

A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity



weekly  
**worker**



**Supplement: ancient Israel worshipped many gods besides Yahweh and his wife, Asherah**

- Letters and debate
- Steve Bloom polemic
- Ukraine: PCC statement call
- Fredric Jameson 1934-2024

No 1509 October 3 2024

Towards a mass Communist Party

£1/€1.10 - free for Palestine marchers

# ISRAEL BENT ON A FOUR FRONT WAR





## LETTERS



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

## Pathetic parody

I was very pleased to read Arthur Bough's letter in the September 26 issue of the *Weekly Worker* and wish to contribute further "auto Trot" material.

It really is amazing that Lars T Lih proceeds with his ridiculous theses that the real leaders of the October Revolution were the Bolshevik rights (Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov, Kalinin, Lunacharsky, etc), who opposed not only Lenin's April theses, but the taking of power itself in October 1917, going to the capitalist press in an attempt to stop it. Lenin had no understanding of the relation of class forces on the ground, so Kamenev and Stalin had to edit his 'Letters from afar' and put him right on this when he returned on April 3.

It seems the version of history put forward by Trotsky, Trotskyists and the majority of capitalist academic historians is false, and Lars T is the only one who has discovered the truth (with Eric Blanc as a partial ally) that the rights were the real Bolsheviks and the lefts were a waste of time; Lenin was a cultish figure and Trotsky's 1924 *Lessons of October* was a slander on the rights, those true Bolsheviks.

So please do not read *Lessons of October*, lest you might take the wrong lessons from that book and let us set ourselves on a programme that will ensure we will never again make such a monumental error like the October 1917 revolution. There is no other conclusion we can draw from the outright falsification of the history of the Bolsheviks in 1917, to which ignoble task Lars T has dedicated himself for something like a decade. I have answered him many times, but it is impossible to remain silent in the face of this 22,000-word supplement on September 19.

Let us take Lenin's words in *Pravda* No26 (April 7 1917). He was for the immediate convocation of a party congress and the alteration of the party programme, mainly: (1) on the question of imperialism and the imperialist war; (2) on "our attitude towards the state and our demand for a 'commune state'"; (3) the amendment of "our out-of-date minimum programme". He was also for a change of the party's name. His footnote 3 says: "Instead of 'Social Democracy', whose official leaders throughout the world have betrayed socialism and deserted to the bourgeoisie (the 'defencists' and the vacillating 'Kautskyites'), we must call ourselves the Communist Party."

Lenin presented his theses on April 4 first to a gathering of Social Democrats and later to a Bolshevik committee, both of which immediately rejected them. *Pravda* published them, but carefully noted that they were Lenin's personal ideas. He got a hot reception from some Bolsheviks; Alexander Bogdanov called out that his speech was the "delusion of a lunatic". Joseph Goldenberg, a former member of the Bolshevik central committee also denounced him: "Everything we have just heard is a complete repudiation of the entire Social Democratic doctrine, of the whole theory of scientific Marxism. We have just heard a clear and unequivocal declaration for anarchism. Its herald, the heir of Bakunin, is Lenin. Lenin, the Marxist, Lenin, the leader of our fighting Social Democratic Party, is no more. A new Lenin is born: Lenin, the anarchist" (David Shub *Lenin*, 1948, p203).

The *Pravda* editorial contained Lenin's sister, Maria Ulyanova, Aleksandra Kollontai and his wife, Krupskaya; even they did not support him on this in the beginning: "No prominent Bolshevik leader supported his call to revolution, and the editorial board of *Pravda* took the extraordinary step of dissociating themselves and the party from Lenin's proposals. Nadezhda Krupskaya concluded: "I am afraid it looks as if Lenin has gone crazy" (Slavoj Žižek, quoting Lenin by Hélène Carrère d'Encausse in the *London Review of Books*). History correctly records that Lenin won that argument by appealing to the second ranks and particularly to the Bolsheviks on the Petrograd soviet.

Lenin was definitely convinced that things in the Bolshevik Party needed changing. *Pravda* under Shliapnikov and Molotov was absolutely anti-war, but the line was immediately changed in mid-March to support for the war and the Provisional government: "Under Kamenev's and Stalin's influence, *Pravda* took a conciliatory tone towards the Provisional Government - "insofar as it struggles against reaction or counterrevolution" (Stalin) - and called for a unification conference with the internationalist wing of the Mensheviks.

According to EH Carr (*The Bolshevik revolution* London 1950), on March 15 Kamenev supported the war effort: "When army faces army, it would be the most insane policy to suggest to one of those armies to lay down its arms and go home. This would not be a policy of peace, but a policy of slavery, which would be rejected with disgust by a free people." On March 16 Stalin wrote "The slogan, 'Down with the war' is useless."

Among crucial phrases censored out of Lenin's 'Letters from afar' was his charge that "those who advocate that the workers' support the new government in the interests of the struggle against tsarist reaction ... are traitors to the workers, traitors to the cause of the proletariat [and] the cause of freedom."

In 1949 Stalin allowed the publication of Lenin's 'Letter on tactics' (written between April 8 and 13 1917, but not translated into English until 1964). Here we find the arguments against old Bolshevism, Lenin's central target in his April theses:

"The person who now speaks only of a 'revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry' is behind the times. Consequently, he has in effect gone over to the petty bourgeoisie against the proletarian class struggle. That person should be consigned to the archive of 'Bolshevik' pre-revolutionary antiques (it may be called the archive of 'old Bolsheviks')."

He finished his piece with an unambiguous attack on Kamenev (Stalin had somewhat backpedalled by then and had nothing of substance to say again until he saw Lenin in his final stages in 1923):

"It seems to me that these words betray a completely erroneous estimate of the situation. Comrade Kamenev contraposes to a 'party of the masses' a 'group of propagandists'. But the 'masses' have now succumbed to the craze of 'revolutionary' defencism. Is it not more becoming for internationalists at this moment to show that they can resist 'mass' intoxication rather than to 'wish to remain' with the masses - ie, to succumb to the general epidemic? Have we not seen how in all the belligerent countries of Europe the chauvinists tried to justify themselves on the grounds that they wished to 'remain with

the masses'? Must we not be able to remain for a time in the minority against the 'mass' intoxication? Is it not the work of the propagandists at the present moment that forms the key point for disentangling the proletarian line from the defencist and petty-bourgeois 'mass' intoxication? It was this fusion of the masses, proletarian and non-proletarian, regardless of class differences within the masses, that formed one of the conditions for the defencist epidemic. To speak contemptuously of a 'group of propagandists' advocating a proletarian line does not seem to be very becoming."

Lenin himself accused Kamenev and Zinoviev of treason four days after the successful revolution on October 25 (they had leaked the plans for the uprising to the capitalist press):

"And now, at such a moment, when we are in power, we are faced with a split. Zinoviev and Kamenev say that we will not seize power [in the entire country]. I am in no mood to listen to this calmly. I view this as treason. What do they want? Do they want to plunge us into [spontaneous] knife-play? Only the proletariat is able to lead the country."

"It is not easy to discover an explanation for such shameful vacillations of the comrades Zinoviev and Kamenev. The revolutionary party has no right to tolerate vacillations in such a serious question, as this little pair of comrades, who have scattered their principles to the winds, might cause a certain confusion of mind. It is necessary to analyse their arguments, to expose their vacillations, to show how shameful they are ... They say, 'We have no majority among the people, and without this condition the uprising is hopeless ...'

"Men capable of saying this are either distorters of the truth or pedants, who at all events, without taking the least account of the real circumstances of the revolution, wish to secure an advance guarantee that the Bolshevik Party has received throughout the whole country no more nor less than one-half of the votes plus one. Such a guaranteed history has never proffered and is absolutely in no position to proffer in any revolution. To advance such a demand means to mock one's audience and is nothing but a cover to hide one's own flight from reality."

I think everyone must acknowledge this is Lenin in his best fighting revolutionary form handing out a merciless ear-bashing to the rights, whom Lars T Lih would like to try to persuade us were the real heroes of the Russian Revolutions. It is clear that Lenin and Trotsky led that revolutionary struggle and not Lars T's pathetic conciliators.

**Gerry Downing**  
Socialist Fight

## Unbalanced

I agree with Tony Clark (Letters, September 19) that we should take a balanced approach to all leading figures in the world communist movement. The exact balance sheet of positives and negatives for each should be a matter of legitimate discussion, debate and judgement.

Tony is mistaken, however, to claim that "in Khrushchev's view, Stalin was all bad". On the contrary, Khrushchev regarded Stalin as a highly complex and contradictory character (much as he was himself), with both immense positives and immense negatives.

Very brief examples from Khrushchev's memoirs (translated from Russian): "We no longer looked on him as we had when 'enemies of the people' were first being unmasked, when it seemed he could see through iron and stone ...

But, after smashing Hitler's forces, he still had an aura of glory and genius about him ... he remained a Marxist ... did everything in his power for the victory of the working class ... I have to give him his due ... everyone who knew Stalin admired this gift and was therefore proud to work with him ... Especially when he was sober and in sound mind, he gave the people around him good advice and instruction. I'll say it straight: I valued him highly and strongly respected him."

Of course, many criticise Khrushchev's 'secret speech' (with the hindsight of 70 years) to the closed session of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 as being partial and inadequate, indeed - seeking to cover up his own complicity in the events and the excesses of 1937-38. But it was nonetheless monumental, extraordinary, devastating and transformative in its own right. It was very far from certain that Khrushchev would ever have become Soviet leader, that he would ever make such a speech, or that he would survive the negative consequences of making it.

In my opinion, among Khrushchev's own achievements were: the removal and elimination of Beria; the restoration of the leading role of the Communist Party in the Soviet state and society (Khrushchev was senior secretary and then first secretary from September 1953); the effective launch of deStalinisation; the restoration of full socialist legality; the replacement of one-man rule by a collective leadership; and, as he said himself, the removal of conservative opponents from the leadership between 1955 and 1957, without their subsequent liquidation. Khrushchev's own peaceful removal from office in 1964 was itself testament to those achievements.

I agreed at the time and still agree with Monty Johnstone in his March 1985 *Marxism Today* article, when he said: "Stalinism had been undermined by its very success in carrying through a major industrial and cultural revolution. The needs and aspirations of a great industrial state with an expanding planned economy, an increasingly educated population and an avowed commitment to Marxism conflicted with [Stalinist rule]."

"A more realistic appraisal was publicly made of the lag in Soviet industry, and particularly agriculture, in comparison with the west. Steps were taken to stimulate more initiative from below. A much greater emphasis was placed on the production of consumer goods, and very important material concessions were made to the peasantry."

I think this shows both the materialist conception and dialectics of history in operation: the underlying progressive material and economic factors impacting on the growing cultural, educational and aspirational needs and wants of the Soviet population; and the role of the extraordinary individual - in this case Khrushchev. What may have been effective and appropriate in the 1930s and 40s was no longer so in the 1950s and 60s.

It fell to the Gorbachev leadership in the mid-1980s very late in the day (too late?) to try and complete the stalled process of deStalinisation and launch a comprehensive and wholesale process of democratisation, renewal and revitalisation of the Soviet economy and society, taking full advantage of the scientific and technological revolution, which would influence the coming 21st century.

Gorbachev, despite the radicalism of his thinking and political,

economic and social programme, also made a very careful and balanced assessment of the very tremendous achievements of Soviet society under both Stalin and Khrushchev, the positive political and personal qualities of both individual leaders, as well as a trenchant critique of their negative aspects. (Read, for example, his address on the 70th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution.)

So, I would argue in response to Tony, it is completely core and basic to the mainstream communist tradition to take a fully rounded, balanced and dialectical view and assessment of our collective history, and indeed of the conditions, prospects and options for socialist revolutions in the advanced capitalist countries.

**Andrew Northall**  
Kettering

## Kimist Stalinism

Tony Clark writes: "For a long time, most of the communist movement have based themselves on an anti-dialectical view of the past, with the partial exception of the leadership of the Communist Party of China under Mao, following Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin back in 1956."

To be charitable, this is a very oversimplified view, which ignores certain key facts. In fact Khrushchev's attack on JV Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was not just opposed by the CPC, but also by the Workers Party of Korea under the leadership of president Kim Il Sung and, to be fair, also Albania and a number of non-ruling communist parties. In fact probably the bulk of the international communist movement did not accept the denunciation of Stalin - it was only supported by those parties under the control of the CPSU and those parties in Europe and elsewhere that were beginning to show signs of liberalism and right deviationism.

Delving deep into the matter, we find that in fact the CPC actually initially accepted the line of the 20th Congress of the CPSU but later switched to opposition. Enver Hoxha and the Albanian Party of Labour also initially accepted the line of the 20th Congress, only to very vocally oppose it later. However, the Workers Party of Korea refused from day one to accept Khrushchev's attack on Stalin. At the 3rd Congress of the WPK, held in April 1956, there was no mention of criticising Stalin.

Therefore it was not surprising that in August 1956 revisionist elements in the WPK, with the backing of outside forces, tried to overthrow the leadership of president Kim Il Sung. Of course, they failed because the Korean people were solidly behind him (some steelworkers even asked the president to send the factionalists to them so they could throw them in the furnace!) Two things were significant about this; firstly it was not just pro-Soviet factionalists involved, but also the pro-Chinese 'Yanan' faction; secondly, some of the factionalists ran away to the revisionist USSR and later after 1991 became open agents of the fascist south Korean puppet regime.

There needs to be a far greater appreciation of the anti-revisionist role played by the Workers Party of Korea.

**Dermot Hudson**  
London

## Psychobabble

On September 20 John Wedger said on the online *Not the BCFM politics show*: "If the white middle classes in this country knew the state of our young citizens of inner-



city areas they would be horrified. They are borderline moronic, some of them. They can't articulate. They're ignorant. I cannot believe the ignorance of them. One of them the other day asked me what was Glasgow ... and I told him it was a city in Scotland. And then he asked me, were there polar bears walking around the streets there? A grown man!"

When I heard him speak these words, I thought, how do we achieve socialism in these circumstances? How are we going to organise to create a better society? This is where the vanguard party comes into play - and predominantly Leninist thinking. The vanguard party practising 'democratic' centralism will lead the working classes to the promised land, as such.

But what if the vanguard party gets infiltrated and hijacked, as happens to so many movements? There was Roger Windsor of National Union of Mineworkers fame. Lenin himself was accused of being a German agent. Oops! Keir Starmer within the Labour Party - he once pretended to be a Jeremy Corbyn supporter. Mark Kennedy, aka Mark Stone, gained fame for infiltrating several protest groups, acting as an *agent provocateur* and simultaneously finding time to have sexual relationships with several women he knew, whilst pretending to be someone he wasn't.

In a socialist society I believe we will have a better formal education, and overall education will be a continuous process from cradle to grave, in my opinion - in the sense that working people will have every opportunity to study and take time off without experiencing a decline in living standards and without voluntarily indebting themselves to a bank for a life. But that's after we achieve socialism.

My thoughts of a vanguard party lead me to thinking, 'Why not embrace the idea of a benevolent dictator?' We've just as much chance of success believing in a benevolent dictator. Who do we trust? Marx said it was the job of the working class to achieve socialism. But what if the working class are becoming increasingly moronic? On top of this we have artificial intelligence to contend with. It will be used maliciously against revolutionary movements, or I should say movements which on the face of it seem just to be formed to allow its members to pontificate political/revolutionary psychobabble to one another, as if it's meaningful in any way.

As AI is not under democratic control by working class organisations, I shouldn't think it will ever be used to better the conditions of life for working class people. It will be used to create a whole new industrial landscape with greater opportunities for profit accumulation.

I went to school for 12 years and met many a moron - not all of them teachers, I should point out. I went to school with some perpetrators of the Sean Graham bookmakers massacre (Belfast, 1992). So I know all about moronism. I've witnessed the most base of what humanity has to offer.

So how do we navigate ourselves out of this morass? I do have a soft spot for the Socialist Party of Great Britain (They're probably thinking, 'Just our luck to have a moron like him as a supporter!'). But really, to me this is the crucial question surrounding all revolutionary activism. How do we achieve a socialist society through peaceful means, through intellectual enquiry, through conscientious endeavour, through working within mass organisations, etc, etc, when a large proportion of the population are as

good as moronic?

People may have the potential to become a Mozart or a Shakespeare, but what about the guy who didn't know what Glasgow was?

**Louis Shawcross**  
County Down

## Seminal truth

Was I alone in recognising how last week's article from Mike Macnair, and letters from Brünnhilde Olding and Arthur Bough, shared between them a simple but seminal truth: the fact that what is required of Marxism-Leninism/Trotskyism is to be *inspirational*, and within that provide attractive templates for successful party-building and proven programmes?

**Bruno Kretzschmar**  
email

## Fossil fool

With the high court decision to quash planning permission for the new mine, Woodhouse, near Whitehaven, we have seen the last bullet in a war which began in 1980. It has changed and widened its aims, as it went on and switched its flag from the Tories to Miliband's and Starmer's Labour.

It is the war against coal and its real target, the miners. At the risk of sounding like one of John Cleese's black knights, determined to fight on minus arms and legs, we may yet stage a new beachhead. After all, over the last six years the various flat-earthisms and friends of the Stone Age have thrown all kinds of legal hoops and barriers in the way, and we've cleared the lot. The simple fact being that this is a *steel coal* mine; its extract will go for coke. We still use steel made with coke/coal by the million tonnes.

This will be the first time we lost. I say 'we' not only because the National Union of Mineworkers were keen advocates of the mine, not simply because we had every indication that the NUM would be reborn at this mine, but because I gave evidence both at county council enquiries and the national independent enquiry held with every form of expert.

This time they hit on an obstruction for all seasons - the same magic puzzle which had dumbfounded the enquiry into the development of new oil reserves and stopped their development. Had all previous enquiries taken into account the emissions which would be made in the lifetime of the mine? Well, no, they had never raised that and, if they had, so what? It's a question that is easily answered. But, because it had not been asked, we would have to start again - only this time with Miliband as the obsessive Joan of Arc anti carbon crusader in a highly hostile environment. The Labour government made it plain to the court that it did not want the mine and that it had no objections to the rejection of permission for its go-ahead. With West Cumbria Mining - which has invested £181million on 500 miners' jobs and 2,000 associated ancillary jobs, not to mention the upgrade to the main Whitehaven-Carlisle railway line - must be wondering: is it really worth the effort? No doubt prospects at winning at least one million tonnes of rich coking coal per year seemed rewarding. This was so, even when 'net zero' had meant they only had 25 years before they packed it in.

So there is this insoluble question then: what is the point? Will the answer mean that because of all these emissions we will no longer use new steel, which is essential for virtually everything we use every day? That can be the only point of the question. Otherwise we find out the net worth of future emissions and either choose which has less - coal from Whitehaven or from

Appalachia in the US? Coal tankered across the ocean, or else supplied from next door? A choice between unregulated strip mining, with no environmental safeguards, using the worst mining method yet devised, run by non-union firms? Or else heavily monitored, environmentally controlled production in an equal employer-union mine? That would be the point.

Unless we use the dreaded question just as a means to stop the Whitehaven mine, knowing all the while that coal for the coke will enter European blast furnaces from America, with emissions not recorded. Who will care that the plague of wind turbines, which will cover the British Isles, will have been made with a veritable fog of emissions, or indeed any of the hundreds of thousands of tonnes of steel we use every day, or steel products will have been made without the slightest enquiry or thought as to their environmental impact. The question was never meant to be asked of every producer - only British ones, because then we can say, 'We're net zero'. It won't mean anything in fact, except unemployment for miners and steel makers here. We will still be causing the emissions, we still will be buying the produce of the emissions, but we will export the emissions abroad. You call that a victory?

Meantime a battlefield nearly as wide and of equal importance as the miners has opened up against the oil and gas rig workers. With manic determination, the aim is to run down and turn off all oil and gas in UK waters. The only country in the 'Group of Seven' to stop making its own steel is now determined to shut down oil and gas too. Needless to say, this is exactly the same fight as the miners'. We sit in bombed-out villages and towns, rotten with deprivation and unemployment, with dead-end jobs for the ex-miners, their kids and grandkids. The loss of jobs on the rigs, the refineries, and terminals, in transport and ancillary associated work has seen put conservatively at over two million. Will there be a wave of depression and hopelessness not seen since the 30s?

Even the TUC declared support for the workers resisting the closures. With the notable exceptions of the National Education Union and Unison, they voted at the TUC congress in favour of Unite and GMB resolutions and argued: '*No ban without a plan*'. No cutbacks and closures without some alternative work and social fallback for the workers. In the meantime the Socialist Workers Party distinguished itself by wheeling out two ex-miners, who declared that they wouldn't be used in the cause of fossil-fuel capitalists wanting to pollute the world. Such hypocrisy, when we had demanded 'Coal, not dole', and insisted that all reserves which could be mined safely *should* be mined. We produced 180 million tonnes per year, and we wanted to carry on producing that.

Ah, but the workers were the flavour of the month then, and the roots of the class lay in industry. Not so now, and the SWP clearly feels more at home with the eco-warriors and the middle class than the sons and daughters of toil. Let me say, I'm proud to stand alongside gas and oil miners in this new battle front of deindustrialisation and the war to eliminate industry and the proletariat. We hear a lot about being on the right side of history. But it's more important that we stand on the right side of the picket line and barricades - on the side of the working class - and history will take care of itself.

**Dave Douglass**  
South Shields

# ACTION

## Your right to protest

**Friday October 4, 7pm:** Book launch, Housmans Bookshop, 5 Caledonian Road, London N1. Human rights barrister and campaigner Christian Weaver introduces his new book. This guide details your rights and the laws that protect you - and those laws you may inadvertently break as a political activist. Entrance £3.50 (£1). Organised by Housmans Bookshop: housmans.com/events.

## Troublemakers at work

**Saturday October 5, 9.30am to 5pm:** Conference for trade unionists, Central Hall, Oldham Street, Manchester M1. Share experiences with other workers: from organising from scratch or reviving a moribund union to resisting a rotten deal or winning a strike. Tickets £10 (£5). Organised by Troublemakers At Work: troublemakersat.work/conference-2024.

## End the genocide - stop arming Israel

**Saturday October 5, 12 noon:** National demonstration. Assemble Russell Square, march to Whitehall. Demand the government ends complicity in Israel's genocide and pushes for a permanent ceasefire. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events.

## Defend the winter fuel payment

**Monday October 7, 12.30pm:** Protest and lobby of parliament. Assemble by George V statue, Abingdon Street, London SW1. The government's decision to axe universal winter fuel payments is the latest policy to target the oldest and most vulnerable in society. Organised by National Pensioners Convention: www.npcuk.org/post/lobby-of-parliament.

## What made us human?

**Tuesday October 8, 6.30pm:** Talks on social and biological anthropology, Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviton Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1, and online. This meeting: 'Gendered species: a natural history of patriarchy'. Speaker: Tamas David-Barrett. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: www.facebook.com/events/1612952362605329.

## We're not going back

**Tuesday October 8, 7pm:** Musical comedy about the miners' strike, Fenton Town Hall, 3 Gimson Street, Stoke-on-Trent ST4. In a pit village hit hard by the government's war on the miners, three sisters are determined to set up a branch of Women Against Pit Closures. Tickets £10.46. Presented by Red Ladder Theatre Company: www.facebook.com/events/328087337041304.

## Lambeth for disinvestment from Israel

**Wednesday October 9, 6pm:** Lobby pensions committee, Lambeth town hall, 1 Brixton Hill, London SW2. Lambeth council has over £10 million of local government pensions invested in companies complicit in Israel's oppression of Palestine. Organised by Lambeth and Wandsworth Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events/lambeth-for-divestment-lobbies.

## Ceasefire now - stop arming Israel

**Thursday October 10:** Nationwide workplace day of action. Take up the struggle for a ceasefire and an end to Britain's arming of Israel with work colleagues at solidarity actions. Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk/events.

## School and uni strike for Palestine

**Thursday October 10:** Nationwide mass student walkout. Students taking action in solidarity with the people of Palestine. Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk/events/national-school-uni-strike-for-palestine.

## Trade unions building solidarity with Palestine

**Saturday October 19, 10am to 4.30pm:** Conference for trade unionists, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1. Key Palestinian voices and union leaders discuss solidarity with Palestine, including divestment campaigns targeting institutions complicit with Israel's crimes. Tickets £20 (£15). Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: palestinecampaign.org/events.

## Walter Rodney: what they don't want you to know

**Thursday October 24, 7pm:** Film screening, Working Class Movement Library, 51 Crescent, Salford M5. Documentary about historian and Marxist Walter Rodney (assassinated in 1980 at the age of 38). The film covers cold war conspiracies, black power and Rodney's murder. Register for free ticket. Organised by Working Class Movement Library: wcmf.org.uk/event/walter-rodney-what-they-dont-want-you-to-know.

## Mixing pop and politics

**Friday October 25, 7pm:** Book event, Housmans Bookshop, 5 Caledonian Road, London N1. Author Toby Manning introduces *Mixing pop and politics: a Marxist history of popular music*, his radical history of political and social upheavals in the last 70 years, told through the period's most popular music. Entrance £3.50 (£1). Organised by Housmans Bookshop: housmans.com/events.

## Bargain books

**Saturday October 26, 11am:** Book sale, Marx Memorial Library, 37a Clerkenwell Green, London EC1. Get your hands on Marxist classics and rare pamphlets. Organised by Marx Memorial Library: www.marx-memorial-library.org.uk/event/485.

## Stop Tommy Robinson, stop the far right

**Saturday October 26, 12 noon:** National demonstration. Assemble central London, venue tbc. Tommy Robinson is planning a march to spread racism and Islamophobia. Mobilise to prevent the far right from taking over the streets. Organised by Stand Up to Racism: standuptoracism.org.uk.

## CPGB wills

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



## MIDDLE EAST

# Itching for war on four fronts

Tehran's theocratic regime has fallen into a 'trap' of Netanyahu's making. With Israel wanting to fight Gaza, West Bank, Lebanon and Iran, the whole region looks in danger of being dragged down into a terrible conflagration. **Yassamine Mather** looks to the revolutionary politics of the working class

**B**enjamin Netanyahu finally got what he wanted. On October 1 Iran launched between 180 and 200 ballistic missiles. As every intelligent observer of the region is aware: Iran has fallen into his "trap".

Over the last few months, Netanyahu's far-right coalition government has done all it can to provoke the Islamic Republic, not least the pager explosions in Lebanon and the assassination of close allies, including in Iran itself. Israel is not only confident in its own military prowess: it knows that the United States will fully back it.

As expected, both sides made contradictory claims about the success and failure of the October 1 strike. However, we know that the Israeli Iron Dome, helped by US and UK air interventions, failed to stop all the incoming missiles. Some got through and left behind deep craters. Sillier Middle East social media pundits were quick to label Israel's acclaimed air defence system a "paper dome", while the White House called Iran's attack "ineffective". Most news agencies, however, agree that there were direct hits on Israeli targets, showing the limitations of Israel's famed air defence systems.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards claim that Fattaha-2 hypersonic missiles took less than 12 minutes to reach Tel Aviv, while a BBC fact check confirms that the Nevatim air base, housing F-35 jets, was hit. There is also video footage of an oil rig burning in Ashkelon in southern Israel.

With western news agencies continuing to expose their hypocrisy when it comes to reporting events in the Middle East, a CNN reporter saw no irony in saying that Israel's Mossad headquarters are located in a "densely populated area" in Tel Aviv: "The concern is if you're firing, even though Iran might consider that a military target, it is in a densely populated city with civilians around it" - repeating almost word for word the accusations against Hamas and Hezbollah for more than a year.

Confirming that Mossad headquarters was a target, according to US senior journalist Nick Schiffrin, an Iranian rocket struck just outside the Mossad's HQ. This is a clear message from Tehran, confirming that its intelligence capabilities and missile reach could target strategic Israeli assets. According to the US government-affiliated Peace Institute, Iran has the largest and most diverse arsenal of ballistic missiles in the Middle East - some with a range of more than 2,000 kilometres. Reuters quoted a senior Iranian official claiming that Tehran had informed the US of the planned attack "shortly before" it took place, but this was later denied by Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's vice-president for strategic affairs.

Either way, global security researcher William Alberque, a former director of Nato's arms control programme, says the October 1 attack has dramatically changed the equation in the Middle East ... because of what comes next. Netanyahu has already said Iran "made a big mistake" and "will pay for it." IDF chief of staff, Herzi Halevi promises that the response will come as a shock to Tehran. "We will choose when to exact the price, and prove our precise and surprising attack capabilities, in accordance with the guidance of the political echelon," he ominously warns.



**IDF scuttles from Lebanon in 2006**

It might be said that Iran's leaders were left with very few choices. The night before, on September 30, a couple of days after the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and less than 10 days after the mass mutilation of thousands of Hezbollah cadre and Lebanese citizens, Israel launched its ground invasion of southern Lebanon, in what the Israeli Defence Forces called "limited, localised and targeted" attack, as various facilities located close to the border posed "an immediate threat to Israeli communities". The emphasis on the nature of the attack, limited and localised, is supposed to differentiate this latest attempt from previous Israeli invasions of Lebanon in 1982 and 2006, both of which ended in defeat for the Zionist state.

### Unanswered

On September 30, Iranian president Massoud Pezeshkian denounced the Israeli attacks against Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis and made a promise of responding: "We cannot accept such actions and they will not be left unanswered." The following day, he added: "Netanyahu needs to know that Iran is not a warmonger, but it stands firmly against any threat. This is only a small part of our power. Do not enter into a conflict with Iran."

In Iran itself, until the October 1 missile attack, he and his government were facing a major backlash from conservative factions angry at the failure to respond to the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in July. There are rumours and accusations that the Zionist state must have spies in the highest echelons of Iran's Revolutionary Guards - who gave details of Haniyeh's residence in Tehran, his travel plans and where he was staying in Beirut. All this adds to fears about who will be Israel's next victim - the supreme leader, ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has reportedly been moved to a secret location.

Last week Pezeshkian, his deputy Javad Zarif and foreign minister Abbas Araqchi went out of their way to present a conciliatory message to the west, repeatedly arguing they are keen on resuming diplomacy and nuclear negotiations. As I wrote last week, Pezeshkian was quoted as saying that Iran would give up all weapons if Israel did the same.<sup>1</sup> In his UN speech, the Iranian president lamented the death of 40,000 Palestinians, but did not issue any threats against Israel.

Ali Motahari, a well-known conservative political activist in Iran, tweeted earlier this week that Iran's hesitation in responding to the assassination of "martyr Ismail Haniyeh" in Tehran encouraged Israel to "dare" to kill Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut: "We were deceived by the United States, which repeatedly sent messages saying, 'Don't retaliate, we will establish a ceasefire next week'."

Amir Hossein Sabati - a member of parliament and a supporter of Saeed Jalili, a political rival of Massoud Pezeshkian - agreed: "Why should 80 million Iranians and the Resistance Front pay the price for the naivety of a few individuals?" In response, the president's son, Yousef Pezeshkian, wrote: "The overall policies of the regime and matters of war and peace are under the authority of the supreme leader, and Pezeshkian is loyal to the leadership and will never disobey the orders of the commander-in-chief. The insinuation that the president disobeyed the leader's orders is in line with Israeli operations."

Javad Emam, spokesperson for Iran's Reformist Front, also criticised Sabati's statements, calling them "demagoguery." He called for Sabati to refrain from creating a "polarised" environment and provoking the public under current conditions. Emam urged Sabati first to seek answers from Iran's security officials regarding the assassination of Haniyeh and the "suspicions of infiltration and its connection to Israel". He commented that decisions regarding military actions are beyond the president's authority and require the endorsement of the supreme leader, adding that Khamenei had "wisely and prudently" prevented the country from being dragged into a pre-planned Israeli trap by taking "extreme and emotional decisions".

In fact, the cost of not responding to Israeli assassinations was far higher than expected in Iran - extreme rhetoric and unfulfilled promises of liberating 'Quds' (Palestine) had paved the way for a psychological war on the Axis of Resistance. The government, the military and the supreme leader had no choice but to act.

Hours before the land invasion in Lebanon we heard Netanyahu addressing the Iranian people with what amounted to a regime change message:

Israel stands with you. You'll be free sooner than people think

... with every passing moment, the regime is bringing you - the noble Persian people - closer to the abyss ... Imagine if all the vast money the regime wasted on nuclear weapons and foreign wars were invested in your children's education, in improving your healthcare, in building your nation's infrastructure, water, sewage, all the other things that you need.

When Iran is finally free - and that moment will come a lot sooner than people think - everything will be different. Our two ancient peoples, the Jewish people and the Persian people, will finally be at peace. Our two countries, Israel and Iran, will be at peace.

When that day comes, the terror network that the regime built on five continents will be bankrupt, and dismantled. Iran will thrive as never before: Global investment; massive tourism; and brilliant technological innovation based on the tremendous talents inside Iran. Doesn't that sound better than endless poverty, repression and war?

All this reminded Iranians of the Israeli premier's message to the people of Lebanon before the current onslaught, prompting the expectation of yet another Israeli terrorist assassination inside Iran or - even worse - an air onslaught against the country's nuclear facilities.

Historically, Israel has been cautious in directly attacking Iran for several reasons: regional instability, a potential international backlash and the fear of triggering a broader conflict with Iran's network of support: Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis.

However, until yesterday the unspoken deterrents that might have once constrained Israel's actions seemed to have drained away. The Israeli state compares Iran to an octopus, with tentacles in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen and its head in Tehran. According to this analogy, the killing of Hezbollah's leader in Lebanon, the dismantling of Hamas in Gaza, and airstrikes against Houthi targets in Yemen all aim at cutting off arms before going for the head itself.

No doubt with recent developments Israel feels emboldened, calculating that the regional power balance has shifted in its favour, making a confrontation with Iran seem less daunting or more strategically viable. However, there are many false assumptions in any such calculation.

First of all, Iran's ballistic programme had been underestimated. It has plenty more missiles available to launch at any time. Secondly, Hezbollah fighters thrive in martyrdom, and the assassination of the group's leader has unleashed unprecedented anger among the organisation's rank and file, who will continue to fight in south Lebanon. Contrary to western media propaganda, Hezbollah is no longer just a Shia sectarian militia in Lebanon. As I keep saying, it is now an integral and important part of Lebanon's capitalist economy and state. Many non-Shia Lebanese see the current Israeli air raids and land invasion as an attack on their country and the current Lebanese government is calling on all its allies to support a ceasefire.

After a year of war against the

Palestinians in Gaza, conducted under the claim of "destroying Hamas", the Israeli state has failed to achieve its stated military aims. But, the reality is that what the Netanyahu government really wants is the opportunity to expel millions of Palestinians, a second nakba. Many believe the extension of the war to Lebanon should be seen in that light. Add war with Iran to that and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza will appear as a mere detail for much of the western media and political class. Given the support Netanyahu has received from Biden and his officials over the assassination of Nasrallah and the incursion into Lebanon, it is clear that, irrespective of who wins the US presidential election, Netanyahu can rely on the new president to support his next step.

### Hezbollah

The western media is full of misinformation about Hezbollah and its leadership, and it is therefore important to look at the group's origins, as well as its evolution from a militia to a major regional political force.

In the 1960s and 70s, the Shia population in Lebanon was not mobilised along sectarian lines. In the south of the country, many joined left organisations like the Lebanese Communist Party. However, in the 1970s, Musa al-Sadr, a charismatic cleric educated in Iraq, began challenging the left. He formed the Movement of the Deprived to advocate for the rights of marginalised groups, and its military wing, Amal, that emerged with the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975.

Events between 1978 and 1982 further pushed the Shia population away from the left: Israel invaded twice during this period, displacing hundreds of thousands of people. Additionally, the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran offered a new ideological model for Shia Muslims, diverging from both western capitalism and leftist ideology.

The most critical event in Hezbollah's formation was the Israeli invasion of 1982, which was aimed at driving out the Palestine Liberation Organisation from Lebanon. The invasion resulted in mass displacement, including the Sabra and Shatila massacre, where thousands of refugees under the 'protection' of the Israeli military, including many Shia, were killed. The invasion and the massacre proved pivotal in galvanising the Shia community.

Hezbollah was formed in 1982 by a group of Muslim clerics in close cooperation with Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who had been stationed in Lebanon's Bekka Valley in response to the Israeli invasion. Iran's role was to help consolidate several Shia groups committed to resisting Israeli forces and participating in the ongoing Lebanese civil war. The Islamic Republic initially provided military training and equipment for the Shia militias. Over time, these various groups unified under the banner of Hezbollah, through the formal announcement of the 'Party of God' and its armed wing, the Islamic Resistance.

The group also gained political power and widespread support through the provision of social



services and healthcare, and its influential media outlet, Al-Manar TV.

Another key moment for Hezbollah came in 2006 when it conducted a cross-border raid, capturing two Israeli soldiers and killing several others. This provoked a month-long war with Israel that ended in a ceasefire. Despite heavy losses, Hezbollah claimed victory, and this bolstered its standing across much of the Arab world.

While the organisation promotes an Islamic way of life, it has moderated some of its early religious strictness. Initially, Hezbollah imposed Islamic codes of behaviour in southern Lebanon, though this met with mixed reactions. As the group expanded its political and economic activities, it became more lenient when it came to social customs, including dress codes. This change is even evident on al-Manar TV, where female presenters do not abide by any type of Islamic stricture on attire. Hezbollah's political strategy emphasises that its Islamic vision is not aimed at imposing a theocratic system on Lebanon.

Since 1985, Hezbollah has developed a sophisticated internal structure. In the 1980s, it formed the *majlis al-shura*, a religious council of prominent leaders, which oversees multiple aspects of the organisation's operations, including financial, judicial, social, political and military functions. The organisation also established regional councils in Beirut, the Bekka Valley and southern Lebanon. As Hezbollah entered mainstream Lebanese politics towards the end of the civil war, it created additional decision-making bodies, including an executive council and a politburo.

Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah is often referred to as Hezbollah's 'spiritual leader'. However, both he and the party repeatedly denied this religious connection. A rift existed between Iranian and Lebanese Shia over the role of the *marja'iyah* - the institution through which Shia Muslims follow a *marja al-taqlid* (source of religious guidance). Fadlallah believed that religious scholars should not affiliate to a single political party or involve themselves in governmental affairs. His views align with traditional Shia jurisprudence and differ from the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (rule of the clerics), advocated by ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran.

Hezbollah's *majlis al-shura* officially follows Khamenei, Khomeini's successor as supreme leader of Iran. However, individual members or supporters are free to follow other *marja'*, with many choosing Fadlallah. This illustrates the distinction between political allegiance and religious emulation within the party.

Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah was Hezbollah's secretary-general since 1992, following the assassination of his predecessor, Sayyid Abbas al-Musawi, by Israel. Though a religious scholar trained in Najaf, he was not ranked as a *marja al-taqlid* and instead followed Khamenei. Nasrallah was known for his direct leadership style and became the figurehead, as Hezbollah transitioned into mainstream Lebanese politics - a shift that distanced some more radical clerics from the party's leadership.

While Hezbollah has a strong connection with Iran, including military and economic support, the party's decisions are independent and centred around Lebanese interests. Hezbollah's relationship with Syria has also been close, though Syria has no control over the party's actions. After the assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafic al-Hariri in 2005, Hezbollah carefully supported

his position on Syria's withdrawal from the country, framing it as a step that would not sever ties between Lebanon and Syria.

Hezbollah presents itself as a nationalist party but in contrast to the Phoenician-based nationalism of Maronite Christian groups and the neoliberal, US-backed nationalism of parties like that of Hariri. Hezbollah's vision of Lebanon is of an Arab state which is closely tied to regional causes, such as Palestine. Despite its Islamic outlook, Hezbollah has consistently emphasised: "We don't want Islam to reign in Lebanon by force."

Hezbollah's nationalism has evolved, as it transitioned from a resistance movement to a major political player. After the Syrian withdrawal in 2005, it successfully increased its parliamentary representation and entered the cabinet for the first time.

In addition to its military and political activities, Hezbollah championed a social agenda in the early years and it used to portray itself as a representative of the poor, especially within the Shia community. In the 2005 elections, Hezbollah demonstrated its political flexibility by aligning with various non-Shia figures, including Bahiyya al-Hariri, sister of the assassinated prime minister. Since then, Hezbollah's most significant political ally has been Michel Aoun, an 'anti-Syrian' figure in Lebanese politics. Together, they have collaborated in major initiatives, such as opposing government privatisation plans that threaten public-sector jobs.

Emerging during a period of economic stagnation exacerbated by the Lebanese civil war, Hezbollah's welfare institutions filled significant gaps in healthcare, education and housing - areas where the crippled Lebanese state struggled. The party's social services are largely funded by donations, religious taxes like the *khums* (a Shia tithe), and financial contributions from the Lebanese diaspora. As I wrote in March 2024, an organisation called Friends of Shia Lebanon acts globally to collect financial support from wealthy Lebanese individuals who live abroad. Amongst the wealthiest are owners of major multinational companies with interests throughout the Middle East and Africa (for example, Car Care Center ERS, which has numerous international branches).<sup>2</sup>

Hezbollah's social services and military presence continue to coexist with its involvement in Lebanese politics, and its popularity is closely tied to its role as both a resistance group and a provider of essential services. This dual role helps explain why Hezbollah remains deeply entrenched in the social and political life of Lebanon despite the various pressures it faces, both internally and externally.

Its adoption of neoliberal economic policies has also brought it political alliances with Christian groups, such as Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, reflecting its broader political strategy of cross-sectarian alliances. This strategy allowed Hezbollah to cement itself within Lebanon's official political structure. For instance, Christian leaders have eulogised Hezbollah figures like Hassan Nasrallah.

On September 28, soon after the assassination of the Hezbollah leader, former Lebanese president, Aoun, wrote on X (Twitter):

With the martyrdom of His Eminence, Hassan Nasrallah, Lebanon lost a distinguished and honourable leader who guided the national resistance on the path to victory and liberation. He remained true to his word, loyal to

his people and deeply committed to their cause. In turn, they reciprocated his devotion with trust, love and respect.

Aoun, describing Nasrallah as "a noble friend", expressed concern over the current challenges Lebanon faces amid ongoing Israeli aggression and called for national unity in the face of these dangers, adding: "May God grant the great martyr a place in heaven, and my deepest condolences to his family, the resistance, his loved ones and all of Lebanon."

## Reaction

Over the last week, Nasrallah's death has been considered a major victory in Israel. His supporters in Beirut and Iran admitted they were shocked and stunned by the event and raised questions about the future direction of Hezbollah. There are doubts about its ability to continue its armed struggles against Israel. Again all this might have prompted Iran's missile attacks.

But Israel has, of course, continued its own attacks on targets in Lebanon over the last few days, killing leaders of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, as well as the most senior Hamas commander in Lebanon.

In his first comments, before the official announcement of Nasrallah's death, Ali Khamenei condemned the killing of civilians in Lebanon, labelling it a sign of "the short-sightedness and foolishness" of Israeli leaders. Khamenei also called on Muslims to show their solidarity with the people of Lebanon and Hezbollah in their confrontation with the "usurping and oppressive regime".

However, the reality is that Iran, for all its ballistic arsenal, has limited ability to retaliate against a rogue settler colony - not just due to the Zionists' military strength, but because Israel is deeply intertwined with its allies in the US and Europe.

Mohammad Ali Maqad, a wishful-thinking university professor and journalist, believes that recent events may provide Hezbollah with an opportunity to return to a "more moderate position and seek agreements that allow the Lebanese government to regain sovereignty over all its territory". He also believes that Nasrallah's death might open the door to a political solution in Lebanon, including creating conditions for holding presidential elections in the country.

Maqed also raises the possibility of a rift among Hezbollah members. He outlines a passably plausible scenario, where a small hard-line faction continues to fight, while a larger section returns to the embrace of the Lebanese government and distances itself from Iran.

In Beirut, the significance of Nasrallah's assassination was evident. A group of Hezbollah supporters took to the streets to express their sorrow and anger, while another group mourned on social media. The unveiled woman who was presenting the coverage on Al-Manar TV, broke down in tears, as she announced the death of the group's leader. Meanwhile, around one million displaced individuals continue to live in the streets without shelter, as they suffer Israeli attacks that have, according to the Lebanese ministry of health, resulted in over 1,000 deaths.

After Hezbollah confirmed the news of Nasrallah's death, BBC Arabic spoke with several displaced individuals in Ain al-Mreisseh, a neighbourhood in Beirut, many of whom were unable to accept or bear the news. Some fell to the ground, while others began to shout, run and cry. One woman said, "I wish they would kill us all and leave him

alive."

So far 19 senior Hezbollah officials have been killed and Nasrallah's assassination raises questions about the ability of his successor to fill the significant void he left in both the political and military arenas. But no doubt Iranian leaders will emphasise that Nasrallah's death will not impact Hezbollah's capacity or standing in the region.

Ahmad Vahidi, a former commander of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guard and former Iranian minister of the interior, stated: "Hezbollah has trained many commanders and, whenever one commander is martyred, another commander rises to the forefront, and Hezbollah has never been weakened."

## Where next?

Since 1948, the peoples of the entire region have been victims of the consequences of the nakba and settler-colonialism. Irrespective of their religious affiliation or background, they feel a sense of solidarity with the Palestinians. Repeating war crimes which have been a common feature of Israel's genocide in Gaza, this time in Lebanon, far from bringing 'safety', will endanger the lives of Israelis living close to the Lebanese border.

Netanyahu's arrogant threats in his September 30 message and subsequent warnings of retaliation after Iran's October 1 attack, implied, of course, military retaliation against Iran's Islamic Republic. But that would only lead to increased Iranian nationalism. Those Iranian activists who underestimate the strength of that nationalism might pay a heavy price. Whether we like it or not, Iran is now gaining increasing support on the Arab street and none of the dictators of the region can afford to take their populations for granted.

As far as Israel is concerned, an editorial in the Israeli daily, *Haaretz*, sums up the despair of liberal Zionism:

The sad fact is that there is no real opposition in Israel, army operations aren't a substitute for diplomacy. The last thing Israel needs are proposals for another occupation or new targets for assassination. Israel requires a

determined, moral opposition that will challenge the security hubris of the Israeli right, which now feels that it has an opportunity to do anything it pleases. Such an opposition is needed not only because our enemies - from Iran to Hezbollah and Hamas - can still respond, but also to think about the day after the war.

Death and destruction aren't goals in and of themselves, and the opposition mustn't be the one calling for expanding a war that would end with the army once again sinking in the Lebanese quagmire.<sup>3</sup>

The only answer is the politics of the working class and the perspective of socialism. Liberal Zionism, reactionary Islamic organisations such as Hamas and Hezbollah, the Iranian theocracy or Syria's Ba'athists - all offer nothing but the dead-end of blood, destruction and tears.

However pathetically weak at this present moment in time, the left can and must be revived. Not on the basis of technocratic modernisation, guerrillaism, pan-Arabic nationalism or 'official communism'. That hardly needs saying.

But a strategy of working class leadership of the Arab movement for national unity and sweeping away the emirs, sultans and kings, the Shia and Sunni religious misleaders, the divisive sectarian politicians, the Ba'athist kleptocrats, El-Sisi's military-bureaucratic dictatorship in Egypt; and reaching out to the masses in Turkey, Kurdistan and crucially Iran - that could, surely would, split Israeli society along class lines, with the prospect, not of the workers being an ever poorer labour aristocracy, but part of the ruling class.

Now that would be something ●

## Notes

1. See 'Third war begins' *Weekly Worker* September 26: [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1508/third-war-begins](http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1508/third-war-begins).
2. 'Part of the establishment' *Weekly Worker* March 21 2024: [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1483/part-of-the-establishment](http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1483/part-of-the-establishment).
3. [www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/2024-10-01/ty-article-opinion/where-is-the-israeli-opposition-thats-against-more-death-and-destruction/00000192-4490-d07b-aff3-57f673d50000](http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/2024-10-01/ty-article-opinion/where-is-the-israeli-opposition-thats-against-more-death-and-destruction/00000192-4490-d07b-aff3-57f673d50000).

## Online Communist Forum



Sunday October 6 5pm  
**Moshé Machover: What's really behind the war in the Middle East?**

Use this link to register:  
[communistparty.co.uk/ocf](http://communistparty.co.uk/ocf)

Organised by CPGB: [communistparty.co.uk](http://communistparty.co.uk) and Labour Party Marxists: [www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk](http://www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk)  
For further information, email Stan Keable at [Secretary@labourpartymarxists.org.uk](mailto:Secretary@labourpartymarxists.org.uk)

A selection of previous Online Communist Forum talks can be viewed at: [youtube.com/c/CommunistPartyofGreatBritain](https://youtube.com/c/CommunistPartyofGreatBritain)



**POLEMIC**

# Analysis of historical causes

We must ruthlessly criticise all past attempts. As Mike Macnair once again demonstrates, Steve Bloom's arguments on method and history only give support to dogmatism and personality cults

This is the second part of my response to Steve Bloom's recent series criticising my book *Revolutionary strategy*.<sup>1</sup> The first part addressed his offer of 'synthesis', meaning his demand for acceptance of the mass-strike strategy for revolution. This part addresses questions of historical method and historical substance, and their implications for the idea of a party. A third article will address internationalism, and return to the most fundamental question: the class perspective, and the grounds for hope that we can escape the infernal machine of capitalism.

On the historical questions, the starting point is the question of method and the use of hindsight. It is necessary to repeat a quotation from *Revolutionary strategy*, which comrade Bloom gives in a partial form in his second article (August 29):

The second general point is that this book from beginning to end attempts to discuss the history of the movement's strategic ideas *with the benefit of hindsight*. For example, later in the book when I criticise the arguments and decisions of the leaders of the Russian Revolution, I do not intend by this to pass some sort of moral judgment on the decisions they took under extremely difficult circumstances.

I do not even *necessarily* mean that any superior alternative was open to them. For example, I said above that October 1917 was a gamble on revolution in western Europe, which failed. But the alternative to this gamble put forward by Martov and Kautsky - a Menshevik-SR government based on the Constituent Assembly - was unreal: the real alternative available was either the policy the Bolsheviks actually followed, *including* the coercion of the peasantry to supply food, 'red terror', and so on, or a government of the 'White' generals and 'White terror'. The problem here is not the actions the Bolsheviks took: it is their *over-theorisation* of these actions, which has been inherited by the modern far left.

The use of hindsight is justifiable and necessary, because the point of the whole exercise is to study history for what it can tell us about where we are now, how we got here and where we should (try to) go next. In this sense it is loosely analogous to the sort of exercise that has to be undertaken if a bridge falls down. Why did the bridge fall down? If it was hit by a meteorite, we may well rebuild it in exactly the same form. But, if the collapse was caused by problems which will predictably recur in future (like severe storms or an increased weight of traffic), we should redesign the bridge, *in the light of hindsight*, to meet these problems. The fact that the problems which caused the collapse may not have been originally predictable affects the moral responsibility of the original designers, but it does not in the least alter our present tasks (pp23-24).

Comrade Bloom quotes the third paragraph of this passage without the first two. The effect is that he says (his fifth bullet point) that "Mike



**David Hume: his Tory philosophical scepticism matches Bloom's version of Trotskyism**

does not place a moral blame on those who held onto power in the USSR after 1921 ... But he does hold them politically responsible. That is much the same thing in my judgment." But, when the first two paragraphs of the passage are quoted, it is plain that it is *not* "much the same thing". I say nothing about holding the Bolshevik leaders "politically responsible". I say merely that trying to repeat 1917 or clinging to the texts of the first four congresses of Comintern is not good strategy today, given what we now know.

## Selective again

Another selective quotation. I wrote:

Once we recognise that this is true, we can no longer treat the strategy of Bolshevism, *as it was laid out in the documents of the early Comintern*, as presumptively true; nor can we treat the several arguments made against the Bolsheviks' course of action by Kautsky, Martov and Luxemburg (among others) as presumptively false. I stress *presumptively*. In relation to each and every element of Bolshevik strategy there may be independent reasons to accept it; in relation to each and every argument of Kautsky, etc there may be independent reasons to reject it. But the 'victory of the Russian Revolution' on its own, or the course of the revolution after late 1917-early 1918, can no longer be taken as evidence for Bolshevik strategy as a package. What it led to was not a strategic gain for the world working class, but a 60-year impasse of the global workers' movement and the severe weakness of this movement at the present date (p14).

Comrade Bloom quotes only the last two sentences of this passage. The effect of the cut is the same as that for the first passage quoted: that is, it makes me appear to categorically

reject the Russian Revolution *as such*. He goes on after this quotation to argue that I would have urged Europeans not to colonise North America on the basis of initial English failures, and that I would have urged Haitian slaves not to revolt in 1791. In the first case I am not sufficiently favourable to European colonisation of North America to be willing to engage with the claim.

The second is a plain falsehood. It is transparent that the French Revolution of 1789 created a situation in which the slave-owners of Saint-Domingue could not go on in the old way, and the semi-proletarianised slaves (semi-proletarianised because their work was characterised by factory-like, coordinated productive activity) were unwilling to go on in the old way.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the day, the revolution in Haiti resolved into a *bourgeois* revolution, which displayed the same dynamic (from republicanism to a new bourgeois Bonapartism/monarchism) as the French Revolution, of which it was part. The disastrous long-term outcome is a variant on the usual effects of semi-colonial status, with the superadded negative effects of US state revanchism. But this would not be a reason not to rise up to overthrow slavery.

And, as I said explicitly about the Russian Revolution in the part of the passage comrade Bloom did not quote,

... the real alternative available [in Russia] was either the policy the Bolsheviks actually followed, including the coercion of the peasantry to supply food, 'red terror', and so on, or a government of the 'White' generals and 'White terror'. The problem here is not the actions the Bolsheviks took: it is their over-theorisation of these actions, which has been inherited by the modern far left.

Marx in *The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* wrote:

... proletarian revolutions, like those of the 19th century, constantly criticise themselves, constantly interrupt themselves in their own course, return to the apparently accomplished, in order to begin anew; they deride with cruel thoroughness the half-measures, weaknesses and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their opponents only so the latter may draw new strength from the earth and rise before them again more gigantic than ever, recoil constantly from the indefinite colossalness of their own goals - until a situation is created which makes all turning back impossible ...<sup>3</sup>

Comrade Bloom's objection to my use of hindsight to abandon conclusions reached by the Russian revolutionaries is the rejection of Marx's conception of proletarian revolutions in this passage as "constantly criticis[ing] themselves" and "derid[ing] with cruel thoroughness the half-measures, weaknesses, and paltriness of their first attempts". His method is to *refuse* such criticism, on the basis that we have insufficient evidence to criticise the views of the early Comintern.

## Physics envy

In support of this argument against Marx, comrade Bloom attacks my (explicitly loose) analogy with a bridge that falls down. He offers four bullet points about (20th-21st century) engineering in support of this attack: there is most likely a single identifiable design flaw in the bridge, but there are "multiple and interconnecting" factors in revolutionary defeat. Second, bridge design is controlled and revolution is not. Third, steel girders are all identical, but countries are different. Fourth, when we construct a bridge we can plan the intended outcome;

not so of revolutions. Hence, comrade Bloom argues, "any conclusions we draw about future expectations/actions [from hindsight] must be far more qualified".

These are merely examples of 'physics envy' arguments, resting on the point that we cannot attain the degree of probability in our political or historical judgments that can be attained by 20th-21st century experimental methods in physics and related disciplines.<sup>4</sup> This is, of course, true. I have added "20th-21st century" to the formulation because several of comrade Bloom's claims about civil engineering would only be true of the 20th to 21st century: bridge-builders of the 19th century or before had to work with considerably more approximation, for example, on the uniformity of steel girders, or on the possible multiplicity of causes of failure).

This small point pulls at a loose thread in the knitting of comrade Bloom's argument: it is, in reality, a much larger point. Scientific method is in origin a formalisation of the lower-level 'suck it and see' or 'trial and error' practised by medieval and early modern artisans. The mathematical precision aspect was already present in Ptolemaic astronomy: what happens in the 'scientific revolution' of the 17th century is that it becomes acceptable for *very approximate* reports of observations, experiments and new medical treatments to defeat the long-established doctrines of Aristotle (384-22 BCE) Claudius Ptolemy (approximately 100-170 CE) or Galen of Pergamon (129-216 CE).

Foundational to this development - that the authorities can be overturned by observation and experiment - is the recognition that, though complete certainty is not attainable,<sup>5</sup> in what medievals and early moderns called the 'sublunary sphere' (the part of the world we can actually affect) we are entitled and obliged to *act* on the basis of probabilities. Following from this, in human decision-making presumptions (inferences from the common course of events) and ideas of the burden of proof and the standard of proof are as unavoidable outside judicial procedures as they are within them.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the mere fact that they are unavoidable *in* judicial procedures should be enough to lead us to reject 'physics envy' demands for physics-like levels of certainty before we act in social matters.

'Physics envy' has a political and a class content. It is a dilute form of David Hume's critique of induction and general scepticism: it is, like Hume, a denial of the legitimacy of individuals making their own political choices on the basis of imperfect evidence, rather than deferring to authority. And Hume's scepticism had a political purpose: it was the conceptual foundation for the anti-revolutionary politics of his *The history of England from the invasion of Julius Caesar to the revolution in 1688* (six volumes, 1754-61), which, in turn, became a charter text for French anti-revolutionary politics and for Burkean conservatism.<sup>7</sup>

The class aspect of Humean scepticism and ideas derived under it should appear from the deployment of these ideas by conservative writers opposed to the lower orders getting out of hand: thus the late 18th and early 19th century British writers discussed in Don Herzog's



*Poisoning the minds of the lower orders* and the early 19th century Virginia slaveocrat writers discussed in Dickson D Bruce's *The rhetoric of conservatism*.<sup>8</sup>

The point is that the rejection of decision-making on probabilities, of artisanal trial-and-error, and of self-criticising earlier endeavours implies, on the one hand, that every cook *cannot* govern, because the artisanal trial and error decision process is insufficient for political decision-making, so that the workers should subordinate themselves to the specialists.

And, on the other hand, it implies that *existing textual authority* is protected from refutation, whether this existing textual authority is to be Aristotle, Ptolemy or Galen, or the Bible, the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican church, or some other sacred text. Or - and here we come back to comrade Bloom - Rosa Luxemburg's *The mass strike* or the texts of the first four congresses of Comintern, to be treated as sacred texts, because to disprove them requires evidence to physics standards.

In this context, comrade Bloom claims that "Mike draws absolute and sweeping generalisations from his hindsight, which are completely unwarranted", while, on the other hand, *he* claims that we *can* "generalise ... useful lessons for the future" of a positive kind from the Russian experience. Remember, that I claim only that "the 'victory of the Russian Revolution' *on its own*, or the course of the revolution after late 1917-early 1918, can no longer be taken as evidence for Bolshevik strategy *as a package*" (emphases added). So I do, in fact, think that there are positive *as well as negative* lessons of the Russian Revolution; I merely deny that 1917-21 proves the Comintern 'package'.

The reality is that what I claim is that *repeated* failures of mass strike movements to create the conditions for the creation of workers' power - starting in Germany and Austria in 1918-19 and the 1919-20 *Biennio Rosso* in Italy, but repeated many times - and repeated failures of the 'new left' since 1960 to achieve more than ephemeral spectaculars, or small bureaucratic-centralist sects, mean that we need to reconsider radically both mass-striking, and the claims of the first four congresses of Comintern. And I argue that the eventual failure of the Russian Revolution and, in particular, the fact that there could be no serious resistance to the restoration of capitalism in 1989-91, besides being fundamental to the present weakness of the left, also means that the Russian Revolution cannot legitimately be interpreted as evidence for the success of the mass-strike strategy *sufficient to outweigh* the very repeated evidence of its failure elsewhere.

## Dogma

Comrade Bloom's claims on the question of method in relation to the use of hindsight are, then, flatly wrong, and amount to a form of philosophical scepticism in the service of dogma. The difference is the particular dogma that is being protected by the scepticism: Toryism in Hume, Trotskyism in Bloom.

Given that I reject completely comrade Bloom's objections to the use of hindsight, most of his substantive points about the history can merely be dismissed as simple applications of his false claims about method. Thus what he has to say about soviets is merely argument of this sort, and disregards not only the non-Russian evidence of failure, but also Trotsky's polemics against fetishism of soviets in *Lessons of October* and in his writings on the Spanish revolution.<sup>9</sup> The same is

true of what comrade Bloom says about the formation of Comintern. I say, perfectly clearly in chapter 5 of the book, that the split in the Second International was justified and cannot be undone - but that some (not all) of the *reasons offered for it* were wrong and have poisoned the communist left.

Similarly on the question of government (the end of his second article, and under the subhead, 'Method', point a, in his third): it is comrade Bloom, not I, who misunderstands what is in the Comintern resolutions; and the experience of history with left minority participation in governments hoped to be 'transitional' shows that Comintern's ideas here were false.

It is convenient at this point to *observe merely* that I do not accept comrade Bloom's observations in his third article, subhead 'Definitions', on "minimum programme" and "Kautskyism". On "minimum programme", comrade Bloom says that "the same term was *first* used in a different sense ... to mean a programme that would limit itself to bourgeois-democratic demands" (emphasis added). Since I have shown that it was *first* used by Marx and others of the 1880 *Programme of the Parti Ouvrier*, which certainly does not make such a limit, I think that it is positively useful today to correct the errors of the early 20th century socialists on the issue. On "Kautskyism" it *might* be better to substitute 'Bebelism', since Bebel was the primary architect of the SPD approach.<sup>10</sup> But it would clearly be false to concede anything to the modern far left's use of "Kautskyism" in the service of the personality cult of Lenin and the effort to downplay the influence of "Kautsky when he was a Marxist" on Bolshevism. Again what is involved is comrade Bloom's assertion of Trotskyism as dogma - here by demanding 'Trotskyist' verbal usages.

I did not discuss the Trotskyists' interpretation of 'permanent revolution' and its relation to 'transitional programme' in *Revolutionary strategy*, because I had when the book was published recently written for the *Weekly Worker* a separate series of articles on the issue: "Transitional" to what? (August 2 2007), 'What is workers' power?' (August 9), 'For a minimum programme!' (August 30), 'Spontaneity and Marxist theory' (September 6) and 'Leading workers by the nose' (September 13). (I list these here rather than in a footnote because footnotes are often easily overlooked.) I see no reason in comrade Bloom's third article (subhead 'Blind alleys') to change my views on this issue, since he offers - again - merely dogmatic reassertion of the common coin of the late 20th century Trotskyist left.

On the points of more substance, the first is the claim that I assert an "expiration date" for the Russian Revolution; and, conversely, comrade Bloom claims:

The power of the mass mobilisation that had been central to the Russian Revolution itself in 1917 ... remained alive through the 1920s and 30s, even the 40s and 50s, when the generation that made the revolution was alive and very much a factor in social life. I would suggest that this power was still alive even until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, though in a weaker and weaker form as time passed.

## History

Comrade Bloom argues here that the positive effects of the mass mobilisation of 1917 persist down to 1989, albeit at decreasing levels, and denies my claim that Hungary

1956, Czechoslovakia 1968 and Poland 1980-82 showed the inability of the proletariat (lacking a party) to pose a political alternative. Against this, I argue (1) that the idea of prolonged, persistent effects of a mass mobilisation after it has ebbed is a fantasy (when do we ever see it outside this context?); and (2) that, if we actually look at the events, we see processes of radicalisation in a rightward direction - more clearly in Poland than in Czechoslovakia, and more clearly in Czechoslovakia, where 'economic reform' was very prominent, than in Hungary, where it was already present.

"Give me the victory of the Spanish revolution," says comrade Bloom, and "the entire history of the world ... would almost certainly have turned out differently." Maybe. *Maybe* because Spain, though sub-imperialist, would not have contributed industrial power to the Soviet problem of isolation: rather, it would (like Cuba later) have needed Soviet subsidy. But leave that aside.

Step two: *why* did the Spanish revolution fail? The main reason is that Spain lacked the independent arms manufacturing capacity needed to defeat the army rebels and their backers from fascist Italy and Nazi Germany; and the UK insisted on a blockade of arms supplies to Spain, which it enforced on France by diplomatic threats to align with Nazi Germany. At this level, the essential condition of the victory of the Spanish revolution was the overthrow of the *British* state.

Secondarily, the constitutionalist, popular front policy of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), the Partido Comunista de España (PCE), the anarchist-led Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) trade union confederation, and the broad-far-left Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista meant that the government did not encourage peasant land seizures, which *might* have undermined the Francoist army.<sup>11</sup> In this context, the USSR as much as the Spanish Frente Popular government was seeking alliance with the 'western democracies' and, as well as the PCE's commitment to the Frente Popular, deployed Soviet GPU operatives to suppress leftist opposition.<sup>12</sup> At this level, the essential condition of the victory of the Spanish revolution was the overthrow of the *Stalinist regime in the USSR*.

Trotsky's comment in January 1931 was: "For a successful solution of all these tasks [of the Spanish revolution], three conditions are required: a party; once more a party; again a party."<sup>13</sup> When he wrote this, Trotsky imagined that the PCE could be that party. By May 1937 it was clear beyond any doubt that it could not be, and also that the POUM could not be.

"In the 1920s and 30s," says comrade Bloom, "there were revolutionary events in Germany, France, Britain, Italy and elsewhere." We should consider *only* the cases of Germany, France and Britain, for the reason given above: to overcome the problems of the USSR required the victory of the proletariat in one of the central imperialist, industrialised powers.

In Britain, the mutinies and police strikes of 1918-19 *might* have led to a revolutionary crisis if there had already been "a party; once more a party; again a party". But the CPGB was not created until July 1920 and remained on the scale of the modern British far left. The 1926 general strike was not a "revolutionary event": it was far from being true that the ruling class could not go on in the old way, and the trade union leadership collapsed politically in only nine days. In France, the 1920 general strike was a catastrophic defeat: though the workers'

movement revived, by the time of the 1936 Front Populaire the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) was already playing the role of restoring capitalist order; the Trotskyists were split into two groups, of no more than hundreds.

In Germany, there was a real revolution (overthrow of the Kaiser-Reich) and deep instability in 1918-23. But the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Spartacus) formed in December 1918-January 1919 was small and very ultra-left, and the mass Vereinigte Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (VKPD) was only created in November 1920. The 'March Action' in 1921 decisively defeated the VKPD; Trotsky's belief that there was a missed opportunity for the VKPD to take power in autumn 1923 was a self-deception.<sup>14</sup> To make his analogy with the Russian October work, we would have to imagine that the Provisional Government in August-September 1917 agreed a ceasefire with Germany with a view to a separate peace, in which case 'October' could not have won; or, conversely, that Gustav Stresemann's government in Germany from August 1923 continued, rather than abandoned, Wilhelm Cuno's policy of hyperinflation and 'passive resistance' against the French in the Rhineland - in which case there *might* have been a KPD-led revolution.

## Bonaparte

A further level of causation is the question of Brest-Litovsk and its consequences. Comrade Bloom asserts that the fact the Reds won the civil war shows that they had a majority.<sup>15</sup> This mass support was, however, *in my opinion* support constructed *after* the outbreak of civil war *on a new basis*: that is, that the Reds became a collective Bonaparte or 'man on horseback' - a representative-master of the peasantry that *represented* the peasants' struggle against the White armies by *mastering* the peasants through grain expropriations. This collective-Bonaparte character - that the peasantry as a class naturally throws up absolute monarchy as its representative-master - is in my opinion the social basis that is reflected in the necessity to adopt military centralism in the *party* at the same period.

As far as the *perceptions of the broad workers' vanguard outside Russia* were concerned, what was created - and overtly theorised at the Second Congress of Comintern - was party dictatorship over both proletariat and peasantry. This *theorisation* in my view underlies the inability of the communist parties to make the united front policy work: the overtheorisation meant that they could not offer either party or soviet democracy.

The problem, then, is comrade Bloom's *refusal of the analysis of historical causes*, in the name of the belief that better outcomes were possible. *Possible*, I agree. But low-probability. We need to proceed from the starting point that, first, in any revolutionary crisis the trade union, social democratic and 'official communist' leaderships will play a scab role. The large preponderance of the historical evidence - starting with Germany 1918-19 and going down to Egypt in 2011-13 - is that the absence of a serious party *before* the outbreak of crisis cannot be made up for *during* crisis.

The refusal of causal connections appears again in his third article, subhead 'Method', point (c), where he argues that we cannot treat the ideas of the Comintern after Lenin's death as having any historical continuity with Comintern ideas during Lenin's life. But this is personality-cult politics. It cannot explain why the Left and United

Oppositions *lost* in 1923-29, because it evades the elements of continuity both in policy (the *smychka*) and in institutional arrangements (military centralism from 1919 on) that helped the bureaucracy to win.

This last point brings us back to the modern far left, as in my first article. As Lars T Lih's supplement, 'A hundred years is enough' (*Weekly Worker* September 19), argues, the Trotskyist analysis of the Russian Revolution is within the framework of the personality cult of Lenin, constructed around the time of his death. As to the fate of the revolution, the Trotskyists merely make a cult of the personality of Trotsky succeed *within the framework* of the cult of the personality of Lenin.

And, because it is personality-cult politics, this aspect of 'anti-Stalinism' inevitably supports the personality cults of so many petty Maoist and Trotskyist caudillos round the world. Without overcoming the *method* involved in the cult of Lenin, we can never escape from the world of small groups, organised round the cults of Healy, Cliff, Grant-Woods, Taaffe, Barnes, Avakian, Lambert, Posadas, Moreno ... (the list is endless) ●

mike.macnair@weeklyworker.co.uk

## Notes

1. 'In search of a synthesis' *Weekly Worker* August 1 2024 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1502/in-search-of-a-synthesis); 'Historical and methodological differences', August 29 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1504/historical-and-methodological-differences); 'Matters past and present', September 12 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1506/matters-past-and-present).
2. Cannot and will not: a shortened version of Lenin's formulation on the nature of revolutionary crisis, from 1913 (www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/jun/15.htm); 1915 (www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/csi/ii.htm); and 1920 (www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch09.htm).
3. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm.
4. Googling 'physics envy' produces 4.85 million results.
5. Even in mathematics: this is the significance of Russell's paradox, Gödel's incompleteness theorems and Turing on the limits of computation: the high level of abstraction and hence generality of mathematics makes it *appear to be true a priori*, but it is ultimately inductively grounded.
6. B Shapiro *Probability and certainty in 17th century England* Princeton NJ 1983, and her subsequent work - especially *Beyond reasonable doubt and probable cause* Berkeley CA 1991, and *A culture of fact: England 1550-1700* Ithaca NY 2000; and my own review of the latter book, *American Journal of Legal History* Vol 44, (2000) pp445-46; on the relation to historical method and politics more generally, see my outline discussion in 'The Tory interpretation' *Weekly Worker* January 31 2019 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1236/the-tory-interpretation).
7. DW Livingston, 'David Hume and the conservative tradition' (2014): isi.org/david-hume-and-the-conservative-tradition; L Bongie *David Hume: prophet of the counterrevolution* Carmel IN 2000.
8. Herzog: Princeton NJ 1998; Bruce: San Marino CA 1982.
9. *Lessons of October* chapter 8: www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lessons/ch8.htm. 'Spain: on the slogan of Soviets' (1931): www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/spain/spain09.htm.
10. A point I make in the introduction to B Lewis and M Zurovski *Karl Kautsky on colonialism* London 2013, p8.
11. "Might" because land tenure relations in 1930s Spain were substantially different to those in 1917 Russia: S Basco, J Doménech and L Maravall, 'Land reform and rural conflict: evidence from 1930s Spain' *Explorations in Economic History* Vol 89 (July 2023): www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0014498323000244.
12. There is a convenient summary account at www.marxists.org/subject/spain/1987/richard-price.htm.
13. www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/spain/spain04.htm.
14. See johnriddell.com/2021/12/01/the-german-october-of-1923-a-failed-bid-for-workers-power. This gives a good deal of detail and no reasons to believe that the failure was merely one of not 'seizing the moment'; August Thalheimer, introduced by Mike Jones: www.marxists.org/archive/thalheimer/works/missed/index.htm.
15. This disregards the literature I cited for the point; it is legitimate to *reject* such evidence by offering counter-arguments, but not to *disregard* it. Add to these references A Rabinowitch *The Bolsheviks in power* Bloomington IN 2007, chapters 8-11.



**LABOUR**

# Davos on the Mersey

Corporate representatives flocked to attend the Liverpool conference, where they could freely lobby, influence and bribe. **Eddie Ford** looks at the root-and-branch cynicism, corruption and sectionalism of Labourism

Last week some very well dressed folk took part in 'Davos on the Mersey' - that is, the Labour Party conference in Liverpool. Just like the previous year, corporate interests descended in full force with exhibitions, sponsored events and receptions staged by the likes of Barclays, Bloomberg, Uber, Ikea, Specsavers, etc.

Therefore we had all the usual crap that comes with such a junket, some of it quite creepy.<sup>1</sup> A 'QR code wall' that allowed organisations to advertise in a prominent area of the conference site; 'room drops' that delivered your message straight to hotel rooms for "direct engagement" with delegates and parliamentarians; a 'distribution zone' to promote your campaign or organisation that is "perfectly positioned" for maximum exposure, as you first enter the site; and a conference app that allows attendees to create a "personalised agenda" (this had over 15,000 unique users last year). There was even a "lead retrieval" that captured the details of people who visited your stand or fringe event by scanning the barcodes on their badges. Nothing is too much trouble for business.

This year we were particularly treated to a £3,000-a-head "business day" taking place alongside the main party conference.<sup>2</sup> If you were lucky enough to get one of the tickets, which sold out instantly, of course, like an Oasis gig, then for your money you were promised attendance at "In Conversation" and "Q&A sessions" with Keir Starmer, a "networking business lunch" with key Labour politicians, access to the "business and international drinks reception", complete free rein to fringe events, wider conference activities, and so on.

With such a golden opportunity to exert influence, more than 500 lobbyists and executives from big banks, oil companies and tech firms flocked in - where Starmer was introduced by the chief executive of HSBC UK, and then interviewed by the UK chief of Google. No awkward questions were asked, it goes without saying - definitely no mention of his Pabloite past. Naturally, he told businesses that they should "come directly" to No10 if they had problems with anything the government was doing and stressed how he wanted to "reinforce our invitation to partner with us".

True, not everything was totally rosy in the garden. Some of the lobbyists were "anxious" about the coming budget, tax changes and the government's new workers' rights bills, which apparently will bring in "day one rights" for employees and an end to zero-hours contracts. Other were "still unclear" about who would lead the government's industrial strategy council and complained that an "investment minister" had yet to be appointed to work with business. One particularly ungrateful rep grumbled about the "stale sandwich" buffet lunch and lack of "top-tier" cabinet ministers in attendance at the "networking" session.

Yet you can guarantee that Sir Keir, alongside chancellor Rachel Reeves and business secretary Jonathan Reynolds, worked hard to calm their anxieties - mere teething problems of a new government. But, if you have had your winter fuel payment cut, then tough luck - "hard choices" have to be made (though



He with £2,485 worth of glasses, she with a £1,105 Edeline Lee frock

maybe consider sending an email to your MP). Obviously, the idea that the Labour Party conference acts as a parliament of the working class is a sick joke.

## Avarice

Apart from the corporate hoopla, the conference was notable for two things. Firstly, the leadership was defeated on a show of hands over the winter fuel payment, but they always knew that was going to be the case. Hence the conference arrangements committee, doing the bidding of its master, cynically moved the debate from Monday to the very end of the conference on Wednesday *after* the ministerial speeches had taken place - with bigwigs like Starmer and Reeves safely back in London.

*The Guardian's* reporters, Aletla Adu and Kiron Stacey claim that the vote was "narrow". That is how they explain the call for a count. But that only goes to show how little they understand the Labour Party. The chair knew perfectly well that the margin would be, and was, wide. After all, trade unions tops cast bloc votes, so the result was clear from the get go. A count would simply have underlined the government's defeat.

The other issue that dominated the conference, much to the fury of Keir Starmer and the apparatchiks, was 'trouser-gate' and all the rest. Like 'borrowing' an £18 million penthouse flat from Labour donor Waheed Alli during the election, so

that his son could study in peace for his GCSEs without being bothered by journalists or protestors outside Starmer's house. Naturally, the prime minister insisted that no actual cash had changed hands as a result of the deal, which is true on a technicality, but the several weeks' rent-free accommodation is recorded as being worth more than £20,000 in the register of MPs' interests. Must be nice to have generous friends like that.

Waheed Alli is, of course, himself now under a Lords' investigation over registering interests and Sir Keir is busily paying back £6,000 of the bribes (whoops donations). However, the real question here is not that the Labour Party leadership is so uniquely corrupt, compared to the Tory leadership, which is obviously not the case. Rather, that professional politicians of all the mainstream parties view these perks as "part of the job", as Jonathan Reynolds said recently about Arsenal matches, Taylor Swift concerts, and so forth. Along with a minister's salary, and the expectation that upon leaving office they will be showered with job offers, maybe a lucrative role in advising some giant transnational or a cushy post in Nato, a big bank or the UN doing worthy things.

What is truly incredible about these establishment politicians is that their sense of entitlement is so overweening that they think you cannot dress or house yourselves properly without taking *individual donations*. We are not talking about

donations to the actual Labour Party and its national executive committee. No, they have to pocket the money themselves. By contrast, we are reminded of the Paris Commune, the early communist parties, even the 'official' Italian Communist Party of Enrico Berlinguer. It had loads of MPs in the Rome parliament and enforced a partymax on its MPs. Everything above an average skilled worker's wage went to party coffers.

But in today's Britain inhabited by professional politicians, you can imagine the retort - we couldn't possibly live on that! How could Angela Raynor dress herself in the style that she would like to become accustomed to, or celebrate the new year in some New York penthouse?

Another noteworthy Labour event is the resignation of Rosie Duffield, the MP for Canterbury, citing the "cruel and unnecessary" policies of the prime minister and his "managerial and technocratic approach" to politics. Now, she is certainly no friend of the left or a rebel (except perhaps over the trans question), having previously abstained on votes to cut the winter fuel payment and on an amendment to end the two-child benefit cap.<sup>3</sup> But she is quite right to attack the Starmer government for its endless freebies and avarice that she calls "off the scale" - apparently her constituents have been bombarding her with emails and phone calls expressing bewilderment at the Labour leaders' attack on old people, while living the life of the bourgeoisie.

Of course, this government is not about serving the working class, but looking after number one - which is what rightwing Labour politicians have always been in it for. Think about Tony Blair and his account of being at Oxford University, weighing up career options - successful lawyer or politician? If politician, then what party to join? Blair decided upon Labour precisely because they were out of office, providing him with a greater opportunity to rise up the greasy pole than if he was in a party holding office. One thing that was certainly not part of the equation was principle - or the 'vision thing'.

## Cynicism

That sort of cynicism encapsulates the Labour right. But as communists we should also make the same point about the Sharon Grahams, or even the Jeremy Corbys, of this world. Are they representatives of the working class, as they claim to be? In reality, if you take the classic Marxist view of trade union politics of the sort that Graham personifies to a T, what they actually represent is *the bourgeois politics* of the working class. As for the right, Keir Starmer is just a bourgeois politician no different from Rishi Sunak or David Cameron. But it is Sharon Graham who trades with the capitalist class in the labour market over the commodity of labour-power, haggling over its 'proper' price or value.

Sure, her politics are about improving the condition of the owners of wage labour - ie, workers - but this relies on the working class remaining a slave class. That is the whole point about being an intermediary between capital and labour. Unlike a trade union functionary, the politics of Marxism seeks to represent the *independent* politics of the working class - which are not sectional or national, but have to be *international*. Marxism stresses the interests of the working class as a whole - not the British working class, not this or that trade union committed to maintaining in perpetuity employment in jobs like prison officers, or making torture equipment or weapons of mass destruction such as Trident.

Nor do we have any time for the myopic Gary Smith, GMB general secretary, who backs fracking and opposes the "bourgeois environmental lobby", as well as the expansion of the London Ultra-Low Emissions Zone, and wants the Labour government to "rethink" its plans to ban new oil and gas exploration in the North Sea. A classic example of the bourgeois politics of the working class.

No, the project of Marxism is to lift the working class from sectionalism to universalism - to think of themselves as a future ruling class. And that requires the liberation of *all* workers, no matter what country they are from, whatever their nationality, ethnicity, gender or sexuality. ●

eddie.ford@weeklyworker.co.uk

## Notes

1. [login.labevents.org/Application/PurchasePortal.aspx](http://login.labevents.org/Application/PurchasePortal.aspx).
2. [labour.org.uk/annual-conference/commercial-opportunities/business-day-waiting-list](http://labour.org.uk/annual-conference/commercial-opportunities/business-day-waiting-list).
3. [theguardian.com/politics/2024/sep/29/rosie-duffield-keir-starmer-women-problem-labour](http://theguardian.com/politics/2024/sep/29/rosie-duffield-keir-starmer-women-problem-labour).



LEFT

# No illusions in greens

Under the leadership of Carla Denyer and Adrian Ramsay, the Green Party has moved considerably to the right. Despite that there are some on the left who want to sign up. **Carla Roberts is unconvinced**

The attraction of the Green Party has been growing in direct proportion to the disorganisation of the left. The failure of Jeremy Corbyn and Corbynism to, firstly, wage a fight against the right when he was running the Labour Party and, secondly, to organise any kind of coherent opposition to the rightward march of Starmer, has led to many people on the left to look at the Green Party as a possible alternative. There are even some disorientated folk in our periphery who look kindly upon Greens - clearly they have not grasped the ABCs of communist politics.

The dire state of forces to the left of Labour, with its tiny confessional sects and sometimes deranged political outlook, is partially to blame. The newly (mis)named Revolutionary Communist Party with its hysteric prediction that there is going to be a "British revolution" within "the next five or 10 years" (so better sleep with your boots on) is just one, particular, example (as an aside, its revolving door is spitting out many disillusioned, older activists who cut their political teeth in Socialist Appeal). Many of these groups have almost indistinguishable versions of the 'transitional programme' - and yet insist on maintaining their group existence, all the while pretending that other groups do not exist or are not worth talking to. This kind of behaviour makes pretty much the whole left appear strange, if not totally crazy, to the wider working class population.

Perhaps most importantly, the Greens present a national alternative to Labour and the Tories - unlike the localist, deeply uninspiring nonsense that Jeremy Corbyn, Andrew Feinstein, Jamie Driscoll *et al* are currently taking up their time with. It does not look as if Collective will become a 'party' in any meaningful way any time soon, despite former Unite general secretary Len McCluskey trying to push things along.<sup>1</sup>

So we cannot really blame the unorganised Corbynistas and soft lefts who are currently drawn to the Greens, especially considering the imminent danger to the continued existence of human life on earth that the climate catastrophe poses. Further, the formation last month of 'Greens Organise', which includes many former soft Labour lefties, including Corbyn's advisor, Matt Zarb-Cousin, has given the impression that perhaps socialists could do some useful work in the Green Party and 'win over' some of the membership to "mobilise a diverse working class, and secure a broad mandate for an internationalist, anti-capitalist, and ecologically transformative agenda", as this new platform proposes to do.<sup>2</sup>

## Current programme

That would be an uphill struggle, to put it mildly. Under the leadership of Carla Denyer and Adrian Ramsay (in charge since 2021), the Green Party has moved considerably to the right - as a quick comparison between the election manifestos of 2017 and 2024 shows. While there is no trace to be found of the 2017 programme on their website, Jack Conrad noted in the *Little red climate book* that it called for the "abolition of the standing armed forces"; "replacing



Posing radical when suits, but now supporting Nato

the monarchy with a republic"; and "withdrawal from Nato".<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps this is now so embarrassing to the leadership that it has decided to do some Stalin-like airbrushing. We are under no illusion that the party was ever going to try and implement those radical-democratic demands. In any case, they have certainly been ditched in the 2024 manifesto, in favour of more 'reasonable' policies such as "replacing the House of Lords with an elected second chamber". But there is no mention of the monarchy (or the army, for that matter).

The manifesto does, however, feature the party's new pro-imperialist line on Nato, adopted at its spring conference 2023: "Nato has an important role in ensuring the ability of its member-states to respond to threats to their security" and the party "would work within Nato to achieve a greater focus on global peace-building".<sup>4</sup>

This is the sort of "peace-building" where you actually support war, you understand: The Green Party "continues to support Ukraine" and takes a 'bad apples on both sides' view, when it comes to Israel-Palestine: "We condemned the appalling murder of hundreds of Israeli civilians by Hamas, and since then have watched in horror as Israeli forces have committed war crimes that have caused the deaths of tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians."

The Greens have also bought fully into the big lie that anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism and the party has adopted the fake definition of anti-Semitism published by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, describing it as "the gold standard definition by most Jewish institutions", which "should clearly be a pre-eminent source for understanding anti-Semitism".<sup>5</sup> Only if you are unaware of the widespread criticism over the 'working definition', which is, as many have pointed out, neither a definition nor about anti-Semitism! It is about defending Zionism and preventing criticism of Israel.

In a gushing portrait of Denyer and Ramsay, *The Guardian* describes their political outlook: "They have brought this relentless, almost ruthless focus on electoral victories." In other words, the Greens have offered themselves up as willing coalition partners, beginning in city, town and county halls.

As to their internal democratic

structures, this is how their 15-person-strong executive committee works, according to a "Green Party official": "We don't generally try to make decisions by votes very often. The whole idea is consensus - to talk it through as long as we need. Obviously, that can lead to some really long meetings, and sometimes you just want to get things done."<sup>6</sup> The 'tyranny of structurelessness' in full flow.

You do not have to be German to be reminded of the victory of the pro-government 'realo' wing of Joschka Fischer over the more leftwing 'fundis' in the German Green Party. That trajectory has culminated in the German Greens now being the most gung-ho when it comes to sending missiles and tanks to Ukraine for example - an entirely pro-imperialist party. All such major green parties across Europe have gone a similar way and Britain is no different.

When it comes to the economy, the Greens are, yes, "committed to the public ownership of public services, so they are run to serve us all, rather than to increase the wealth of shareholders". Public ownership here does not mean 'in the hands of the workers', we should point out, but the capitalist state. So they want the railways, etc run by Sir Keir Starmer on behalf of the 'people'. "Community ownership to be encouraged through greater access to government funding in the transition to a zero-carbon economy." The Green Party "would push for a Green Economic Transformation to include a £40 billion investment per year in the shift to a green economy over the course of the next parliament", etc, etc. In other words, the whole programme is about administering capitalism, not opposing it.

We can already hear our Green sympathisers shouting, 'Well, the Labour Party - even under Jeremy Corbyn - did not fight capitalism either and yet you intervened actively with Labour Party Marxists!'

I cannot argue with that. We would still intervene in Labour, in fact, if most of our members had not been thrown out as part of the witch-hunt. We argue, however, that the Labour Party - even today - remains what Lenin dubbed a "bourgeois workers' party": at one pole are thoroughly corrupt career politicians, ever eager to serve capitalism and its interests; but it is the other pole, based on the working class through the electoral base and the affiliation of trade

unions, which makes the Labour Party a different beast altogether.

Labour presents Marxists with a fertile ground on which to fight for the political independence of the working class. Less fertile than 10 years ago, for sure, but much more fertile than the Green Party, which has no union affiliations - and does not even seek them. There is no talk of socialism, even in the distorted form common in the Labour Party. The 'working class' is totally absent in the Green Party as a subject of history.

## Popularity

Yes, Marxists should always try to understand why people (especially those on the left) do particular things. We do not ignore the increasing popularity of Green politics among some sections of the working class, be it in the shape of the Green Party or elite direct-action organisations like Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion. Many people are drawn to these politics out of understandable rejection of the political status quo and a desire to do something to fight the climate catastrophe and to make life just a bit less miserable. Many of these are people that should and could be won to our programme for communism and human liberation.

But how? Not by subordinating ourselves to Green politics, we would argue - and not by joining with Greens Organise or setting up a communist platform or faction in the Green Party, as has been suggested. Such a platform might give us a more 'direct' route to any radical Greens, but it would come at a serious political cost. We would be propping up a party that is, politically and sociologically, neither of nor for the working class. We would, through our actions, tell the working class that we want them to join, too - when we know that the Green Party is a political dead

end and most certainly not the way to get to socialism. That would be criminally stupid.

As we have already outlined, one of the main reasons why the Greens look to some like a good alternative is the pathetic nature of the left today. This is where our main focus should lie: working towards a revolution in the culture of the left and building a principled and democratic Communist Party - a party that actually fights for what is necessary to stop the climate catastrophe: a radical change of system, the overthrow of capitalism, not its greenwashing.

That is precisely our key criticism: the politics of Greenism are based not on the self-liberation of the working class, which is the only realistic strategy to positively end the antagonism between humanity and nature - but are designed to become part of the management team of a system that is the cause of the climate crisis.

Marxists try to intervene with Green politics in a principled way and from the outside, not by propping up the bureaucratic-capitalist election machine of Denyer and Ramsay. Our *Little red climate book*, for example, was such an attempt. No doubt, we could do more ... but one thing we should not do is lose our strategic bearings ●

## Notes

1. See 'Corbyn's maybe party' *Weekly Worker* September 19 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1507/corbys-maybe-party) and 'Hidden divisions in Collective', September 26 (weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1508/hidden-divisions-in-collective).
2. greensorganise.uk.
3. J Conrad *Little red climate book* London 2023, p51.
4. greenparty.org.uk/about/our-manifesto/a-fairer-greener-world.
5. members.greenparty.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-08/Antisemitism-a-guidance-070821.pdf.
6. *The Guardian* June 27.

## Fighting fund

# Success!

Well done, everybody! As I hoped, we not only reached the monthly *Weekly Worker* £2,250 fighting fund target for September, but smashed right through it!

Thanks to the excellent £433 received in the last five days of the month, we ended up with £2,545 - just less than £300 above the target! Exactly what we wanted to happen - it certainly gives us huge encouragement in our struggle to ensure we can keep on producing this essential paper for the Marxist left, in spite of ever-increasing printing and postage costs.

When it comes to the donations received, pride of place goes to comrade AK for his excellent £114, not to mention JC for his £70. Other bank transfers/standing orders came from GT (£35), OG (£27), JT and BK (£25 each), MW and KB (£20), CH (£15) and IS, MD and CP (£10 each). On top of that, there were PayPal donations from DB (his monthly £50 contribution!), PE (£7) and EG (£5).

So much for last month, but can we keep it up in October? Well, in just the first two days £234 has already come our way. Mind you, that includes a good number of those start-of-the-month standing orders (although there'll be a few more of those in the next few days).

Anyway, what we've received on October 1 and 2 is the following: £30 from TG, £20 from BK, II, SJ and DL, £18 from MD, £15 from BG and MT, £13 from TM, £11 from MM, £10 from AN, DI, YM and CP, plus £6 from JS and DC.

Not too bad at all! But now we need to make sure that September wasn't just a one-off. Please play your part to help us do that - go to the link below to find out how you can contribute ●

Robbie Rix

Our bank account details are name: Weekly Worker sort code: 30-99-64 account number: 00744310 To make a donation or set up a regular payment visit weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate



## STATEMENT

# Establishing a principled left

CPGB's Provisional Central Committee calls for others on the left, individuals and organisations, in Britain and internationally, to discuss and agree this statement with a view to cementing principled unity and furthering the struggle against war and capitalism

**1.** There is a real danger of escalation in Ukraine and the possibility of war between Russia and Nato.

2. We are told that in their September 13 White House meeting Joe Biden and Sir Keir Starmer agreed a "strong position", which everybody takes as reference to British Storm Shadows - and other Nato-supplied missiles that Volodymyr Zelensky wants to use to strike into the territory of the Russian Federation.

3. Putin has warned that, if this happens, it means that Nato would be "at war with Russia". After all, Ukraine could not use such missiles without Nato technical and military back-up - crucially US satellites. Dmitry Medvedev, former president and prime minister, ominously talks of reducing Kyiv to a "giant melted spot". Sabre-rattling, perhaps - till the moment when it is not.

4. Looking at the situation objectively, it is impossible to imagine Storm Shadows being a *winner* for Ukraine, as Zelensky and the whole pro-war liberal propaganda machine claims. Yes, they will make a marginal difference, but they will not - cannot - turn the tide of the war. Russia has already moved most important command posts, airforce bases and major storage facilities inside Russia, beyond their 155-mile range.

5. Their importance lies in how the dial is being turned up. For instance, the Polish foreign minister, Radoslaw Sikorski, has been hawking the possibility of Nato protecting Ukrainian *nuclear* facilities. But, of course, it is Ukrainian forces that have been recklessly shelling the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia power plant - not the other way round, as crazily suggested by large parts of the western media.

6. That alone is reason to be extraordinarily concerned. According to UN observers, with grossly "inadequate" staffing levels due to the war, this has "significantly increased the risk of a nuclear accident" in a country which already witnessed the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. Zaporizhzhia is unlikely to explode - it is under cold shutdown - but shelling or a missile strike could still release significant amounts of deadly radiation. Depending on the prevailing winds, this could badly affect people in neighbouring Turkey, Belarus, Poland, Germany, Hungary and Bulgaria. Clearly nuclear power is inherently dangerous.

7. Owing to the sensitivity and significance of giving the go-ahead for Ukrainian use of Storm Shadows and other such missiles, there has been an elaborate kabuki dance. The US administration does not want to be seen to be taking the lead in upping the ante. So Biden called in his favourite yap dog, the UK, to come to Washington and lobby him. The same kabuki dance was then repeated in various European capitals. We saw exactly the same kind of performance with supplying main battle tanks and then F-16 fighter-bombers.

8. If others join the UK warmonger, as the US presumably wants, then not only will Kyiv be given permission to use Storm Shadows against Russia. France, Italy and, most importantly, the US will follow suit in giving permission for using the missiles they have supplied; ie, Scals and Himars.



Operating as a US-Nato proxy

9. Lifting western restrictions on using missiles inside Russia would mark yet another escalation - not a pivotal military moment. Storm Shadows are tactical, not strategic, weapons, but unlike drones they move fast and carry enough of an explosive payload to penetrate bunkers and knock out command posts.

10. Germany is already under intense pressure to supply Ukraine with its Taurus cruise missiles. We note that Germany has suffered enormously, with cheap Russian gas being cut off and public opinion swinging against underwriting the war in Ukraine. However, testifying to the failures of the left, this has largely been to the benefit of the far-right AfD.

11. The war in Ukraine has antecedents long predating February 24 2022. Directed by the CIA and spearheaded by the forces of extreme chauvinism and the organised far right, the Maidan coup deposed the 'neutral' Viktor Yanukovich government in Kyiv. Ukraine was shunted into the western camp with the stated ambition of joining the European Union.

12. The Russian response hardly came as a surprise. Crimea was annexed and Russian-Ukrainian separatist forces were encouraged and aided - in particular the armed rebellions in the Donbass. However, faced with a Nato membership plan, significantly increased Ukrainian Armed Forces attacks against the Donbass and the threat of heavy western sanctions, the Putin/FSB regime gave the go-ahead for a full-scale invasion. The aim was, at the very least, to force Kyiv into compliance and break it from the western camp. A trap.

13. Phase one of Putin's so-called 'special military operation' failed abysmally. Zelensky's government more than survived. With Nato military, propaganda, diplomatic and financial backing, it mobilised the Ukrainian population and mounted stiff resistance. Since then we have seen advances and retreats on both sides. Despite all that, the war is essentially a stalemate. Tens of thousands have died, many more have been horribly maimed and millions have been displaced in what is a reactionary war on both sides.

14. There is nothing remotely progressive about the Putin/FSB regime. It is fighting to preserve Russian independence, true. However, that goes hand-in-hand with a clampdown on democratic rights, the chauvinist aim of a greater Russia, promoting orthodox Christianity and annexing foreign territory and populations. Economically Russia is dominated by a combination of Kremlin insiders and pliant so-called oligarchs ('so-called' because they do not rule, do not govern). Suffice to say, then, Russia is not anti-imperialist. Russia wants to, dreams of, joining the top ranks of the imperialist club, not overthrowing imperialism.

15. Nor, on the other hand, is there anything remotely progressive about the Zelensky regime. It upholds a poisonously narrow version of Ukrainian nationalism - a nationalism that has no place for the Russian language and Russian-Ukrainians. Economically and politically it is dominated by oligarchs and has pursued a thorough-going neoliberal agenda.

16. No genuine socialist, no genuine communist can support either side. Both are reactionary, both are anti-working class. Those socialists and communists who support the Kremlin, or who see something anti-imperialist in its war with Ukraine, have completely lost their class bearings. The same can be said of the social-pacifist left and fostering the illusion that there can be a peaceful capitalism, as long as governments act reasonably and abide by internationally agreed rules and standards. In fact, war and capitalism are inseparable. Peace is only a moment between war, and war is merely the continuation of the same policy previously carried out peacefully through diplomacy, tariffs and sanctions.

17. Naturally, the social-imperialist 'left' claims that its support for Ukraine is no different from its support for Palestinian self-determination. There is a wilful refusal to recognise that both Ukraine and Israel are US proxies.

18. We must forthrightly oppose both social-imperialism and social-pacifism. Failure to do so, keeping quiet in the name of 'left unity',

is treachery in its own right - it is centrism, and perhaps the worst kind of opportunism, because it provides seemingly 'left' excuses for blurring principles and finding an accommodation with social-imperialism and social-pacifism and thereby capitalism.

19. Throughout the entire current conflict, the US and its allies have sought to strike a balance between giving Ukraine enough weapons to resist Russia, on the one hand, and not doing anything too overtly provocative, on the other. Naturally this has infuriated the Zelensky regime ... and its social-imperialist cheerleaders. They demand "full sanctions" against Russia (ie, siege warfare), claim that the Putin regime is "attacking democracy globally" and that Ukraine should get all the "arms necessary to liberate the country, from wherever possible and without conditions". Effectively this 'Arm, arm, arm Ukraine' line poses a 'guns or butter' choice in Europe, with the social-imperialists demanding guns: ie, supplying Ukraine with massively increased supplies of the most up-to-date fighter aircraft, tanks and missiles.

20. If, as it looks, the US has given the UK the go-ahead for the use of its Storm Shadows against targets within the Russian Federation, does this mean we stand on the threshold of nuclear war in Europe or a generalised nuclear exchange between Russia and the United States? Unlikely - well, at the moment - because such a war is unwinnable and would spell disaster for humanity as a whole ... but, of course, miscalculations can always happen.

21. Western support for Ukraine cannot be separated from other wars and conflicts, not least Israel's. The idea that the US, UK, France, etc are supporting a "just war" in Ukraine and an "unjust war" in Gaza and the wider Middle East, is a stupid, hopeless, opportunist muddle. States which are committed to anti-trade union laws, restrictions on civil rights and the continuation of class exploitation at home pursue those same *class interests* - including by other, violent, means - abroad. If a war is supported by *our* capitalist state, then it follows that such a war

is a criminal war. Those who urge on any such war betray the working class and the cause of socialism.

22. The war between Russia and Ukraine is not a 'Goliath versus David' contest, which is how it is near universally portrayed by mainstream bourgeois politicians and the social-imperialists alike. It is a proxy war, being fought in the strategic interests of a declining US hegemon - which does not, of course, face any sort of serious challenge from Russia. China, though, is another matter entirely. From this perspective, the war in Ukraine, and Nato's steady eastward expansion, is fundamentally directed against China, not Russia.

23. As part of this anti-Beijing drive, it is vital to grasp that the aim of the US is to bring about regime change in Moscow. It wants to replace Putin with someone not unlike the first post-Soviet Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, or the now dead oppositionist, Alexei Navalny.

24. True, this runs the distinct danger, as US state department and military tops must surely know, of producing the very opposite of what they intend - a super-aggressive alternative in the Kremlin, willing to risk *Götterdämmerung* in the attempt to save Mother Russia from ruin and humiliation. Nonetheless, the US is banking on Putin being eased or shoved aside, either in a palace coup or by a colour revolution which results in ending Russia as a Black Sea naval power and degrading it into either a neocolony or a series of neocolonies. As a result - and this is crucial - that would see China surrounded - to the north by former Soviet republics, to the south by India and to the east by Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and the formidable American Pacific fleet - thereby potentially strangling China.

25. America would then control Halford Mackinder's 'world island' and therefore have the ability to reboot its domination of the entire globe. A scenario that both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping will surely resist using whatever means that they have at their disposal.

26. Under such dire circumstances, which clearly carry the distinct risk of descending into a World War III, it is the duty of genuine socialists and communists to urgently cement principled unity and towards that end to ruthlessly expose social-imperialism, social-pacifism and centrist conciliationism. Clear lines of demarcation must be drawn. This is the necessary condition for developing the political consciousness of the advanced section of the working class and then taking the struggle of the broad masses from the narrow routine of trade unionism and economics to the level of high politics and thereby the perspective of turning what is a war between reactionary capitalist powers into a civil war - a revolution - for democracy, socialism and communism ●

Sign up to CPGB news



bit.ly/CPGBbulletin



## OBITUARY

# Desire utopia but neglect politics

Fredric Jameson April 14 1934-September 22 2024

**W**e are quite used to Marxist literary critics telling us about the historical context of Jane Austen or TS Eliot. One critic, Fredric Jameson, who died last month, however, could show you a stylistic-historical account of such knotty creations as structuralism and postmodernism - as well as *Star wars* and a new hotel foyer.

Jameson's most lauded works were *Postmodernism: or the cultural logic of late capitalism* (1991) and *The political unconscious: narrative as a socially symbolic act* (1981). He began though in 1961 by publishing his dissertation, *Sartre: the origins of a style*.

Born in Cleveland Ohio in 1934 and the son of a medical doctor, he travelled after graduation to Europe - to Aix-en-Provence, Munich and Berlin. It was there that he extended his knowledge of post-war thinkers like the German Frankfurt School and the French structuralists. Back in the US he taught at Harvard and in California alongside Herbert Marcuse. In 1969 he co-founded the Marxist Literary Group with a number of graduate students.

He continued writing about European thinkers from Adorno to Althusser - not only repeating their concepts, but locating them in conversations about social structure and cultural products. On this he wrote dense but suggestive critiques like *Marxism and form* (1971) and *The prison-house of language: a critical account of structuralism and Russian formalism* (1972). He was both learning from the recent turn to language and semiotics, and situating them in the period of late 'cultural' capitalism.

In 1991 Jameson produced *Postmodernism* - a bestselling work on the contemporary theories of the (current) era called postmodernism. In the 1990s the book was especially influential in China. In his more recent work, Jameson continued his interest in utopias and science fiction, as well as reviewing east Asian thrillers and discussing in detail Hegel and Marx's *Capital* before completing his last acclaimed work, *Inventions of a present: the novel in its crisis of globalisation*.

In *The political unconscious*, Jameson covers cultural products like *Sir Gawain and the green knight* and modernists like the 'adventure' writer, Joseph Conrad - proposing the broadest level of interpretation in which to understand them. He situates these (even tribal pottery) in the succession of modes of production. Art works are each a symbolic action in a situation of a particular class tension. They can be read both by a negative hermeneutic (revealing class tensions), but also a positive one (utopian). They contain the history that hurts us, as well as settling us for our position in an unfair world.

My example is Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and prejudice*, which shows a world where a middle class family like the Bennets can be down at heel and insulted by an aristocrat like Darcy. The book figures as a warning to the regency, when republicanism threatened the UK's cohesion, by resolving this fraught situation in an ending where one of the daughters, Elizabeth, marries mansion-owning Darcy - but only after much struggle as to who is worthwhile. Austen attacks 'pride' - through overcoming the 'prejudice' of the rising middle class. A social peace is achieved and a unity - or, if you like, a wedding - of classes celebrated.



Fredric Jameson: answers for everything cultural

In his discussion of the 1975 film, *Dog day afternoon*, Jameson revealed a story which ends not with social peace, but with a more anxious reflection on crime and justice. In this narrative two lower-middle class men rob a bank (one, Sonny, is played by Al Pacino), where their escape is prevented not just by a TV news show wanting an interview, but the New York police putting them under public siege. The FBI, which Jameson identifies as figures of corporate power, sideline the more empathetic local police and negotiate the robbers into an ambush.

At one point before this there are stirrings of solidarity between the bank employees taken hostage (mainly female) and the robbers, while Sonny gets to inspire the ghetto crowds behind the police lines by starting a chant of "Attica, Attica" - a reference to a prison massacre some years before. However, all this collective activity disappears and one of the robbers is shot in the ambush. Sonny is left alone uneasy at what has occurred: he is no longer a deferential member of the middle class, but is cut adrift.

### Causality

Jameson situates art at a specific level of the social structure, where society's injustices are both admitted (realism) and symbolically overcome. In doing this he draws on Althusser's concept of 'structural causality'. Art serves the system, but not in some direct propaganda way. This is contrasted with the more Hegelian-Marxist concept of 'expressive causality', where all levels are directly made in the image of the mode of production. That is, more like a choir, where the function of the whole is to promote one theme in unison. The choir sings one song, with small differences in voice - tenor, baritone, soprano - whereas Althusser's differentiated structure is more like an orchestra playing a symphony, where different tones and instruments contribute to the whole. In their own way and at different times and sections.

Parliamentary politics, after all, is not the same as the law. Jameson points out that not all levels or voices say the same thing: they exhibit differences, but are still 'united', as it were, by an operation in favour of the mode of production. Let us take a text like *Sir Gawain and the green knight*. This magic knight that faces King Arthur's court is not a portrait of an actual feudal landowner, but a symbol of a felt contradiction - a figure of antagonism within the class. Gawain steps forward for combat, although it is not a dragon he faces, but another knight. However, he is shown doing it without abandoning the class's code of chivalry, as in his courteous refusal of sexual offers from the green knight's lady. We can feel for his plight, but admire him doing the right thing, even at the risk

of his life. Life is tough, but the hero overcomes it in the right way.

In the 1980s, Jameson turned his attention to the present in his bestselling *Postmodernism*. Rather than treat the trendy concept of postmodernity as a distraction from the processes of globalisation (ideology as mask) he examines the cultural style of the period and what this tells us about the political conjuncture.

In fact Jameson begins from the very definition of the postmodern given by theorist Jean-François Lyotard. Famously, Lyotard names the key to postmodernism as the suspicion of grand narratives; the lack of people's trust now in the future as something different from the past; no more hope in progress, whether liberal or socialist.

Jameson begins from this idea to describe our period's cultural aspects, which he characterises as marked by styles of 'pastiche' - parody without satire - giving examples from film, TV and architecture. While modernism from the 1920s quoted from different cultures (Aztec, African, ancient Egypt, the dramatic monologues of Shakespeare), postmodern works cannibalise such elements, but erase any sense of critical or historical distance. As he puts it, "there no longer seems to be any organic relationship between the history we learn from schoolbooks and the lived experience of the current, multinational, high-rise, stagflated city of the newspapers and of our own everyday life".

While finance capital operates without most of us understanding it, the promises of actually existing communism and the radical 1960s have become dust (or caricatures), while the majority enjoy 'stylish' 1930s and 40s TV, from Agatha Christie to Batman spin-offs. Since Warhol, high art has become branding, reaching ever higher prices. The 1980s did indeed seem a dead end - full of nostalgia and the death of historical change. As Jameson remarked, the mega-movie franchise, *Star wars*, was not about the future, but nostalgic, made to satisfy longings of baby boomers and younger consumers for earlier sci-fi serials of adventure and youthful astro warriors. Sequels and fantasy (*Lord of the rings*, Harry Potter) deny the present (even as analogy) in 'simple, pure entertainment'.

It is debatable whether any counterforces have arisen lately which challenge this with a sense that we can have a change and shape a different future. It is debatable too whether Jameson's series of evocative descriptions have aided this process. Fellow Marxist Terry Eagleton took up this question in several essays on Jameson's method and politics.<sup>1</sup>

Eagleton admires Jameson's account of so many different methods and ideas, both using them and marking their limitation as one-

sided approaches to the totality. But he notes that this may only amount to a too liberal adoption - ie, without their contradictions - can we mix Althusser with Derrida? He also mentions Jameson's neglect of politics, with no discussion at all of the likes of Lenin, Luxemburg or the problems of revolutionary strategy. Eagleton remarks that therefore Jameson's work too is constrained by its historical context. "It is no accident," he says, "that the declared political correlative of his theoretical pluralism is the amorphousness of 'alliance' politics" (p63). He remarks:

Jameson's style displays an intriguing ambivalence of commentary and critique; that this springs from a similarly ambivalent relation to bourgeois culture, at once over-appropriative and over-generous; and that all this in turn may be illuminated by the essentially Hegelian cast of Jameson's Marxism, which tends to subordinate political conflict to theoretical *Aufhebung* [ie, synthesis] (p76).

Jameson does have an answer to this: his model of the differentiated levels of the social formation contains survivals from previous modes of production, integrated into the current dominant mode and lately ready to be opposed as 'out of date' with contemporary capitalism by reforming liberals and radicals: "We are not going back," declares Kamala Harris, but she does not mean there will be deep change.

Jameson has otherwise argued:

The affirmation of radical feminism, therefore, that to annul the patriarchal is the most radical act - insofar as it includes and subsumes more partial demands, such as liberation from the commodity form - is thus perfectly consistent with an expanded Marxian framework, for which the transformation of our own dominant mode of production must be accompanied and completed by an equally radical reconstruction of all the more archaic modes of production with which it structurally coexists.<sup>2</sup>

### Future

Let us all unite then - all the sections, methods, hopes - but with democratic centralism, of course: that is, with no lack of mutual criticism, though in a common project against the totality.

One recent film shows something like this: the latest *Alien* sequel, *Alien: Romulus*, where a mixed group have to struggle, without arrogance, with their personal difficulties, as well as against the latest progeny of the *Alien* franchise - a monster that turns out to be still threatening, but this time part-human.

But if culture (from speeches and editorials to TV drama and bestselling novels) is an operation to stir, then satisfy, the project of exposure is still useful as part of a project for change - not only in opposition to closure (endings happy or hopeless) but acknowledging that these products, in their appeal to us humans, reveal that the utopian is still desired and a politics of a different future is still possible ●

Mike Belbin

### Notes

1. See T Eagleton *Against the grain: essays, 1975-1985* London 1986.
2. F Jameson *The political unconscious* Abingdon 2002, p100.

## What we fight for

■ 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.

The *Weekly Worker* is licensed by November Publications under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Licence: [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode). ISSN 1351-0150.

Subscriptions: [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/subscribe](https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/subscribe)



# Hiding the hack

Even though the odds are too close to call, why are US media outlets so unwilling to use leaked material about Trump's running mate? Paul Demarty investigates

The presidential election campaign is now in the closing straight.

It is neck-and-neck. Kamala Harris has her nose in front in national polling, but that is all but irrelevant, when a handful of swing states will, in reality, decide matters. In those, things are much dicier. For all the general impression of chaos in Donald Trump's camp, for all the cringe-inducing podcast quotes being unearthed from Republican vice-president candidate JD Vance, the odds are too close to call at this point (leads of less than 3% are within the margin of error, and that margin has rather tended to embarrass pollsters in recent cycles).

You would think, then, that media outlets which back Harris and consider Trump an unconscionable fascist ogre would have a voracious appetite for *anything* that could put him in a bad position. And just such a document has appeared in recent months. When Trump was in the process of picking a running mate, his team ran opposition research on each of the candidates, trying to discern what weaknesses the other side would pick on. Vance's dossier somehow found itself in the hands of persons unknown, who then attempted to shop it around to various news outlets. Remarkably, none decided to bite.

The reason is that this material is apparently believed to have been stolen by the Iranian state - which, of course, has a strong interest in Trump not returning to the White House. That may well be true - or not; we have only cryptic comments from various intelligence agencies to trust on this, but that does not stop the dossier from being noteworthy.

One man not inclined to keep this document out of the public eye was the investigative journalist, Ken Klippenstein, for a long time employed by the *Intercept*, but now independent, like many of his former colleagues (a change of leadership at the *Intercept* has triggered an exodus of many of its big-name writers). He threw the dossier up on his Substack website.<sup>1</sup> He was immediately and permanently banned from Twitter for his troubles, and anyone attempting to share the link will discover that they are prohibited from doing so. The official reason is that it includes personal information like Vance's address, but, given his prominent position in US politics, that is already effectively public knowledge. Again: why try to kill this?

## Explanations

The Twitter situation has the more obvious explanation. Owner Elon Musk is the most notorious of the new cabal of far-right tech moguls. JD Vance was a subordinate of former PayPal boss Peter Thiel and strongly plugged into this network. They were all cock-a-hoop when



**Cringe-inducing podcasts**

he got the VP nod from Trump: he would be their man in the White House.

Some combination of low political calculation and personal favour-currying is likely behind all this. It is breathtakingly cynical, but hardly new - under the 'old regime', Twitter took the same action against the Hunter Biden laptop leak shortly before the 2020 election, which Musk loudly denounced at the time. (Many have noted that you can still link to *that* stuff, which includes far more sensitive material, from private emails to home-made pornography.)

As for the respectable press, it seems to go back to 2016, when Wikileaks provided a dump of internal emails of the Democratic national committee, which demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that it was effectively backing Hillary Clinton's primary campaign, as it came under threat from the insurgent challenge of Bernie Sanders. It was one of many scandals that nibbled away at Clinton, as she faced off against Trump that year, with the eventual result of her defeat. It was not the only, or even close to the *main*, reason for that defeat; but, facing up to the catastrophe of a Trump presidency, the only explanation acceptable to the sensible liberal mind was that she had been robbed by Russian interference in the election.

In this context, the 'intelligence community' asserted that Wikileaks had got the emails from the Russians (denied by Wikileaks, and no concrete evidence was ever made available for the charge - just an endless list of three-letter agencies and cybersecurity companies

victory, and a purge of the 'woke mind virus' from the body politic. He has turned his website into a far-right cesspit in furtherance of this aim. Meanwhile, deracinated legacy media outlets are more and more dependent on apparently credible briefings from willing sources (like intelligence agencies), which save them the bother of paying money for real journalism - no small problem in these days of decimated advertising revenue. Those relationships become more valuable than one's own reputation for honest reporting.

The turn of global politics towards war, meanwhile, tends to infect national politics with chauvinism and obedience to the state. There is no need to press the case that Trumpite conservatism is chauvinist - but blaming all your country's problems on the malign agency of some foreign power, as anti-Trump liberals do, is *also* chauvinism. Both parties are gearing up for the same war - against China - via perhaps different routes - through or around Russia (or perhaps not: Trump did Putin no favours in the end). This would be a major war, which will require, among other things, a compact and disciplined propaganda apparatus.

Pity, then, poor Ken Klippenstein - a man with a clear sense of vocation, but who finds that vocation increasingly difficult to live out. He was not the only *Intercept* exile to show up with a Substack, which has proven itself a fairly open-minded home for writers of various kinds and eccentric obsessions. It is not, however, that well-suited to investigative journalism. That has always been a cost-centre for media organisations, but there was a reason to support it, which was political influence. People did not buy media companies because they wanted to become rich, but because they *were* rich - and also wanted to be powerful in capital cities. The practice was therefore subsidised by the profit centres: sports, celebrity gossip, and whatever else.

The Substack model is to allow small publications to take subscription payments. How well this supports ongoing investigative work is strictly dependent on the subscription volume. Very few even make enough to pay a wage for the individual themselves - never mind a team of journalists of the sort that can really produce a story, the editors to shine it up, and the lawyers to make sure you are not on the fast track to debtor's prison. And as we noted above, this sort of thing was never a huge money spinner in the first place. The people who do best on the platform tend to just crank out commentary, which - if it is sufficiently alarmist and confirms the ideological prejudices of some audience niche - can happily be done by a sufficiently motivated team of one.

As communists, we have an interest in the truth being unearthed - perhaps for agitational value, but then also to better understand our enemies and their own strategies. The Vance dossier is not terrifically interesting in itself; it perhaps provides some 'hard' questions for journalists to ask, but frankly the fact that Vance is an opportunistic, reactionary freak is not exactly a state secret, and we wonder why the Iranians (if it was they) did not set their sights higher. But it is one dot on the vast pointillist canvas of bourgeois politics, and has value for that reason.

## Blind spots

Yet we are in a situation where, even forgetting their biases and blind spots, bourgeois media organisations are increasingly unable to provide an institutional frame for workaday journalism of this sort. It still happens, sure, but its ambitions steadily shrink. During the pandemic, the French novelist, Michel Houellebecq, quipped that there was no dystopia in the wings, nor any moral revolution to come from the experience: the future will be like the present, only "slightly worse". Such has been the steady decline of the bourgeois media's always extremely conditional commitment to uncovering uncomfortable truths.

The decline in this public good demands a response, which would mean an *alternative institutional structure* that can support it. Social media (here including Substack and the like, for simplicity's sake) has signally failed to provide one. The future is not the petty-bourgeoisification of journalism by way of the world's Klippensteins striking out on their own. For communists, this is precisely part of the role of the party. The old slogan goes: 'Educate, agitate, organise!' None of these are possible in an information vacuum.

A large - indeed, even a small, but not insignificant - political party has the resources to keep journalism ongoing. We can run it at a loss, because we are not in the game for profit. We do not need our investigations to yield advertising dollars, or curry favour with political elites. We need it to support the work of the party in organising for social revolution, in the course of which we must recruit members - members who pay dues. The whole thing balances out.

Journalism is hardly the only role of party media: it is for fighting out internal and external political differences, supporting campaigns, and much else besides. Yet it is worth highlighting here, simply because our rulers are doing such a terrible job of it ●

paul.demarty@weeklyworker.co.uk

## Notes

1. [www.kenklippenstein.com/p/read-the-jd-vance-dossier](http://www.kenklippenstein.com/p/read-the-jd-vance-dossier).



SUPPLEMENT

# They worshipped many gods

What Christians call the Old Testament depicts the ancient Hebrews being dedicated to the Yahweh cult, but also erecting altars on high places and sacrificing to Baal. Jack Conrad explores the origins of Judaism

Current scholarly opinion is firmly against the veracity of the idea of the wandering children of Yahweh, who, after departing from Abraham's ancestral land of Haran, journeyed to and fro around the Middle East; whose 12 tribes descended from Jacob's 12 sons; who entered, prospered, multiplied and then sank into servitude in Egypt; who, led by Moses, escaped, hotly pursued by the pharaoh's chariots and cavalymen; and who, after spending decades roaming the inhospitable wastes of the Sinai and Arabian deserts, seized Canaan under Joshua. All carefully manufactured myth.

Not that the Moses story was spun out of thin air. There is evidence of Canaanites drifting into Egypt and establishing themselves in the Nile delta around 1800 BCE. Later, for a hundred years, their elite ruled Egypt as the 15th dynasty during the period 1670-1570 BCE. A resurgent Egyptian ruling class finally drove them out. These Canaanites were the Hyksos (foreign rulers). Their domination of Egypt and violent expulsion doubtless created an enduring folk memory in Canaan that echoed down the generations. Raw material for later myth-makers of the kind that produced the wonderful fables of Arthur, Lancelot, Merlin, Guinevere and the triumphant Romano-British resistance to the Saxon invasion. Except that the Hebrews converted defeat not into victory, but heroic escape.

One thing seems certain though. There was no exodus of 600,000 Hebrews under the leadership of a man called Moses during the 14th or 13th centuries BCE.<sup>1</sup> The numbers are simply impossible. On top of that, biblical descriptions reflect not those centuries, but Egyptian monarchs, place names and geopolitical realities of the 7th century BCE. A sure sign of politically expedient invention rather than real history.

## Joshua's genocide

The Bible relates how, with the death of Moses, a new commander-in-chief arose. Joshua served as a "minister" under Moses and it was he who appointed him as his successor. So nothing in the way of a democratic culture on display here. Underlining the point, anyone tempted to rebel against Joshua's word is promptly threatened with "death".<sup>2</sup>

Yahweh tells the newly installed Joshua to order the 12 Hebrew tribes to immediately prepare for the much delayed crossing of the river Jordan, so as to take possession of the land long ago pledged to them. Of course, Joshua does as he is told. Ominously, given present-day Israeli politics, the territory is described as stretching from "the wilderness and this Lebanon" to the "great river", Euphrates, and all the lands of the Hittites to the Mediterranean, the "Great Sea" and "toward the going down of the sun".<sup>3</sup>

Headed by Levite priests carrying the ark of god - a box within which Yahweh dwells - the invasion of Canaan begins. Yahweh miraculously stops the flow of the Jordan to allow the men-at-arms to safely cross, along with wives, children, animals and possessions. Encamped on the left bank of the river, Joshua oversees the circumcising of all uncircumcised males (a practice that seems to have lapsed, according to the account, because of 40 years spent in the Sinai and Arabian deserts).

Everyone surely knows the next episode of the story. Jericho is besieged and Joshua sends the ark, accompanied by seven priests, marching around the city each day. On the seventh they noisily blow their trumpets of rams' horn and - hey presto - Jericho's strong walls crumble to dust. The city is torched. There is much booty and much bloodshed: "men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and asses" are slaughtered.<sup>4</sup>

Next, the story moves to those who kept looted treasures for themselves. Guiltily they confess and are swiftly dispatched - stoned or burnt to death. These transgressors are blamed for a frustrating setback in battle. Yahweh had decreed that all gold and silver were his and his alone. Suitably purified, the Hebrews then target the city of Ai. Joshua carries out a clever military ruse. Once again there is total destruction and mass killing. Fearing the same



Baal: with thunderbolt

fate, the people of Gibeon sue for peace. They plead that, being foreigners, they are not due to be exterminated. Joshua believes them and agrees terms. When their lie is exposed, the Gibeonites are spared, but cursed to be "slaves, hewers of wood and drawers of water" in perpetuity.<sup>5</sup>

The Hebrews go on to rout the combined might of the five kingdoms of the Ammonites - Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish and Eglon. Yahweh rains deadly hailstones down upon them from the heavenly heights. And, so as to provide sufficient light for the almost industrial extermination of the terrified Ammonites, the sun and the moon are made to stand still. Joshua proceeds to sack, burn, massacre and terrorise his way through the rest of Canaan. Finally, the city of Hazor was taken and, again obeying Yahweh, the Hebrews "did not leave any that breathed".<sup>6</sup>

Looking at passages such as these - approvingly cited on the Israeli right, including by Benjamin Netanyahu - the modern reader cannot but be struck by an eerie resemblance that exists between Yahweh's genocidal programme and Adolph Hitler's crazy plans, flagged in *Mein Kampf*, to expel all Jews from Germany and reduce the entire Slavic population to the east to slavery, so as to provide his beloved German yeoman farmers with labour and *Lebensraum* (living space).

Anyway, though there were still unexterminated Canaanites within their borders and god-sanctioned conquests to the west, north, south and east remaining to be accomplished, the tribes are each allotted their carefully delineated territory within what we can call 'Israel'. Being otherwise privileged, the Levite priesthood have to make do with burnt sacrificial offerings, and pastures and towns specially put aside for them in the midst of other tribes.

So comes into being the post-conquest social order described in Deuteronomy, Judges, Ruth and Samuel. The loose confederation of Hebrew tribes were advised, guided and on countless occasions rebuked by the so-called judges. They acted as military leaders and a kind of collective conscience for the whole people.

Religiously sanctioned measures were put in place, presumably designed to prevent extremes of poverty and wealth: "there will be no poor among you", confidently proclaims the book of Deuteronomy.<sup>7</sup> In order to keep a due sense of proportion, it is worth adding that the same book contradictorily admits, just a few lines down, that "the poor will never cease out of the land".<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the egalitarian ethos is clear. Every 49 years (more likely every seven) a jubilee happened - a year of release from the chains of debt and indentured labour. Enslaved Hebrews were to "go free" and be furnished "liberally" with grain, wine, sheep and goats. Elsewhere we read about land and property. Each seventh year the land had to remain fallow and property was to be returned to its original owners (or heirs). Though slavery and debt bondage was a constant danger for the poor, given the period we are talking about, the people of Israel seemingly enjoyed a quite extraordinary social settlement: "In those days there were no kings in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes."<sup>9</sup>

We actually have no hard evidence that the Israeli inter-tribal confederation ever existed (or whether it was a much later biblical invention). "It is extremely difficult any longer to assert that it did," remarks a doubting Thomas Thompson.<sup>10</sup>

Quite conceivably the general crisis of the late Bronze Age - that is, before the 13th century BCE - produced social chaos, along with a myriad of highly localised strongmen and rival tribal chiefdoms, before the re-emergence of state formations. But the fact is that Deuteronomy, Judges, Ruth and Samuel contain a strong egalitarian strand. And radical scholars have understandably made much of such passages and descriptions.

Three examples: George Mendenhall presented a pioneering argument for a revolutionary anti-monarchist Israel, founded on a direct treaty between each individual and Yahweh.<sup>11</sup> Another American, Norman Gottwald, maintained that Hebrew society under the judges was "revolutionary and egalitarian".<sup>12</sup> Along the same lines, but with undoubted hyperbole, at least in my opinion, Jan Dus, a Czech theologian and anti-Stalinist dissident, even claimed that the judges oversaw the "first ideologically based socio-political revolution in the history of the world".<sup>13</sup> More about such ideas below.

## Damning archaeology

The traditional dating for the Hebrew conquest is between 1230 and 1220 BCE. This neatly fits with the claimed flight from Egypt and references in the book of Exodus to Ramesside pharaohs. Yet, though there is an Egyptian victory stele of the pharaoh, Merneptah, mentioning a group called 'Israel in Canaan', which is believed to refer to the year 1207 BCE, the whole narrative of Joshua's invasion and the destruction of its native population is now widely doubted - to put it mildly.

The archaeology is damning. There are "abundant records" from Egypt in the late Bronze Age (1550-1150 BCE), which show that the Canaanite city-states - and beyond them, to the north, the great Phoenician trading ports and the kingdoms of south-west Syria - were vassals.<sup>14</sup> Clay accounting tablets, temple engravings and diplomatic correspondence prove that the pharaohs regularly issued orders and were in receipt of a steady flow of tribute. More than that, Egyptian administrators, Egyptian troops and Egyptian-paid mercenaries were stationed in towns and strongpoints in Canaan. And yet the book of Joshua completely fails to mention Egyptians outside the context of Egypt itself.

Perhaps because of gouging Egyptian tribute, perhaps because of hobbling Egyptian decrees, Canaanite cities were unfortified, much diminished and presumably pretty shabby at the time. No tall towers or intimidatingly thick walls, as recounted in the book of Joshua. Nor did they command vast armies. In fact they were "pathetically weak".<sup>15</sup>

The pharaohs built an empire, which included not only Canaan: their domains reached into Libya and incorporated the whole

of Nubia down to the fourth cataract. Tribute also flowed in from Cyprus, Crete and Syria. The Egyptian sphere of influence had hardly ever been so extensive. Visit the temple complex at Abu Simbel on the shores of lake Nasser and stand before the four colossal statues of Rameses II (reigned 1279-13 BCE) and you will appreciate something of the confidence, wealth and ego of its rulers.

Though its hold over Canaan was steadily weakening, this late Bronze Age superpower would have experienced no particular trouble in dispatching necessary reinforcements, if needed, through their well-managed and well-fortified Sinai coastal road into Canaan - had there been any sort of serious armed incursion by Hebrews (leave aside whether or not they were refugees who had fled Egypt decades before). Not surprisingly Merneptah's stele reports that Israel was crushed. Apart from that, Israel and the Israelites go unmentioned in what Egyptian records we have available to us from the period.

Except from the Hittite empire in the north, Egyptian domination of Canaan met no strategic challenge. And Egypt came to a stand-off agreement with the Hittites despite the bruising a youthful Rameses II received at the battle of Kadesh (1274 BCE). Taking cognisance of this geopolitical balance of power, the idea of a raggle-taggle Hebrew population, who had been scratching out a precarious existence in the desert wilderness, storming their way through an Egyptian-dominated Canaan is simply not credible.

Circumstances were different in the middle Bronze Age. Then there was indeed a system of affluent, tribute-gathering and militarily powerful Canaanite city-states - despite their independence one from another, they were linked by alliances and shared a common culture. But during the late Bronze Age they fell into decline. Jericho, Ai and Megiddo were abandoned. Other urban centres were destroyed: eg, Ashdod, Aphek and Hazor. Nowadays this is not put down to Joshua. Rather, explanation is sought in ecological degradation, disease, social revolt due to over-exploitation and the raids and dislocation caused by the so-called sea peoples.<sup>16</sup> Doubtless there was a combination of factors at play. But all that was several centuries before Joshua was supposed to have marched Yahweh's chosen people across the Jordan.

The late Bronze Age general crisis hit the whole of the eastern Mediterranean during the close of the 13th century BCE. Archaeological excavations in Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Egypt reveal a "stunning story of upheaval, war and widespread social breakdown".<sup>17</sup> The collapse of the western Roman empire in the 5th century CE was nothing in comparison: and it saw the severing of vital trade connections, a breakdown of the tax system, a general decline in material production and urban depopulation.

Though surviving the Bronze Age general crisis, Egypt was left a shadow of its former self, being stripped of all vassals. Tribute dried up, and so did international trade. However, the other superpower of the day - the Hittite empire, located in Turkey and northern Syria - disappeared entirely. Related tribute-gathering palace economies were likewise extinguished. Mycenae, the city of the famed Agamemnon, the overlord of the Achaeans in the *Iliad*, was overrun and destroyed. Subsequently Greece experienced a prolonged dark age. There was a loss of writing and rapid depopulation and not only in the few remaining cities, but in the countryside too. Sites in Crete, Cyprus and the Levant share the same characteristic blackened archaeological strata, indicating conflagration and a violent end - excavators find ash, charred wood and slag formed from melted mud bricks - and above that the replacement of a materially rich culture by one that is noticeably impoverished in terms of material objects.

The Bronze Age general crisis certainly left behind many enigmatic ruins scattered throughout Canaan. The German biblical scholars, Albrecht Alt (1883-1956) and Martin Noth (1902-68), reasoned that local stories peopled with legendary heroes and villains must have sprung up, which gave meaning to



# SUPPLEMENT

those gigantic wrecks. Both men thought that there was also the likelihood of genuine folk memories. Namely victories scored by hill-country militias over the declining Canaanite city-states, which had till then dominated and exploited them. The book of Joshua was, they concluded, a stitching together of these accounts into a single and much elaborated epic.

## Apiru

Now let us ask an obvious question: who were the ancient Hebrews? Intriguingly, apart from the lone Merneptah stele directly mentioning Israel, there are records of two other named groups, who are of obvious interest here: people who lived on the margins of Canaanite society “between the desert and the sown”.<sup>18</sup>

The first is the Shosu. They kept flocks and herds and appear to have been something of an all-round nuisance. An Egyptian report tells of a punishment raid on the tented encampments of the Shosu, from which the pharaoh’s troops took away cattle “without number”.<sup>19</sup>

The other group was the Apiru (or Habiru). A term that crops up throughout the Middle East in the Bronze Age, but - and this is obviously significant - it does so especially with reference to Canaan. They seem to have been an amorphous collection of escapees from, or rebels against, war, taxation, famine and state power. Disparagingly, the Apiru are portrayed in official sources as criminals, brigands or mercenary soldiers ready for hire. Contending state formations loathed, dreaded and yet might choose to cynically use them. Surely, however, the Apiru would have had their own programme and ideology - an ancient combination of Robin Hood, the Luddites and the Sicilian mafia perhaps? Anyone familiar with Eric Hobsbawm’s *Primitive rebels* (1959) will get the point. Such honourable outlaws, self-defence associations, religious dissenters and bands of social avengers can arrive at the point where “class conflicts are dominant”.<sup>20</sup>

Various writers have speculated about a linguistic connection between the words ‘Apiru’ (‘Habiru’) and ‘Hebrew’ (the Israelites). Opinion is still divided. Nevertheless, even if there is no direct join, both the Shosu and Apiru might provide a clue about who the Hebrews might have been.

Archaeological literalists such as William Albright and Yigael Yadin believed they were proving, illustrating, filling in the fine details of the biblical account contained in Joshua. But, long before them, an iconoclastic Albrecht Alt argued, beginning in the 1920s, that the Hebrews did not originate in northern Mesopotamia, nor did they wander round wilderness before their spectacular invasion of Canaan. Hence Alt not only rejected the biblical account: he rejected the standard academic model of his time of grand people movements - a nationalist assumption which dominated history writing from the late 19th century onwards, when dealing with the ancient world.

Alt put forward the idea that the Hebrews were modest pastoralists, a loosely organised independent group of Shosu-like people, who regularly shifted between the Transjordan plateau and the Jordan valley. At the end of the Bronze Age they began to relocate, clearing areas in the next-door, heavily wooded, sparsely inhabited central highlands of Palestine. Given the lack of direct state control by the Canaanite cities, this sedentarisation - the voluntary settling down to a farming way of life - proceeded, in Alt’s model, without large-scale battles, prolonged sieges or mass slaughter. Instead he proposed a gradual process of peaceful infiltration.

As the population of the highlands steadily increased, the corresponding scarcity of land and water led the Hebrews down into the coastal plain. Only then came serious military conflicts with the Canaanite city-states. Here, or so concluded Alt’s theory, was the *real* background to the recurring struggles between the Hebrews (Israelites) and neighbouring peoples vividly described in the book of Judges.

In the 1960s and 70s Alt’s peaceful-infiltration theory was increasingly disputed. I am not talking about Christian or Zionist fundamentalists - that almost goes without saying. No, I refer to serious critics. Tellingly a range of biblical scholars, anthropologists, historians and sociologists pointed to field studies, which showed an intimate connection between semi-nomads and village farmers in the Middle East. Not unreasonably, Alt’s critics (friendly and hostile) argued that in ancient

times the pastoralist population which regularly headed east from the fertile northern section of the Jordan valley with the coming of the winter rains, and those practising peasant agriculture, were quite possibly one and the same ethnic entity. More than that, while pastoralists might opt for a settled life - for example, because of climate change - once conditions allowed, they returned to their old ways. Semi-nomads certainly do not exhibit Alt’s land-hunger. They are reluctant peasants.

An alternative set of theories inevitably arose. George Mendenhall, like Alt, discounted the historicity of the biblical account of Joshua’s conquests. Yet, despite his background as an ordained Lutheran minister, Mendenhall developed an innovative class-conflict thesis. For Mendenhall there was neither violent invasion nor peaceful infiltration. Rather, he contended, internal conflict pitted the rural lower classes - those who called themselves, or were called, Hebrews or Israelites - against the exploiting “network of interlocking Canaanite city-states”.<sup>21</sup> Mendenhall thought in terms of a religiously motivated peasant movement and gaining control over an established political economy.

While he hardly discounts social relations, Mendenhall’s hypothesis ultimately rests on theological explanation: in the beginning came the idea ... Yahwehism made Israel and in that spirit its operational precepts are conceived of as being nearer to Mahatma Gandhi than Thomas Müntzer. Mendenhall argues that the Hebrews withdrew from the Canaanite system “not physically and geographically, but politically and subjectively”. Through that inner refusal, an increasing swathe of the population no longer felt “any obligation to the existing political regime”.<sup>22</sup> Legitimacy drained away (perhaps along with tax-gathering powers). And, though their final religious war swept away the latifundist-trading Canaanite ruling classes, this did not involve mass extermination by the Israelites. In percentage terms the aristocracy was, of course, insignificant anyway. Furthermore, Mendenhall insisted, the old society was not simply taken over intact: a radically novel anti-monarchist social order was constructed, centred on a covenant between Yahweh and those who were prepared to believe in him.

Symbolically, land ownership passed from the Canaanite aristocracy and was nominally given over to Yahweh. In practice one would hazard that there would have been something akin to what in Russia was called a ‘black redistribution’: a shattering division of the great agricultural estates into numerous smallholdings. The socio-economic foundation of Israelite society was therefore constituted by a mass of independent peasant farmers. Politically there was a matching rejection of centralised power. In religious terms this ‘regulated anarchism’ correspondingly enacted rules forbidding graven images - that is, images of kings and gods, and of gods giving authority to kings.

Others took over the baton from the “pioneering work” of Mendenhall, the most notable being Norman Gottwald.<sup>23</sup> Like Mendenhall he is convinced that there was an Israelite revolution which finished off the Canaanite ruling classes (apart from the Philistines). Hence Joshua is treated not as history, but myth. Gottwald successfully synthesises Mendenhall and Alt by assiduously constructing a theory which has at its core ideologically motivated escapees colonising the frontier lands of Canaan. Gottwald argues that these people played a role analogous not to America’s westward-moving settlers, but Mao Zedong’s People’s Liberation Army. The frontier constituted a base area from where a revolutionary return was carefully prepared, not a safety valve which attenuated class antagonisms.

Gottwald’s monumental study, *The tribes of Yahweh* (1979), is a paradigm-shifting work, historically-theoretically reconstructing Israel as a “major sub-system”. Crucial is understanding religion as a “social phenomenon”, related to other social phenomena “within the system”.<sup>24</sup> The influence of Marxism is unmistakable and acknowledged from the outset. The riches, complexities and contradictions of the Yahwehite religion are therefore derived from social circumstances. Not the other way round.

Gottwald fully accepts Mendenhall’s idea that pre-monarchical Israel embraced a primitive anarchism - though he prefers to call it a peasant communitarianism or an “inarticulate

tribal socialism”.<sup>25</sup> Despite stressing extensive common ground with Mendenhall, Gottwald refuses to subscribe to what he calls his philosophical idealism. Pointedly, he chides Mendenhall for not pursuing class and social relations far enough.

Unfortunately this produced an infuriated, but sadly conventional, reply by Mendenhall (not further development of his original insight). Gottwald was accused of forcing “the ancient historical data into the Procrustes’ bed of 19th century Marxist ideology”. A banal charge endlessly thrown against Gottwald by the academic establishment, which insists for its own reasons on gutting the history of ancient Israel - and virtually everywhere else for that matter - of class content. Technological determinism, piecemeal evolutionary change and state teleologies are always preferred over real historical movement (which is always complex and involves dialectical contradictions, class conflict *and* revolutionary breaks). However, as Gottwald painstakingly shows, the facts tend to support the peasant revolution thesis.

Gottwald argues, crucially in his *magnum opus*, that the Israelites originated in the Canaanite lowlands. He depicts them as a revolutionary political movement which retreated from the stifling oppression and exploitation of the Canaanite ruling classes (and the Egyptian tribute system). These *social* revolutionaries organised a short march eastwards into the lawless uplands. Gottwald’s *physical* withdrawal could only have included relatively small numbers, especially to begin with.

Anyway, perhaps after a number of failures, the Israelite community finally establishes itself in the highlands rising from both banks of the Jordan river. Free at last, they align themselves with the semi-pastoralist population and constitute a beacon of liberty. Welcoming a steady trickle of those “yearning to breathe free” heading out from Canaan, the Israelite revolution steadily expands its political, military and economic base area. The ruling classes would surely have included this dissident body under the pejorative term ‘Apiru’.

Supporting his lowland origins thesis, Gottwald cites what he considers the best archaeology. Eg, William Dever was one of his “informants” in the mid-1970s. He had shown that pottery and buildings discovered in the Palestinian highlands exhibited a similar style to lowland finds of the same 13th and 12th century BCE period.<sup>26</sup> For Gottwald observations such as this provided archaeological validation for his liberation theory (interestingly the philosophically “pragmatic” Dever agreed).

Not that Gottwald ignores the active role of ideas. His “liberated Israel” adopts, fashions or perfects Yahwehism: an ideology providing the cohesion, fervour and popular appeal which raises the Israelites from peasant discontent to the tipping point which delivers state power - despite seemingly impossible military odds. Theological inspiration for the Israelite revolutionary movement came, according to Gottwald, from an exotic intellectual elite, which inherited/carried with them doctrines of the kind that lay behind the fleeting monotheism of the god, Aten, promoted by pharaoh Akhenaten in 14th century BCE Egypt.

## Peasant socialism

In Gottwald’s account the revolutionary highland vanguard of Israel successfully mobilised the lowland rural masses to overthrow the ruling classes in Canaan using Yahwehism. Like good multiculturalists, Israel positively encouraged collective recruitment. For Gottwald there is nothing exclusive about the worshippers of Yahweh in the late Bronze Age. Indeed whole peoples seek entry into the newly established social order.

After a prolonged period of fluidity this arrangement eventually hardened into the 12 tribes which Gottwald argues were finally institutionalised by king David (or maybe before him by Saul) and then given bureaucratic “rationality” by Solomon, with his monthly rotation of officials.<sup>27</sup> Gottwald, let it be noted, draws inspiration from Lewis Henry Morgan and his classic study of the Iroquois confederacy of tribes.<sup>28</sup>

Albeit vastly more ambitious, wide-ranging and sophisticated, the central thesis advanced by Gottwald essentially corresponds with that of George Mendenhall. Israeli peasant socialism

was a deliberately segmented social formation. Mutual aid, confederal relations, tribal intermarriage, tribal military levies, small-scale patriarchal landholdings and universal male cultic assemblies were, taken together, an anti-aristocratic, anti-imperialist defence mechanism. Constructed for the twofold purpose of keeping free from Egypt and preventing an internal revival of Canaanite aristocratic landlordism.

Following Mendenhall, Gottwald describes the new order as uniquely “progressive”, compared with “contiguous” and “antecedent” social systems in the region.<sup>29</sup> I have already mentioned the possibility of a general land redistribution, the jubilees and textual indications of egalitarianism. Gottwald holds that Israel’s “inarticulate traditional socialism” overthrew the Canaanite tribute system without afterwards reproducing its steep social contours. That would indeed make Israel exceptional.

Peasant revolutions have happened throughout history.<sup>30</sup> Two successful Chinese examples: one ancient, the other modern. First, Liu Bang (256/47-195 BCE) - born into a humble Chinese peasant family, he led a rural insurrection and in 202 BCE founded the Han dynasty, which began by freeing slaves and reducing taxes. Then there is Mao Zedong’s peasant-based People’s Liberation Army. It broke the power of landlords in the villages it took. After establishing itself in Beijing in 1949, Mao’s regime set about liquidating the landlords as a class. Between 1951 and 1952 they were expropriated. Peasants, in their turn, were organised into cooperatives.

The subsequent pattern is, suffice to say, sadly familiar, however. Despite lavish egalitarian promises, social stratification quickly re-emerges, as revolutionary cadre are forced to oversee, learn or mimic socially necessary functions. During the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age those functions would have included: supervising irrigation work; maintaining grain and other vital common reserves; drafting legal decrees; negotiating with foreign diplomats; serving as military commanders in order to protect against invading armies; etc.

Gottwald is convinced that there were tribal chiefs, priests and generals. Despite that, Israel was a “self-governing community of free peasants”, which provided “dignity and livelihood for all members”.<sup>31</sup> That is why he feels able to call the mode of production “communitarian”. The ‘big men’, he says, did not exercise coercive powers. Hence, apart from the surplus production customarily given over for religious purposes and social aid for the needy, peasant labour did not support any kind of elaborate state machine. Tribal chiefs, priests and generals were probably better off than others in their immediate locality, but not by much. And, it should be added, even if their power positions were heritable, there would have been an obligation to give away any surplus product they had at their disposal to those around them because of the gift obligation rules outlined by Marcel Mauss.<sup>32</sup>

Without doing that, power would have drained away from the power-holders. Other leaders would have been found. Hence, we can safely conclude, there existed no socially embedded drive to constantly raise production. That is characteristic of peasantries facing high, or increasing, tax demands, marginal land thereby coming under the plough. Nor would there be a compulsion to accumulate forced onto the better-off. Surpluses have to be given away and are always limited. Understandably, peasants, in general, prefer to do as little necessary work as possible. An absence of forts, palaces and grand public buildings and the presence of small farmsteads throughout the highlands is cited by Gottwald as an archaeological pointer.

Nor, says Gottwald, did Israel pay tribute to Egypt, or any other imperial empire. Prefiguring “socialism in one country”, he believes Israel cut itself off from what survived of the tribute-gathering system of the day. It should be remembered that, though it survived the late Bronze Age general crisis, Egypt had been profoundly weakened. As always, periods of independence for small countries such as Israel were brief and resulted not so much from heroic internal class struggles, but more the contraction and retreat of big powers.

However, claims of an extended non-hierarchical peasant socialism have to be treated cautiously. Peasant rebel armies may be mobilised with all manner of fantastic millenarian predictions, egalitarian legal decrees and even substantial measures that seem to embody those ends. Popular passions are thereby ignited, directed and sustained.



If established, there is, though, the constant danger that outside powers will invade the peasant utopia in order to plunder, exact tribute and enslave. Hence the necessity of maintaining well drilled military forces, which, needless to say, are costly and inherently hierarchical. There is an unavoidable chain of command in all armies with those who issue orders and those expected to obey them. And those who habitually issue orders can easily be tempted to establish themselves as privileged rulers. Military coups are as old as armies.

Not that peasants are best placed to resist. They are subject to the tyranny of isolation. Their general way of life is disaggregated. Peasant families are separated one from another, as they work the land. Each peasant family also strives to be self-sufficient - consumption being obtained more through an exchange with nature than complex relations with wider society. That is not just the case with food: spinning and weaving would be done by the women of the household and, once the harvest had been gathered in, the men would take up brewing, leatherworking, carpentry, smithing and building work. Then there is the tyranny of time. If starvation is to be avoided there is no choice. Soil must be ploughed, seeds sown and crops harvested, according to the endless circular rhythm dictated by the seasons. And, to the degree peasant families are uninvolved with the urban centres and are fixed on the daily routine, they are incapable of enforcing common interests.

Nor do peasants really constitute a single class. Peasants are divided into different strata, each with mutually antithetical interests. At one extreme are those granted, holding, owning or renting considerable lands and who regularly employ auxiliary labour. At the other extreme are those languishing deep in debt and who possess less than nothing. These paupers must hire out their ability to labour (even sell themselves or their wife and children into slavery). So the peasantry includes exploited and exploiters - even within the peasant family, the basic unit of production, that is the case. Male patriarchs ruthlessly take advantage of dependent relatives and relations.

Unless established over a pocket-sized territory, peasant democracy proves impossible to maintain for long. Work, seasons and divergent interests tear solidarity apart. The peasant's instinctive hatred of taxation and centralised authority - peasant anarchism - resolves itself into the acceptance of, or search for, a saviour, prophet, king or god, who will deliver them from disorganisation, internal conflicts, foreign threats, and send them "rain and sunshine from above".<sup>33</sup> Anti-statism thereby becomes statism.

I am more than prepared to accept that a late Bronze Age peasant revolution massively reduced and then institutionally maintained flattened social contours in Palestine - the most convincing way in my opinion to explain the surviving traces of an egalitarian ethos in the Bible. The social elite was confined to religious leaders and military commanders, who were in all likelihood related to their congregations and fellow fighters through ties of friendship, marriage or blood. In other words, social relations were ethnical, or personal, not those of political society. Israel could therefore be legitimately described as a non-state, or even post-state, peasant society.

However, peasant socialism does not - it needs emphasising - equate with a higher level of material civilisation. While the Israeli social revolution removed the main burden of exploitation from the individual peasant household, there was also an undoubted loss. Social flattening went hand in hand with cultural shrinkage.

Merchants, musicians, shopkeepers, poets, doctors, painters, perfumers, dancers, architects, dressmakers, jewellers, sculptors, etc - those whom we would now call the middle classes - found that the social surplus needed to support them full-time in those occupations evaporated.

Because they were primarily reliant on aristocratic-driven demand, there was bound to be a downward spiral. Falling numbers of peasants from one generation to the next and a reduction of the overall social surplus surely sealed their fate. And, seeing the past through the prism of material objects as they do, it comes as no surprise that mainstream archaeologists write of a darkness separating bronze and iron civilisations.

Yet - though remarkably successful and lasting a couple of centuries, according to Gottwald - the Israeli system of peasant socialism eventually proved militarily inadequate, when it

came to meeting the growing menace posed by Philistine imperialism. To save egalitarianism, egalitarianism had to be sacrificed - hence, mourns Gottwald, the retreat into monarchy and centralism with Saul (and then David). Yahwehism, he says, had to be continued, so popular was it, but was effectively turned onto its head. Whereas kingship had been rejected because of Yahweh, now the king became Yahweh's anointed representative on earth.

## Counterrevolution

How did the monarchical counterrevolution happen? Biblical accounts blame the common people because, sinfully, they slid back into worshipping other gods. Yahweh, therefore, withheld his divine protection. That put foreigners, especially the Philistines, at a distinct military advantage. As described in the first book of Samuel, the Philistine armies twice routed the combined tribal levies of the Hebrews and on the second occasion they "captured the ark of god".<sup>34</sup>

Thanks to heavenly intervention, the tribes recovered their sacred box after seven months. Nevertheless, because of this military humiliation, plus corruption and self-seeking, the days of the judges were finally coming to a close. The Hebrew elders insisted that they needed a king and a centralised state "like all the other nations".<sup>35</sup>

The aged prophet, Samuel, issues what must surely be the most powerful anti-monarchist warning contained in the *Bible*: a king who rules over you "will take the best of your fields, olive orchards and vineyards"; he "will take a tenth of your grain and of your vineyards"; he will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers; he will take your sons "to run before his chariots" and serve as soldiers, armourers or forced agricultural labourers: he will turn you into "his slaves".<sup>36</sup> Despite Samuel's eloquence, and foresight, the "people refuse to listen".<sup>37</sup> More than that, Yahweh too insisted upon a king. Samuel, naturally, felt obliged to fall in line. Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin, was duly elected by lot and is anointed by Samuel.

Tall, handsome and charismatic, Saul proves militarily successful. He defeats the Ammonites, Amalekites and Philistines. But Saul is religiously suspect. When Samuel tells Saul that Yahweh has bidden that the Amalekites must be exterminated, he does as he is told ... up to a point. The exact instruction was to "utterly destroy" them and all they have. Yahweh not only wants every man, woman and child killed, but every "ox, sheep, camel and ass" too.<sup>38</sup> Following orders, Saul puts the Amalekites to the sword. However, he spares their king, Agag ... and the best of the lambs and oxen and "all that is good".<sup>39</sup> Yahweh is furious. And, though Saul hacks his royal captive to pieces, Yahweh rejects him and promptly informs Samuel that another king must be found.

Now, of course, we arrive at the story of David. Few readers will not know the basic outline. David, the youngest son of Jesse, comes from the Judean town of Bethlehem. Samuel anoints him and the spirit of Yahweh "came mightily upon him".<sup>40</sup>

Yahweh torments Saul, who suffers bouts of severe depression. For consolation Saul gets David to play his lyre. This brings respite and a temporary return of mental stability. David enters into Saul's service and wins the love of his son, Jonathan. The Philistines once again launch themselves against Israel. Their champion, the giant Goliath, challenges anyone in the ranks of Saul's quaking army to single combat. Even though still a callow youth and working for his father as a humble shepherd, David volunteers. He kills Goliath with a single sling shot. David cuts off his head and the terrified Philistines flee.

David is acclaimed a national hero by the people. This provokes the murderous jealousy of Saul. To save his skin David seeks refuge amongst the Philistines, then the Moabites. But the prophet Gad advises him to go back to his native Judea.

Heading a band of 400-600 outlaws, David harries the Philistines, engages in a bit of extortion, saves various village folk and distributes booty. Hidden away in his upland stronghold, he manages to avoid capture by Saul's forces. Once again, however, David exiles himself amongst the Philistines. As one of their vassals he is granted a 'city' and serves in their army. David and his followers raid neighbouring lands. In short he behaves like a classic Apiru chief.

After "a badly wounded" Saul commits suicide on the field of battle, and three of his sons, including Jonathan, are slain by the

Philistines, David is proclaimed king of Israel. As with the deaths of Saul and his sons, David is shown in the *Bible* to be blameless in the killing of Jonathan's crippled child, Mephibosheth, and Saul's close lieutenants. There is a son who succeeds Saul, but we are told Ishbaal is assassinated by the Gibeonites. It hardly takes a Hercule Poirot to work out that in all likelihood David would have spared no effort to "root out" Saul's male line.<sup>41</sup>

Anyhow, the *Bible* then tells how David cleverly seizes Jerusalem and establishes an extensive realm, "for the lord, the god of hosts, was with him".<sup>42</sup> During his dotage David behaves ever more appallingly, driving his son, Absalom, to revolt and descends into sexual depravity. Yet, despite such transgressions, he is succeeded by another of his many sons, Solomon, who extends the kingdom to the banks of the Euphrates and the borders of Egypt.

Unheard of riches flow into the royal treasury. The magnificent Jerusalem temple is built, along with numerous other impressive public works throughout the realm. Internationally Solomon is proclaimed the wisest and most admirable of rulers. Prestige brings exotic visitors to the king's palace from far and wide. A golden age for Israel. And yet, like his father, in his later years Solomon succumbs to temptation. Breaking divine commandments, he "loved many foreign women": we are told he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. As Yahweh had warned, they "turned away his heart".<sup>43</sup>

For the sake of David, his father, Yahweh's retribution is delayed till after Solomon's death and the succession of his son, Rehoboam. Subject peoples rise up. Rehoboam had foolishly wanted to introduce harsh levels of extra taxation. Disastrously the core kingdom then cleaves into two. The 10 northern tribes break away and call themselves Israel. In the south the Judean kingdom is left to struggle on alone (by tradition it is made up of the tribes of Judah and Simeon). And yet Yahweh promises that David's throne - ie, his royal line - will last "for ever".<sup>44</sup>

Few historians, biblical scholars and archaeologists nowadays hold that this and other such stories are in any way an accurate description of early Israel. Indeed, today there is a school of thought which totally discounts David and Solomon, considering them pure invention. Exactly when the scribes are meant to have been given starting orders to begin their work of highly colourful fiction varies greatly - from the 6th century BCE to the 2nd century CE, Niels Peter Lemche representing the most recent dating.<sup>45</sup> However, it is agreed, proceeding from nothing more substantive than a vague folklore, the political elite wanted a glorious past created as a popular focus for nationalist aspirations. This is the minimalist approach.<sup>46</sup>

Others take what I consider to be a more realistic approach. Because of the sheer abundance of stories, place names and personalities contained in the Deuteronomic books, the argument is that this reflects a real underlying history (or, in other words, the *Bible* has some real documentary value). Though it does not decide the matter conclusively, a much valued basalt block was discovered in 1993 by the archaeologist, Avraham Biran. Fragmented, written in Aramaic and consisting only of 13 remaining lines, the Tel Dan stone, carved in roughly 850 BCE, explicitly refers to the "House of David". Hence its significance. Dan, it should be mentioned, was located in the far north of the ancient kingdom of Israel - presumably the place therefore frequently changed hands. The chiselled script boasts of [Hazal], king of Syria, Damascus, having [killed] the "son of" [Ahab], the "king of Israel", and [Ahaz]iahu, son of [Jehoram] of the "the house of David". Interestingly, the second book of Kings reports that Ahaziah, king of Israel, and Jehoram, king of Judea, were simultaneously killed - though this is put down to a coup by the Israelite general and later king, Jehu.<sup>47</sup> Anyway, the triumphant Syrian monarch, the one whom the Tel Dan stone celebrates, goes on to turn [Ahaz]iahu's, towns and "land", into [desolation].

This, and accumulated indirect evidence, has helped to undermine the ultra-minimalists. There was, it seems, a monarchy which traced its lineage back to David (a real or imagined person) some one hundred years after his death in the generally agreed biblical chronology. That is, the kings of Judea, as opposed to those of Israel, of course.

The best book I have read on this subject is *David and Solomon* (2007), jointly written by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman. According to the two authors, there is no

material evidence of a strong, centralised state formation in Judea - not least based on Jerusalem - till towards the end of the 8th century BCE. That is more than 250 years after David in the standard biblical chronology. Archaeological digs - including those designed to illustrate the historical fact of the biblical accounts of David's imperial capital and his son's huge temple - reveal nothing more impressive than a modest hilltop settlement in Jerusalem. A minor chief's political-religious centre, doubtless, but certainly not a city boasting a world-renowned temple.

Other critical-minded archaeological authorities - those whom we might call the advanced school - agree. Eg, William Dever writes of a real temple in the "age of Solomon", built along Phoenician lines by Phoenician architects, "craftsmen and artisans".<sup>48</sup> But he too considers Jerusalem to be a modest affair. Hence Solomon's temple is described as a "royal chapel".<sup>49</sup>

Finkelstein and Silberman are more than willing to countenance David as a real historical figure and founder of a royal line - an Apiru chief who managed to carve out, or gain control of, a kingdom which had Jerusalem as its capital. However, not only was Jerusalem no more than a glorified township at the time (and for many years thereafter): the surrounding realm was diminutive and confined to the dry, rugged Judean hill country. Framed by the Dead Sea, the kingdom included Bethel, jutting slightly to the north, Aroer, on the borders of the Negev desert in the south, but to the west it stopped short with the hills of Shephelah, where it met the Philistine coastal strip. In other words, Judea amounted to little more than the highland area rising to the west of the Dead Sea.

So Finkelstein and Silberman feel confident in discounting biblical claims that David ruled over a territory that roughly equates with modern Palestine. Solomon's empire - stretching from the Mediterranean coast to the Euphrates and to the borders of Egypt - is put down to much later bombastic invention.

Finkelstein and Silberman go on to convincingly show that David's kingdom was economically poor and militarily weak. The entire population is estimated to have amounted to 5,000 people<sup>50</sup> - small even by the Lilliputian standards of the day. Judea's only advantage, when it came to the imperial ambitions of outsiders, was its uninviting terrain and economic unimportance.

The real Israel (Samaria) was in these times located to the north. Once again centred on the rugged highlands, this kingdom did though contain the fertile upper Jordan valley. Its population is thought to have been some eight times bigger than Judea's and included the genuine cities of Samaria, Shechem and Megiddo. Israel really did enjoy a substantial influx of tax and tribute, which allowed the construction of imposing fortifications and marbled temples - wrongly attributed to Solomon by maximalist theology, history and archaeology.

## Polytheism

Let us ask a few closely related questions. What was the *actual* religion of Hebrew peasant socialism and, following that, the kingdoms of Israel and Judea? Was Yahwehite monotheism universally accepted and woven into the social fabric? Were there only temporary and, to all intents and purposes, minor deviations from strict orthodoxy?

In the *King James Bible* - the 'authorised' English version - the 'divine name', or 'Tetragrammaton', is more or less consistently rendered as 'Lord' or 'God' (often printed in upper case). The same goes for earlier Greek and Latin translations. It should be added that biblical scholars freely admit that these titles substitute for the Hebrew letters, IHVH, in English translated as 'YHWH', which, of course, stands for 'Yahweh' (the vowels being omitted). The practice of replacing 'Yahweh' for an altogether vaguer term such as 'Lord' began "before the Christian era": ie, with the Jews. As the preface to my 1973 revised standard version of the Bible further explains, this avoided using the proper name of "the one and only God, as though there were other gods from whom He had to be distinguished". That would be "entirely inappropriate for the universal faith of the Christian Church".

Yet the *Tanakh* has numerous passages which simply take for granted the existence of other gods. The first commandment instructs the Israelites: "You shall have no other gods before me".<sup>51</sup> In other words, the various authors of



# SUPPLEMENT

what Christians call the Old Testament did think that Yahweh had to be distinguished from other gods. Indeed, evidence of an older, polytheistic, tradition still remains within the book of Genesis, albeit in negative form: eg, the attack on Baal and “idolatrous priests” in Zephaniah i,4; the mocking of stone and wooden idols in Habakkuk ii; the spirits mentioned in 1 Kings xxii,19; denunciations of Baal and Asherah in 2 Kings xxi and xxiii.

Such references to Baal, Yahweh’s arch-enemy, seem “to reflect Israelite worship of this god”.<sup>52</sup> In the *Bible* an emotionally sensitive Yahweh rages against those making offerings to Baal. He specially selects prophets to extinguish his cult. And yet the *Bible* contains many revealing stories telling how the chosen people repeatedly turned to Baal: eg, 1 Kings xvi, 31-33. The Israeli monarch, Ahab, “went and served Baal and worshipped him. He, Ahab, erected an altar for Baal, in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria.”

Not that the southern kingdom was immune. 1 Kings xiv, 22-24, reports that the Judeans “also built for themselves high places, pillars, and Asherim on every high hill and under every green tree. They did according to all the abominations of the nations which the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.”

Despite the various theories that Israel originated in the desert margins, worship of Baal indicates a clear orientation towards arable agriculture. Baal symbolises fertility and has been anthropologically categorised as a “dying and rising god”. In *The golden bough* (1914) James Frazer coined this designation, abstracting from his forensic studies of Osiris, Tammuz and Adonis - all male gods representing nature’s cycle, who “annually died and rose again from the dead”.<sup>53</sup>

Whether Baal died and miraculously sprung to life again, or simply disappeared and then returned to view, is still a matter of debate amongst scholars.<sup>54</sup> However, in the Ugaritic Baal cycle we read the following lines: “Baal is dead! What will return him to life; whereupon all nature blossomed again and El proclaimed: ‘Baal the conqueror lives; the prince, the lord of the earth, has revived.’”<sup>55</sup>

The Bronze age emporium city of Ugarit is located near Ras Shamra (on the coast of Syria, about 100 miles north of Beirut). At the height of its prosperity the city is variously estimated to have had a population ranging from 3,115 to 13,555 (at either margin impressive for the time)<sup>56</sup>. It was excavated in 1929 under the direction of Claude FA Schaeffer and several libraries of clay tablets were brought to light. They include the Baal cycle and other sacred texts. Ugarit and Israel were closely related culturally. Ugaritic and Hebrew constitute branches on the same linguistic tree. There is a distinct religious similarity too. Tell-tale parallel sayings, poems and stories crop up in the *Bible* and the Ugaritic texts. Eg, in the Ugaritic texts one finds mention of “herem warfare”: that is, the type of warfare supposedly practised by Joshua, in which “all things connected to the enemy in a battle are consecrated to the god by killing them, either in the battle itself or afterwards”.<sup>57</sup> Mark Smith makes the salient point: “the Ugaritic texts ... offer significant gains for understanding the Israelite religion”.<sup>58</sup>

Baal is a storm god and is shown locked in an epic life-and-death struggle with Yam (god of stormy seas and chaos) and Mot (god of death). Yam kills Baal, but the tables are then reversed. Mot reluctantly submits to the risen/returned Baal. The god Baal has a long list of other adventures and enemies. Despite that, despite his list of successful struggles against them, in the Ugarit texts at least, he never becomes the chief god. He is always doomed to be the heir apparent (in that sense time remains frozen).

Seemingly the *circular* Baal cult involved orgiastic ceremonies and human sacrifice carried out at special sites called *tophets*. We are informed by the writers of antiquity, including Plutarch, about Carthage (a Phoenician colony) and the religiously prescribed, and redeeming, practice of roasting babies alive. If that happened - and most historians and archaeologists are convinced that it was not Roman black propaganda - such state-sanctioned infanticide would surely indicate a social crisis of some kind; but that way Baal was gratified or mollified.

The *Bible* itself contains stories both condemning and condoning child sacrifice. Jeremiah vii,31 has Yahweh rejecting the “abomination” of those who “burn their sons and daughters in the fire”. But that must be set against a theological background where Exodus

xxii,29 commands that “the first born of your sons shall be given to me”. Also in Exodus, this time xxxiv, we read: “All the first-born of your sons you shall redeem.” Nor does Yahweh show the slightest compunction in cynically testing Abraham with the instruction to sacrifice his son, Isaac.<sup>59</sup> In Judges the Israeli war leader, Jephthah, does kill his unnamed daughter and only child. Hubristically, Jephthah had vowed to Yahweh that, if granted military victory over the Ammonites, he would give as a “burnt offering” whomsoever first greeted him when he returned home.<sup>60</sup>

Working out the broad outlines of the original Hebrew religion does not rely on exegesis alone. Over many decades excavators have unearthed an impressive range of objects - amulets, carvings, seals, statues - which show that ancient Israel/Judea was “thoroughly polytheistic”. Many of the figures depicted are thought to be gods and goddesses - though we cannot be sure - not mere mortals. Artistic interpretation thereby comes to the fore amongst contending academics.<sup>61</sup>

Then there was a wall painting and inscription found at Kuntillet Ajrud, in the Sinai, dated 850-750 BCE. It referred to the gods El, Baal and Yahweh ... and “his Asherah”.<sup>62</sup> An archaeological bombshell.

We are, however, as suggested above, provided with another, much wider, *background* picture of ancient Israel through the Ugaritic texts. The Ugaritic pantheon has four distinct levels. At the summit sits the supreme god and his wife (El and Asherah). Below them their 70 divine children (including Yam, Mot, Baal, Astarte, Dagon, Tirosch, Horon, Nahar, Resheph, Kotar Hosis and Anat, as well as the sun-goddess, Shapshu and the moon-god, Yerak). The stars of El. Then comes Kothar w-Hasis, the chief minister. Finally lesser servants, those whom the *Bible* calls angels (in other words, messenger-gods). Outside the divine household the Ugaritic religion was inhabited by numerous evil spirits, devils and a Satan figure (Shachar). This arrangement would seem to be “intimately related” to the structure of the royal household in ancient Ugarit.<sup>63</sup>

## Main god

Frank Cross (following Albrecht Alt) lists the various names of the *main* god of Genesis and Exodus as it originally appeared: El-Shaddai, El-Elyon, El-Olam, El-Bethel, El-Elohay-Israel, El-Roi.<sup>64</sup> Yahweh comes to dominance in other books, but many of El’s attributes, titles and relationships are assumed by, or transfer to, him. In 1 Kings xxii,19-22 we read of Yahweh meeting with his “host of heaven”. Then there is Asherah. In the Old Testament she is the wife of Baal. But, as we have already mentioned, archaeological evidence shows that, at least amongst some Judeans, the goddess Asherah was considered Yahweh’s co-ruler and spouse. A marital join continued in the theistic belief system of the Hebrew mercenary community based in Egypt down to the 3rd century BCE. Papyrus found on Elephantine - a little strip of an island located just above the first cataract in the Nile river - shows that they were worshipped as a couple.<sup>65</sup>

In terms of this discussion, the Hebrew word for death, ‘metu’, is instructive. Linguists say it is derived from Mot, the Ugaritic god of death.<sup>66</sup> The word for sea, ‘yam’, is even more revealing, being an exact match for the Ugaritic sea god. Scholars have also noted that names such as Daniel, Ishmael, Michael and Israel are “theophoric in form” - that is to say, the suffix reproduces the divine name, in this case the god El.<sup>67</sup> ‘Israel’ means something like “God rules” or “May god show himself as ruler”.<sup>68</sup>

In all likelihood, as tradition dictated, Hebrew clans continued to venerate their own particular family gods or goddesses (statues, etc were often clearly female and big-breasted). Numerous intimate shrines are thought to have existed, located within houses, villages, caves and groves of trees. The cults associated with these sites would seem to have involved an annual calendar of events: eg, “feasting, dancing and betrothals”.<sup>69</sup>

While the topmost pantheon has been considerably reduced in biblical references, the evidence shows beyond any *reasonable* doubt that the religion of ancient Israel closely matched those of neighbouring peoples in the Levant - including the opulent and sophisticated civilisation of Phoenicia. We know that hilltops and mountains were considered especially holy - the *Bible* contains many hints: Bethel, Gezer, Jerusalem, Arnon, Bamah and Gibeon were, we can gather, all important religious centres.

Saul, David and even Solomon are shown as patrons. Presumably, during visits to high places, they would have paid generously to have had sex with cult prostitutes, sacrificed animals or children, and sought favours from one or another of the “host of heaven”: El, Yahweh, Asherah, Baal, Yam, Mot, Astarte, Dagon, Shapshu, Yerak, etc.

There was also an unmistakable religious-cultural borrowing from Egypt. Looking at the various objects photographed, or drawn, by archaeologists that are reproduced in books and journals, or placed on the internet, one is instantly struck by an extraordinary similarity between pharaonic depictions of humans, animals and gods and those of ancient Israel/Canaan. Hardly surprising, though, given the prolonged periods of Canaanite vassalship to Egypt.

That aside, I think we can conclude, with some considerable degree of assurance, that notions of an exclusive Yahwehism providing the ideological inspiration for the Israelite peasant movement, and then constituting the *monotheistic* religion of a liberated Israel, are simply not credible. Ditto, notions of the early monarchs as defenders of an *exclusive* Yahwehite faith (albeit ideologically reversed).

Mark Smith has charted how Yahwehite henotheism slowly begins to emerge from polytheism (both modern concepts, of course, that would not have been understood by anybody living in the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age). The four heavenly levels went through a successive series of narrowing modifications. To begin with, Yahweh was merely one of El’s and Athirat’s children - El dividing the world “according to the number of the divine sons”. Supposedly there were 70 nations with Israel going to Yahweh, of course. Later redactors, it is suggested, “evidently uncomfortable” with the polytheism expressed in the phrase, “according to the number of the divine sons”, alter it to read: “according to the number of the children of Israel” (neatly, its patriarchal family heads are also said to number 70).

Psalms lxxxii shows the first surviving biblical narrowing of the divine family. It relates how the god, El, presides over a divine council/assembly, in which Yahweh stands up and makes his accusation against the other gods. Here the text shows “the older theology”, which the passage is “rejecting”.<sup>70</sup>

By the 8th century BCE, during which the Israeli state and monarchy comes to a shuddering end, it is “evident that the god, El, was identified with Yahweh”. As a result Yahweh-El becomes the husband of the goddess, Asherah-Athirat. As I have shown above, this is supported by archaeological evidence of a joint cult. Not surprisingly then, there are also biblical condemnations of the presence of her statue in Jerusalem. Ezekiel xiii,10 reports that the Jerusalem temple was full of “the idols of the house of Israel”.

In henotheistic form, the religious devotion to Yahweh puts him in the role of a divine king ruling over the other deities. This arrangement appears in psalm xxxix,6-8, where the “sons of god”, or “heavenly beings”, are called upon to heap praise upon Yahweh alone. Between the 8th and 6th centuries BCE other gods are increasingly depicted as adjuncts of Yahweh’s power: they shrink, turn into devils or disappear altogether.

Narrowing the hierarchy of heaven follows - or represents, albeit in idealised form - the emergence of kings from amongst the Israeli tribes. Smith argues that there were associated “traumatic” changes occurring in the legal framework; the individual becomes a legal personality, next to and alongside the extended family.<sup>71</sup> He cites Deuteronomy xxvi,16; Jeremiah xxxi,29-30; and Ezekiel xviii. Old tribal structures and egalitarian relationships were collapsing, or undergoing rapid decay, and being subsumed by class interests and property rights.

Social stratification was getting wider and wider. The poor got much poorer, the rich got much richer. Such were the origins of Yahwehite monotheism ●

This article is an edited extract from Jack Conrad's *Fantastic reality: Marxism and the politics of religion*. It can be purchased at [www.lulu.com/shop/jack-conrad/fantastic-reality/paperback/product-20305419.html](http://www.lulu.com/shop/jack-conrad/fantastic-reality/paperback/product-20305419.html)

## Notes

1. See DB Redford *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in ancient times* Princeton NJ 1992.
2. Joshua i,18.
3. Joshua i,4.
4. Joshua xi,21.
5. Joshua ix,24.

6. Joshua xi,14.
7. Deuteronomy xv,4.
8. Deuteronomy xv,11.
9. Judges xxi,25.
10. T Thompson *Early history of the Israelite people* Leiden 1992, p45.
11. GH Mendenhall *Ancient Israel's faith and history: an introduction to the Bible in context* London 2001.
12. NK Gottwald *The tribes of Yahweh* Sheffield 1999, pxxxv.
13. J Dus ‘Moses or Joshua? On the problem of founder of the Israelite religion’ *Radical Religion* No2, 1975, p28.
14. I Finkelstein and NA Silberman *The Bible unearthed* New York NY 2002, p77.
15. *Ibid*.
16. The sea peoples were apparently an ethnically mixed group who attacked and rampaged throughout the eastern Mediterranean in the 13th and 12th centuries BCE. Yet despite an “ever expanding” archaeological record, their origins, identity and material culture “remain elusive” (AE Killebrew and G Lehmann [eds] *The Philistines and other ‘sea peoples’ in text and archaeology* Atlanta GA 2013, p5).
17. I Finkelstein and NA Silberman *The Bible unearthed* New York NY 2002, p83.
18. Jeremiah ii,2.
19. I Finkelstein and NA Silberman *The Bible unearthed* New York NY 2002, p103.
20. E Hobsbawm *Primitive rebels* Manchester 1959, p4.
21. G Mendenhall ‘The Hebrew conquest of Palestine’ *Biblical Archaeologist* Vol 25, 1962, p72.
22. *Ibid*.
23. N Gottwald, ‘Two models for the origins of ancient Israel’ in HB Huffmon, FA Spina and ARW Green (eds) *The quest for the kingdom of god* Winona Lake IN 1983, p5.
24. NK Gottwald *The tribes of Yahweh* Sheffield 1999, p233.
25. *Ibid* p473.
26. WG Dever *Who were the early Israelites, and where did they come from?* Grand Rapids MI 2003, p53.
27. NK Gottwald *The tribes of Yahweh* Sheffield 1999, p368.
28. See LH Morgan *Ancient society* Gloucester MA 1974, chapters 2-5.
29. NK Gottwald *The tribes of Yahweh* Sheffield 1999, p66.
30. See R Hilton *Bond men made free* London 2003; ER Wolf *Peasant wars in the 20th century* New York NY 1969.
31. NK Gottwald, ‘Early Israel as an anti-imperial community’ in RA Horsley (ed) *In the shadow of empire* Louisville KY 2008, p9.
32. See M Mauss *The gift* London 1990.
33. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 11, London 1979, pp187-88.
34. 1 Samuel iv-v.
35. 1 Samuel xiii,5.
36. 1 Samuel viii,10-19.
37. 1 Samuel xiii,19.
38. 1 Samuel xv,3.
39. 1 Samuel xv,9.
40. 1 Samuel xvi,13.
41. B Halpern *David's secret demons* Cambridge 2004, pxxv.
42. 2 Samuel ix,10.
43. 1 Kings xi,3.
44. 2 Samuel vi,16.
45. See NP Lemche, ‘The Old Testament - a Hellenistic book?’ *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* Vol 7, No2, pp163-93.
46. See P Davies *In search of ‘ancient Israel’* Sheffield 1992; and T Thompson *Early history of the Israeli people* Leiden 1992.
47. 2 Kings ix,14-27.
48. WG Dever *Did god have a wife?* Grand Rapids MI 2005, p278.
49. *Ibid* p98.
50. I Finkelstein and NA Silberman *David and Solomon* New York NY 2007, p68.
51. Exodus xx,3.
52. [bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/MSmith\\_BiblicalMonotheism](http://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/MSmith_BiblicalMonotheism).
53. J Frazer *The golden bough* Ware 1993, p325.
54. TND Mettinger, ‘The “Dying and rising god” in BF Batto and KL Roberts (eds) *David and Zion* Winona Lake IN 2004.
55. [bible-history.com/resource/the-worship-of-baal](http://bible-history.com/resource/the-worship-of-baal).
56. See W Randall Garr, ‘A population estimate of ancient Ugarit’ - available at [www.jstor.org/stable/1356929](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1356929).
57. MS Smith and WR Pitard *The Ugaritic Baal cycle* Vol 2, Leiden 2009, p175.
58. MS Smith, ‘Recent study of the Israelite religion in light of the Ugaritic texts’ in KL Younger jr *Ugarit at seventy-five* Winona Lake IN 2007, p20.
59. Genesis xxii.
60. Judges xi,31.
61. See O Keel and C Uehlinger *Gods, goddesses and images of god in ancient Israel* Minneapolis MN 1998.
62. *Ibid* p1.
63. MS Smith and WR Pitard *The Ugaritic Baal cycle* Vol 2, Leiden 2009, p46.
64. See FM Cross *Canaanite myth and Hebrew epic* Harvard MA 1997. Also WG Dever *Did god have a wife?* Grand Rapids MI 2005, pp257-60.
65. There have been other archaeological discoveries pointing to a widespread belief in Asherah and considerable growth of academic literature on the subject. See, for example, O Keel and C Uehlinger *Gods, goddesses and images of god in ancient Israel*; N Wyatt *Serving the gods*; J Day *Yahweh and the gods and goddesses of Canaan* and WG Dever *Did god have a wife?* The pinnacle of this line of research is the landmark volume, *Dictionary of deities and demons in the Bible* 1999.
66. The word “metu” may be derived from the word “mot” meaning death and the ‘u’ is a suffix that means ‘their’ - ‘their death’ (web.archive.org/web/20100113080913/http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/emagazine/010.html).
67. See M Magnusson *BC - the archaeology of the Bible lands* London 1977.
68. R Albertz *A history of Israelite religion in the Old Testament period* Vol 1, London 1994, p76.
69. WG Dever *Did god have a wife?* Grand Rapids MI 2005, p96.
70. MS Smith *The origins of biblical monotheism* Oxford 2001, p49.
71. See MS Smith *The early history of god* Grand Rapids MI, 2001.