberal consensus in mainstream conservatism. But above all they focus their fire on the question of immigration, of which they want a great deal less. It is the job of nation-states to build up their own common good, which in turn means maintaining a coherent national culture, to which mass immigration is thought to represent a significant threat. The marquee names on this bill are Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump - but, as a representative ideologue, one could mention the former Fox News presenter, Tucker Carlson. More distantly, they inherit their main concerns from the American paleoconservatives of the 1980s and 90s, such as Pat Buchanan and Sam Francis. (Orbán looms largest, since he is increasingly an influence on the American NatCons, and indeed provided some material backing for the London conference via friendly think-tanks.)

In their account, a strong

What we fight for

state is an indispensable tool for maintaining such a national culture. Yet the state is undermined from within by a “globalist” elite that prioritises the needs of high finance and happily hurls ordinary, horny-handed workers on the trash-heap of history, and justifies its existence by demonstrative acts of liberalisation, when it comes to sexuality, race relations and other ‘cultural’ issues.

At this point, it is necessary to do some accounting. We are not quite sure where the idea comes from that the Orbán government has strengthened the domestic working class. Though he originally rode to power more than 15 years ago by opportunistically denouncing a privatisation programme of the then-ruling social democrats (in origin the ruling official Communist Party of the cold war years), his government has liberalised the labour market to a near-comical degree, which did at least make Hungary an attractive outsourcing destination for German industrial capital. Trump, likewise, talked a good game at rescuing blue-collar Joe Sixpack types from the “American carnage”, but achieved nothing in that regard - his banner achievement on economic policy was merely a huge corporate tax cut that might even have embarrassed George W Bush. Carlson gives some token airtime to labour activists, but spun so as to pursue a ‘social’ agenda: thus, for example, an interview with Amazon organiser Chris Smalls, which he spent trying to start a bunfight between Smalls and ‘progressive’ congresswoman Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez.

Incoherence

Thus, also, the strange incoherence of NatCon UK. Cates’s speech - besides its jeremiads about phantom ‘Marxists’ - amounted to a call for far greater state support for families, and denounced in passing the introduction of a two-child cap on child benefits. It was roughly representative of the far-right social democratic politics of national conservatism. She shared the podium, however, with David Frost, whose big idea was unleashing the free market, and the same could be said of Jacob Rees-Mogg and other ultra-Thatcherite Brexiters of the same stamp. Both, if they are honest with themselves, despise the thought

of subsidising the large families of the ‘workshy’.

In short, you could hardly form a political party out of the raw material on display here, even if the British constitution were kinder to smaller parties. Not, at least, one with a *fully* worked-out programme. They would have to focus on the things they agreed about: that is, the threat of “cultural Marxism”, of the “grooming” of children by “gender ideology”, of the mere idea that declining birth rates are regrettable (but not on any proactive policy to deal with it), which would immediately split them six ways to Sunday. Likewise foreign policy: hawkishness on the China front was happily indulged, but the Ukraine war was largely skirted - not least, we suspect, because Orbán’s regime is playing a tricky diplomatic game.³

There is, on the face of it, thus something pathetic about the whole endeavour. It is an attempt to build an international movement (always a paradoxical affair among nationalists!) purely on the basis of the hatred of a scapegoat, but a wholly abstract scapegoat. There are many different kinds of Marxism, of course, from that recognisable to Marx and Engels to state-backed Marxism-Leninism, to Trotskyism, communism and identitarian subtypes like Marxist feminism and Black Marxism. The NatCons oppose something altogether different, which - with apologies to Miriam Cates - I would like to call ‘bogeyman Marxism’, a pervasive and indistinct threat that grows and shrinks to meet the polemical needs of the moment (the true red under the bed).

It offers a spurious urgency to the whole business, but really amounts to getting high on your own supply. The NatCons, and the wider anti-woke sphere, systematically deceive themselves about the nature of their opponents. Even when those opponents really do err - by advocating idiotic and irrationalist forms of identity politics - they see these developments as if in a fairground mirror. This goes even when they are happy to use Marxian or otherwise ‘left-coded’ arguments and jargon. Mary Harrington’s talk, for example, was peppered with buzzwords like “biopolitics” and “the politics of the body”,⁴ which we used to hear a lot from

the very postmodernist academic left so scorned by the NatCons; and her interesting but extremely slippery book *Feminism against progress* relies in part on Engelsian arguments about the history of the family.⁵ Yet her central argument - that trans rights is, as her book puts it, an “emotive wedge issue” for a *Bioshock*-style post-human dystopia⁶ (first augured by nothing other than the contraceptive pill) is simply a conspiracy theory, taking a few wild statements from transhumanist academics to be representative of a whole movement she despises too intensely to see clearly.

Combat

It is only political movements that actually offer a meaningful and coherent threat to the existing order of capitalism that really need the instruments of political combat: discipline, programmatic unity and the like. These are tricks that bourgeois parties learned from the example of the workers’ movement, whether they like to admit it or not. National conservatism offers no such challenge: its ‘social democratic’ edge is no more likely to survive the ravages of global financial violence than were the programmes of François Mitterrand or François Hollande in France or Syriza in Greece, for example, and canniness on that point no doubt accounts for Orbán’s willingness to turn his people into an exploitable resource for larger neighbours.

In the wider post-liberal sphere, there is even some awareness of this problem; for a theologian like Milbank, or indeed some of the integralists, the foundation of the nation-state is merely an execrable corruption of the early modern period, and one hears occasional, half-joking proposals to revive the Holy Roman Empire or Habsburg Austro-Hungary. Milbank distanced himself from the conference (though his son, Sebastian, was one of the speakers); Pabst denounced it in advance in the *New Statesman* (the Staggers having become the home turf of the ‘post-liberal left’ in the British media)⁷. Yet he is a ferocious royalist, on the basis of the mystical and religious element in the whole machinery of monarchy, and thus is no less trapped in the same paradigm.

The apparent radicalism is therefore a sham. That is not to say the whole business is without its uses. The flipside to national conservatism having no need of a conventional political apparatus is, precisely, that it may achieve some kind of success without it. Capitalist rule demands legitimating ideology - hence the liberal and more recently identitarian fig leaves adopted by many western states and ideological institutions in the post-cold-war era. A transition *away from* such liberal apologetic structures has long been discernible, from relative global minnows like Orbán’s Hungary to big beasts like India under Narendra Modi, and Japan under Shinzo Abe and his successors.

The praxis of such things as the NatCon phenomenon is thus influence-peddling - thought leadership, as Californian business types would put it. For all the grand appeals to tradition, faith, patriotism and the common good, the mastery of the ideologues by capital ensures a basically transactional mode of operation. Rich rightwing political donors might happily support both ultra-libertarian outlets like the American Enterprise Institute and Adam Smith Institute, and paleocon nationalists at Claremont or the NatCon crowd. Peter Geoghegan usefully follows the money in an article for the *London Review of Books*⁸; but it is merely one example, and the rightwing media world,

especially in the USA, is awash in dark money.

Leaders like Modi and Orbán are pragmatists: nationalists mostly in theory, globalists mostly in practice. Their vicious ideological commitments - Orbán’s overt racism, Modi’s pogroms against Muslims, Abe’s revisionism when it comes to the barbarism of the Japanese occupation in China and Korea - are, in the end, the mirror-image of liberal tokenism (girlboss feminism, minority representation on boards and in film casts). As material benefits to their intended constituencies, they amount to nothing. As symbolic points of unity between rulers and ruled, they do a job. And, while there is a logical equivalence here in the game of bourgeois politics, there is not a moral one - giving more Oscars to black actors does not hurt anyone, but the cost of Hindutva rule in India (to take one example) is paid by Muslims lynched for cow-rustling, among other ‘sacrificial animals’, varied to suit local - ‘national’ - tastes.

For the same reason, those ‘post-leftists’ who find a realignment with the nationalist right a more palatable option than alliance with the identitarians have taken the most hopeless possible course. The basic error of left-identitarianism, when you get past all the irrationalism and melodramatic flummery, is an old one - popular frontism. The demands of ‘intersectionality’ end up functioning the same way as those of the bourgeois parties of the 1930s people’s fronts - as a veto on revolutionary methods, since subordination to these vetoes is considered self-sabotage.

Rightly taking fright at the disastrous effects of this on the left’s fighting capacity, the post-leftists propose - as a remedy! - doing exactly the same thing but in alliance with the *right*, with *those* people at *that* conference: a few mildly interesting intellectuals, admittedly, amid an army of golems formed from the clay of pure *ressentiment*. Instead of accepting neoliberalism in return for gay rights, we will accept anti-immigrant rampages in return for ... whatever the ‘globalists’ will permit, at the end of the day, or whatever advantages can be grabbed in mercantilist fashion on the short road to great-power war. At least Frank Furedi was honest enough with himself, in the end, to just go over wholesale to the other team.

NatCon UK is ominous, therefore, because it gives the lie to a certain whiggishness about recent advances in the liberty of the oppressed in western countries. Bourgeois liberalism is not to be faulted for ‘imposing’ its mores in contradiction to ‘common sense’, but its inability to make those mores stick, since their truth is more egalitarian than the system will bear.

These things go in cycles. A grim atmosphere indeed awaits all Marxists, real and imaginary, when the worm finally turns for good ●

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Notes

1. www.miriamcates.org.uk/news/our-declining-birth-rate.
2. www.youtube.com/watch?v=NS5nh1aD-qM.
3. The Hungarians have form here, leaping on the rather pathetic far-right pundit Rod Dreher - in self-imposed Hungarian exile from the US - when he leaked candid remarks by Orbán on the prospects for peace: www.thebulwark.com/how-rod-dreher-caused-an-international-scandal-in-eastern-europe.
4. reactionaryfeminist.substack.com/p/disunited-posthuman-kingdom.
5. M Harrington *Feminism against progress* Corbridge 2023 (see especially chapter 2).
6. *op cit* p161.
7. www.newstatesman.com/quickfire/2023/05/national-conservatism-is-intellectual-dead-end.
8. www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n11/peter-geoghegan/short-cuts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Online Communist Forum



Sunday May 28 5pm

The F-16 stage of the Ukraine war: a week in politics - political report from CPGB’s Provisional Central Committee and discussion

Use this link to join meeting:
communistparty.co.uk/ocf-register

Organised by CPGB: communistparty.co.uk and
Labour Party Marxists: www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk
For further information, email Stan Keable at
Secretary@labourpartymarxists.org.uk

A selection of previous Online Communist Forum talks can be viewed at: youtube.com/c/CommunistPartyofGreatBritain

weekly worker

Neutral
but always
taking sides

Same old road

Do not expect any radical shift, particularly on foreign policy, under a Sinn Féin-led government, warns Anne McShane

The success of Sinn Féin in the Northern Ireland elections puts it in a very strong position. It is now indisputably the most popular political party on the island of Ireland. SF is surely destined for government in the next election in the republic - due to be held before March 2025. The only unknowns are the size of its vote and the identity of its coalition partners.

I have argued many times that the suggestion that this will be a leftwing government is an utter fallacy. Shamefully the leadership of the main Irish leftwing organisation, People before Profit, is perpetuating this delusion. It declared in its recent pamphlet that "we want to participate in a left government that transforms people's lives for the better and represents real change from the old Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael status quo".¹ To that end it has reassured SF leader Mary Lou MacDonald that its TDs will vote for her to form a government after the next election, provided she does not go into coalition with Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael. Some PBP members - in particular those connected with the Rise faction led by Paul Murphy - have alibied their support for government with SF with the claim that this is the 'united front tactic' in action. Comrades, if your scheme is successful - and it's a big if - it will be a popular front in action. You will be participating in a capitalist government and you will have lost your bearings - just like Syriza and all those others who have taken this opportunistic turn.

Tracking

Meanwhile, SF continues to track to the right in order to win backing from bourgeois forces, nationally and internationally. One of the most recent examples is the shift in its position on neutrality. The Irish state has been officially neutral since the 1930s, meaning that it has not been an official member of any military alliance or engaged directly in war. It is not currently a member of Nato - although it is tied to it through the so-called Partnership for Peace programme. Ireland's main overseas military engagement from the 1960s has been in UN 'peace-keeping' missions. It continues to play this role, while recently also taking on the training of military forces in Afghanistan and Ukraine.

Of course, as this shows, the state has never really been impartial or independent. In World War II - often seen as the highpoint of Irish 'neutrality' - taoiseach Eamon de Valera formally refused to take sides between the great powers and would not close the German and Japanese embassies in Dublin. However, in practice he did, of course, take the side of the Allies. Luftwaffe pilots who crashed on Irish soil were arrested and interned, while their counterparts in the RAF and USAF were allowed to go free. De Valera also permitted the use of



Richard Boyd Barrett: tailing Sinn Féin

Irish airspace for US and British war planes and shared military intelligence with them. These practices have continued since, with amenities, intelligence and assistance from a reliable Irish state. There is even a longstanding agreement to allow the British state to intercept 'alien craft' in Irish airspace. And, of course, we cannot forget the recent history of active collusion with the British state to criminalise and subjugate the movement for Irish unity in the north.

Numerous instances can be found to show the utter abjectness of the Irish state. The most notorious up to recently was the way that the government allowed Shannon airport to be utilised by the US war machine. In 2003 the Dáil approved the refuelling of war planes on their way to bomb Iraq, along with the transport of supplies and military personnel to Afghanistan and the Middle East. US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks in 2006 showed that Irish government ministers were aware that the US was using Shannon as a stopover for flights involving renditions. In 2009 Amnesty International also reported that the government was permitting Shannon to be used as part of the US rendition circuit. It provided evidence to show it was a staging post for the transfer of detainees to torture sites. The government submitted to pressure to hold an investigation and then effectively dropped it.

Since 2022 the Ukraine war has precipitated a dramatic shift from even the pretence of neutrality. In January last year PBP's Richard Boyd Barrett demanded of then taoiseach Micheál Martin as to why Nato had not been condemned for its eastward expansionism. Martin responded firmly:

We're not politically neutral, but we're military neutral. It's an important distinction. We're members of the European Union. We work with our European Union colleagues in terms of rules-based multilateral approaches to international disputes.²

Immediately a commitment was given to dispatch non-lethal support to the Ukrainian army. Foreign minister Simon Coveney then announced in October that Ireland would be part of the EU's military mission to train Ukrainian forces.

Now the government wants to go further. Martin, now in the role of deputy premier and foreign minister, said in April that Ireland is no longer secure and has to increase its military capacity, particularly in relation to possible sabotage of international fibre-optic cables, which run through Irish waters. *The Irish Times* carried a story on May 14 that Ireland is likely to sign up to a Nato project to monitor and protect undersea cables. On May 17 it was reported that the heads of EU and Nato navies were meeting

in Cork to discuss Russia's presence in European - ie, Irish - waters. Reports of Russian ships off the south-west coast, including naval support vessels and frigates, have been appearing in the press since before 2022. One report states: "Security experts fear that these ships are mapping out undersea communication channels and other critical pieces of maritime infrastructure - such as wind farms - ahead of possible sabotage attacks on Europe." It appears that the Nato initiative will be called the Critical Undersea Infrastructure Cell, but the monitoring of Russian ships is already well underway.

In many respects none of this is new. Ireland has been part of the EU's Pesco (Permanent Structured Cooperation) since its establishment in 2017. But rather than cooperation with the EU and Nato happening behind the scenes, as was previously the case, the government is now talking it up. While Leo Varadkar (the present taoiseach) denies that Ireland will become part of a military alliance, he insists that it will support such military groupings: "We're going to continue to work with Nato partners through the Partnership for Peace. And we're going to continue to work with the EU on security questions through the Pesco arrangement." Recent announcements of increases in military spending are clearly aimed at developing Irish capacity to provide logistical support, training and intelligence to the EU and Nato.

Drawn to Nato

The government has also announced that a three-day consultation on security and neutrality is to take place next month. The three forums, to be held in Cork, Dublin and Galway, will have presentations from security, defence and foreign policy experts, academics and, of course, prominent politicians. Members of the public can attend, but not speak (although they are allowed to submit written submissions in advance!). As well as being a method to draw Ireland more openly into Nato, the consultation is to consider removing the 'Triple Lock', which prevents Irish troops being dispatched abroad without Dáil approval. The popular commitment of Irish neutrality will be under attack. More than anything else, this is a political battle.

The attitude of SF to support for Nato has also shifted significantly to the right on this issue. In reply to questions from *The Irish Times* this month, its foreign affairs spokesperson, Matt Carthy, stated:

While we will not withdraw Irish defence forces from pre-committed operations and exercises, we will approach future proposals in the context of the principles underpinned by Irish neutrality and the opportunities that neutrality provides both Ireland and the EU to play a positive and constructive role in building peace and ending conflicts ...

Furthermore,

Ireland's future participation in Pesco and Partnership for Peace must also be assessed based on those principles and should never undermine our capacity to continue playing an important role in UN peace-keeping missions.

In a lengthy statement following this, Carthy confirmed that an SF government would not be withdrawing from these bodies, but would be taking an approach which 'emphasised independence and neutrality'.³ It says it wants a referendum on neutrality to take place, while still abiding by its commitments to Nato and the EU. The status quo would not therefore be threatened by an SF government. An angry PBP issued a statement calling on SF to deny the *Times* reports - which, of course, it would not and could not.

So there we have it. SF will and does support imperialism and its wars. The US can rely on it to act in the same way as Irish governments have always done. No wonder Biden greeted Mary Lou MacDonald so warmly when he visited Ireland. She and her government will be no threat to its interests. It will, however, most definitely be a threat to the working class ●

Notes

1. 'Chasing after cabinet seats' *Weekly Worker* April 27: weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1440/chasing-after-cabinet-seats.
2. www.thejournal.ie/training-exercise-russia-ireland-5664154-Jan2022.
3. www.sinnfein.ie/contents/65525.

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