



# weekly **worker**



**Ferdinand Lassalle and the long and difficult road to the 1875 Gotha unification congress**

- Letters and debate
- Communist University 2025
- Iranian communist women
- Evolution of tech bros

No 1530 March 20 2025

Towards a mass Communist Party

£1/€1.10



**MAKING SENSE  
OF TRUMP'S  
TRADE WARS**

## LETTERS



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

## Censorship

A new film about censorship, *Censoring Palestine*, is itself under attack by secret censors out to suppress it. A number of screenings have been dropped at short notice following 'back-doors pressure' being put on the venues.

In the last few weeks we have received reports of three screenings being axed in different parts of the country because of pressure being put on the venues. Venues are told to drop the film or 'there'll be trouble'. This is the most crude and malicious form of censorship - the worst kind because it's secret.

The documentary, which is the work of London-based Platform Films, investigates allegations that mainstream media has consistently failed to tell the truth about what's happening in Palestine and that counter-terrorism laws are being abused to stop people speaking out. It includes contributions from Ken Loach, Roger Waters, Alexei Sayle and two mothers of imprisoned pro-Palestine activists.

Platform, which in the past has made programmes for the BBC and Channel 4, is also the producer of the film *Oh Jeremy Corbyn - the big lie*, which was itself subject to extraordinary attempts to stop it from being screened in 2023, including most famously being axed by the Glastonbury Festival after an online campaign led by pro-Israel lobby groups.

I believe the reasons behind the attacks on *Censoring Palestine* are at bottom the same as the attacks on our film about Jeremy Corbyn. We are trying to tell the truth about what's happening in Palestine and there are people and organisations out there who just don't want that truth told. But whatever happens we will carry on. Screenings of the films are continuing across the country, from Penzance to Glasgow, and we will carry on supporting them. We need to get the truth out there.

I, together with the film's director,

Chris Reeves, will be speaking live about the attempts to censor the film at a screening of *Censoring Palestine* in the Palace Cinema in Broadstairs, Kent at 7pm on Sunday March 23. Tickets are available at thepalacecinema.co.uk.

See a trailer of the film at: [youtu.be/RcLdpvNY-gg](https://youtu.be/RcLdpvNY-gg).

**Norman Thomas**  
Producer

## CPGB and SPEW

In Jack Conrad's supplement article, 'Trump greenlights ethnic cleansing', he misleadingly states that the position of the Socialist Party in England and Wales is for a "socialist two-state solution", when in fact it is: "For an independent, socialist Palestinian state, alongside a socialist Israel, with guaranteed democratic rights for all minorities, as part of the struggle for a socialist Middle East." In other words, it is essentially the same position as he argues for (or could be read as such): a united socialist federation of the region, in which Israel would be just one part.

As to the question of what the precise borders would be between the 'Palestinian' and 'Israeli' republics (or indeed whether somehow their territories could overlap) - this is a question for a future democratic process between them to resolve.

Conrad says that Israel withdrawing from the occupied territories should be a minimum demand, which implies acceptance of pre-1967 as at least a starting point to that process. Again, this is our position.

This brings me to your general attitude towards SPEW: I have been reading the *Weekly Worker* and have agreed with its basic arguments on democratic republican Marxism since before I even joined the Socialist Party. I must say that I did not find good enough arguments in your paper for me not to join SPEW, much less to join the CPGB instead.

For one thing, SPEW's programme includes transforming the UK into a democratic federal republic, whereby MPs are subject to instant recall, etc. It may go into less detail than the CPGB-PCC *Draft programme*, but this is not a substantive difference. Both SPEW and the CPGB-PCC want a mass party, which allows open public

factions to have their own newspapers, etc. SPEW's strategy is to achieve this through uniting existing groups and trades unions through the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, or some other future alliance which may supersede Tusc.

We would then be an open public faction of a new mass party, as we were as Militant in Labour. The CPGB, CPB, SWP, RCP and various others would all be as well. Perhaps we would find we didn't have as much to disagree on as we do now, and some of the factions may merge or split, as new debates become relevant in these changed circumstances.

The main difference between this approach and the CPGB-PCC's seems to be that you want to somehow start a mass communist party with open public factions from scratch and then expect people from the existing parties to all split off and join it. You think this new party needs to have a very defined programme from the start, whereas we think we need to attract masses of working class people with a programme that is more general.

We would be building this party democratically with input from a mass of workers, not dictating a programme to them. It may therefore involve some compromises in finding a way to fudge the issue of revolution vs reform, but then we as a revolutionary faction would try to win the majority over to our revolutionary positions, as would the other revolutionary factions, including yourselves.

You seem to think this strategy is doomed, because of the history of prior 'broad left' projects. Yet how is your strategy any less doomed? If you set up another party with an overly specific programme, how are you not just another 'sect'? Just because you may have public factions - ie, more than one part of your organisation issuing a newspaper with a tiny circulation?

Frankly, your critique of the general approach of SPEW is very underdeveloped, compared with your critique of the SWP, about whom we generally share your feelings. You tend to lump us in with them under the category of 'sects' without making clear your precise differences with SPEW, and why you are not seeking a 'fusion' process with us, as you are with *Prometheus*, etc, nor actively helping to build Tusc into an alliance of all the Marxists in the UK.

I would be interested to read a longer article in your pages addressing your specific issues with Tusc and SPEW, justifying your attitude towards (or against) active cooperation with us.

**Joseph O'Connor Meldau**  
Bristol

## Two parties

My article, which I headed 'Two parties', was retitled 'A very English possibilist' and the introduction read: "Steve Freeman of the Republican Labour Education Forum dismisses the idea of a mass Communist Party as utterly utopian. Instead he proposes a Commonwealth Party" (March 6). Now I don't have a problem with your introduction: it is your right to introduce my article as you see fit.

However, I should have the opportunity to correct any misunderstanding. I won't take offence at being accused of being "very English" or see it as a racial slur. I am in agreement with Rishi Sunak, who rightly claimed he was very English - as against Suella Braverman, who said Sunak was British and could not be English for reasons of ethnicity. He was simply the wrong colour. Since the Communist Party of Great Britain is British, I am wondering if you agree with Braverman on this?

I keep telling Carla Roberts she is English and she point-blank refuses!

I often claim that Marx (like Darwin) was one of the most important Englishmen that has ever lived. Lenin refers to Marx as "after living in Britain for decades and becoming *half English*" (*Selected works* Volume 1, p628). I am more extreme than Lenin on this matter - Marx was 100% English from the minute he settled in England!

None of this denied his right to call himself German or Jewish, if he wanted to choose his personal identity. Most English people have a number of identities: for example, English aristocracy, English working class, English Muslims or English Jews.

The main point was the claim that I had dismissed "the idea of a mass Communist Party as utterly utopian". We cannot dismiss the *idea* of a mass Communist Party, because there was one in Germany in 1932 and indeed a mass Chinese Communist Party today. Of course, both of these are of the Stalinist variety. So the *idea* of mass communist party is not utterly utopian. It is just "utterly utopian", given the state of the current Marxist movement in England in 2025. We need to be honest about that. The problem is left communism, with its wild talk of a mass Communist Party now. That is pure hocus-pocus. A few intellectuals are trying to hoodwink the working class with exciting promises.

If the CPGB, Talking About Socialism and a section of *Prometheus* merge into a single group, it will not be a mass Marxist-communist party. It won't even have the majority of present-day Marxists. It will just be another group, to add to the long list. Instead communists need to pitch their tent in the right place. We need a new communist *tendency* that can challenge the fragmentation and failure of present-day Stalinism and Trotskyism.

Meanwhile there is the possibility of a mass party of the left in England. This was shown by Corbynist Labour and more recently by the mass pro-Palestine demonstrations on the streets, and showed up in the 2024 general election. Has Marxism anything useful or constructive to say about uniting this movement into a political force? There is a long list of failed left parties from the Socialist Labour Party, Socialist Alliance,

Respect, Left Unity, and Tusc, down to the present. It was not 'broadness' that failed, but the communists, who capitulated to social monarchism for a variety of opportunistic and sectarian reasons.

**Steve Freeman**  
email

## Why 'official'?

Why put 'official' in front of 'CPGB', as there was only the Communist Party of Great Britain before the dissolution of the USSR? It was one single party organisation that you are talking about.

You are retrospectively altering history due to the post-Soviet period settlement, when the CPGB broke up. It wasn't broken up in the Soviet period of history. The CPGB was formed in 1920 and was dissolved in 1991. Whatever the arguments about rights to this, rights to that, regarding the post-Soviet period Communist Party of Britain, this party has - if not the fullest of rights - majority rights to track itself back in time to the CPGB.

But this is irrelevant, when it comes to the Soviet period, when only one undisputed Communist Party of Great Britain existed in legal and constitutional form. Calling that party 'official' is to question that iron fact of history and turn history on its head, which is especially harmful to the younger generation. 'Truth' is our communist motto. The CPGB existed and no amount of sarcasm or criticism or present-day dissatisfaction can alter that ineradicable fact.

This is something that has been bugging me for some time. Your audience has a mixed political background and perhaps, as things go, CPGB-PCC members only make up a small percentage of that audience. It's the same with the *Morning Star*, for that matter. I am making a valid, critical point without any disrespect, though that is common with *Weekly Worker* writers and I think there should be adjustment.

Changing historical fact is no laughing matter. I would have thought your analysis of the Soviet Union would make your paper and party alive to that fact.

**Elijah Traven**  
Hull

## Fighting fund

### We need your help

As regular readers will know, this is the last month when our fighting fund target will be £2,250. A huge increase in our costs has meant that, as well as raising the subscription charge from April, we're also adding £500 to the *Weekly Worker* fund target: in other words, up to £2,750 a month.

Well, I'm confident that, with the number of dedicated readers and supporters we've got, the new target is definitely within our reach. But we need as many comrades as possible to help us out. Please go to the web address below to see how you can play your part!

But right now, let's make sure we not only make that final £2,250 target, but go shooting past it! Helping us out over the last week have been MM, who transferred an excellent £75, TR (£40), JP (£30), TW and GB (£25 each), OG (£24), SA (£12) and SD (£3). All the above were either standing orders or one-off bank transfers. Then there was comrade KS, who

donated his £50 via PayPal, and comrade Hassan, who handed his usual £5 note to one of our team.

All that came to £289, taking our running total up to £1,165. Well, obviously we're quite a little bit behind the going rate, but there's one consolation - we're now approaching that part of the month when a good few substantial standing orders come our way.

However, we really need to do better by edging up towards that higher target, so can you help? Please click on the link below if you'd like to. We need more than another grand just to make the current target and, as I write, there are only 12 days left to do it. Let's start by smashing through that old target! ●

**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](https://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/donate)

## Online Communist Forum



Sunday March 23 5pm  
**Israel unleashes yet more horror in Gaza: political report from CPGB's Provisional Central Committee and discussion**

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

Organised by CPGB: [communistparty.co.uk](https://communistparty.co.uk) and Labour Party Marxists: [www.labourpartymarxists.org.uk](https://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)

CU 2025

# Bigger and better

Tina Becker looks forward to comradely debate and discussion, not least around the communist fusion process. Book now

Communist University has been the highlight of our political year for many decades. This is where friends, supporters and sometimes opponents of the CPGB gather to engage in a week of discussion and debate. Especially in the age of Zoom meetings, it can be hugely invigorating to meet with comrades that you usually only see through a small computer screen.

CU is very different from the run-of-the-mill schools put on by other left groups, in that plenty of time is allocated to contributions from the floor. Controversial debate is positively welcomed and, needless to say, there are no three-minute time limits. Moreover, critical thinking is encouraged, as can be seen by our impressive list of speakers at every CU.

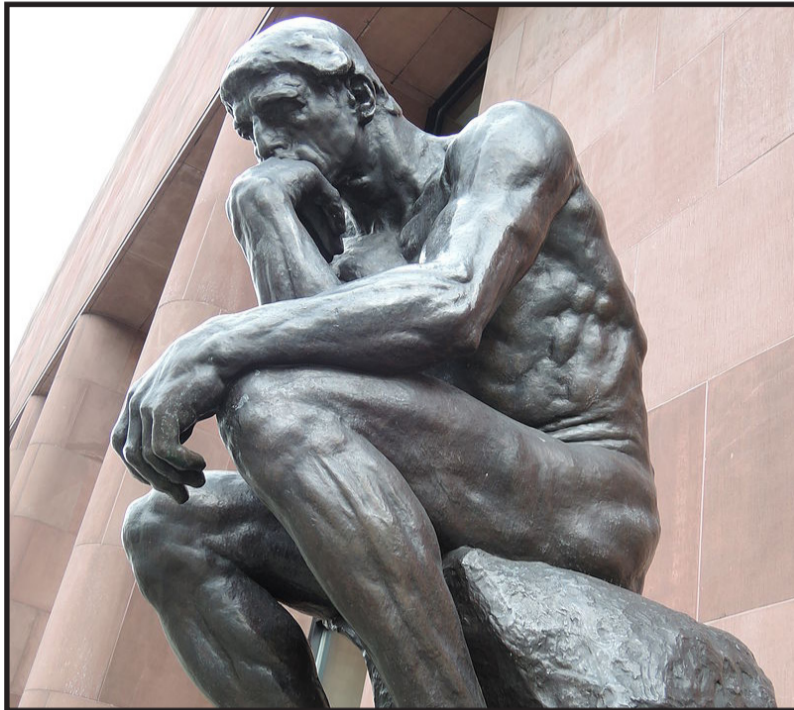
No doubt, this will again be the case this year, though we are admittedly somewhat behind in putting together the schedule of talks and sessions. There is, however, a very good reason for the delay. This year, the event will be jointly organised by the CPGB, Talking about Socialism and the online journal, *Prometheus* - ie, the three organisations involved in the communist fusion process, Forging Communist Unity. We want to make sure that the event will become the property of all three organisations and are therefore keen to hear comrades' thoughts on the format and the speakers before firming up the timetable.

*Weekly Worker* readers can, however, book their place now - see below - and many comrades have already done so. In fact, we already have twice as many bookings for the full week compared with last year - and that with four months to go! It is great news, for example, that comrades from the Communist Platform in the (newly renamed) Revolutionair Socialistische Partij in the Netherlands will be coming - "at least 10 of us will travel to London," we are told. Excellent! We are also expecting comrades from Ireland and hoping to host again supporters of the US-based Marxist Unity Group, comrades from Germany and elsewhere. While we oppose setting up oil slick internationals (as many Trotskyist groups do), we understand the importance of real internationalism - the global system of capitalism can only be overturned by the conscious action of the international working class.

We might still be at the discussion stage, but major themes this year will no doubt be 'Communist unity' and (related to that) 'How to build a Communist Party'. The era of Trump, the changes in global economic politics, the nature of China, the Ukraine war and the situation in Israel/Palestine and the climate catastrophe are of major importance too, of course, and will certainly be part of the discussion.

While there have been recent positive innovations with the addition of shorter CUs on Zoom in spring and winter (usually over a long weekend), the format of our main, summer, Communist University has in recent years become a little stale, in my opinion, and in some respects has even gone backwards compared to events in the past.

There are some reasons for this that are out of our control: for instance, the huge problem of finding a venue that will not threaten to cancel us at the last minute - one of the major problems arising from the largely self-inflicted



Auguste Rodin 'The thinker' (1904)

defeat of the Corbyn movement and the failure to stand up to the smear campaign against the pro-Palestine solidarity movement. Many groups who have taken a principled stand on the issue have been labelled 'anti-Semitic' and continue to have their events cancelled by venues (the aspect of 'cancel culture' that does not appear much in the bourgeois press).

For us this means we have been unable in the last few years to (re-)book venues with big kitchens and communal spaces that allowed us to prepare meals together and socialise in the evenings. This was often where comrades really got to know each other, where disagreements could be cleared up and where, sometimes, lifelong friendships were formed. Having at the end of our annual fundraising drive the 'Summer Offensive meal' (which mostly isn't offensive at all!) to celebrate in a restaurant is an entirely different experience to organising it in our own venue, where comrades can sing, play the guitar and perform party pieces. Hopefully, we will be able to find a venue again soon where these important social aspects can be revived. Still, even at our current venue, there is room to improve the social aspect and we want to make sure there will be plenty of opportunity to chat, discuss and socialise outside the official sessions.

The format of the main sessions can be improved too, I think. And this is something where we can make a real difference, quite easily, particularly with a larger audience. Three long sessions per day, lasting between two and two and half hours, addressed by 'experts' in their field make, of course, for generally high-quality introductions and discussions. But frankly this format is exhausting and many participants - especially younger and newer comrades - often play the role of passive listeners only. Some find it hard to concentrate for that many hours; others feel intimidated by the high level of the debate.

In addition to having some 'expert sessions', I think we should also try to turn the tables this year and encourage some younger and newer comrades to deliver openings, perhaps in shorter and smaller sessions. After all, the best way to learn is to explain something. I could well imagine a series of shorter events around the increasingly relevant question of 'Building a

Communist Party', in which we could discuss questions like 'Why our party needs open factions', 'What's the difference between socialism and communism?', 'Why we argue for a minimum/maximum programme', 'What is the democratic republic?' or 'Should we still talk about concepts like the dictatorship of the proletariat?'

While I am generally not a fan of working groups - especially when they pack too many questions in or are run in a patronising fashion - I do think that this year they would make some sense. For a start, smaller discussion groups allow participants to get to know each other and each other's politics better. Building trust is important if we want our fusion process to be successful.

We should also make a real effort to ensure that there are more cultural issues not only in the official CU programme, but also in the evenings after the official sessions - perhaps with a mini-Communist Culture Club, where comrades can introduce their favourite book or TV series or we could be watching a political film together. It is excellent that we can book breakout rooms in the venue to facilitate such events.

The active input from TAS and *Prometheus* certainly gives us an opportunity to shake things up - I am very much looking forward to it. If you have any proposals, wish to book your place or have any questions, please get in touch at [office@cpgb.org.uk](mailto:office@cpgb.org.uk) ●

**Communist University 2025**

Thursday July 31 until Thursday August 7, inclusive. Central London venue, a short walk from Great Portland Street tube station. Details of speakers and sessions will be posted here: [communistuniversity.uk](http://communistuniversity.uk)

Cost: Whole week's attendance, including accommodation: £250 (£150 unwaged)

Weekend, including one night's accommodation: £60 (£30)

Full day: £10 (£5).

Single session: £5 (£3)

You can reserve your place by sending a £30 deposit to account Communist Party of Great Britain, Cooperative Bank  
Sort code: 08-92-99,  
Account number: 65109991,  
IBAN: GB33 CPBK089299  
65109991,  
BIC: CPBK GB22

Make sure to reference 'CU 2025'

**ACTION**

**Welfare, not warfare**

**Friday March 21, 7pm:** Public meeting, Quaker Centre, Fairfield East, Kingston upon Thames KT1. No troops to Ukraine; stop arming Israel; no increase in arms spending. Organised by Kingston Stop the War Coalition: [x.com/STWuk/status/1899815139311763518](http://x.com/STWuk/status/1899815139311763518).

**Strengthening the employment rights bill**

**Saturday March 22, 11am to 3.45pm:** Rally, Hamilton House, Mabledon Place, London WC1. Union officials, academics and legal experts will debate improvements to the bill to ensure workers and trade unions are protected. Registration free. Organised by Campaign For Trade Union Freedom: [www.tradeunionfreedom.co.uk](http://www.tradeunionfreedom.co.uk).

**Scrap nuclear weapons - work for peace**

**Saturday March 22, 12 noon:** National demonstration. Assemble outside The Forum, Duke Street, Barrow LA14. Britain's nuclear-armed submarines are built at the BAE Systems shipyard in Barrow. Organised by South Lakeland Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: [cnduk.org/events/work-for-peace-demonstration-at-barrow](http://cnduk.org/events/work-for-peace-demonstration-at-barrow).

**Battle lines**

**Saturday March 22, 7pm:** Banner Theatre performance, Theatre Porto, Whitby Hall, Ellesmere Port CH65. A celebration of the 40th anniversary of the miners' strike and many other working class battles up to today. Tickets £8 (£5 or £3). Organised by West Cheshire Trades Union Council: [www.facebook.com/events/1040769624457561](http://www.facebook.com/events/1040769624457561).

**Dr Strangelove**

**Sunday March 23, 2pm:** Film screening followed by Q&A, Stirchley Open Cinema, Stirchley Baths, Bournville Lane, Birmingham B30. Stanley Kubrick's 1964 comedy masterpiece exposing the insanity of nuclear war. Free tickets (must be booked). Organised by Birmingham Stop the War and West Midlands CND: [cnduk.org/events/dr-strangelove-showing-birmingham](http://cnduk.org/events/dr-strangelove-showing-birmingham).

**Censoring Palestine**

**Sunday March 23, 7pm:** Film screening, The Palace Cinema, Harbour Street, Broadstairs CT10. This new documentary reveals how speaking out on Palestine is being suppressed and criminalised. Followed by Q&A with producer Norman Thomas. Tickets £9 (£8). Presented by The Palace Cinema: [thepalacecinema.co.uk/production/censoring-palestine](http://thepalacecinema.co.uk/production/censoring-palestine).

**Perspectives on human origins**

**Tuesday March 25, 6.30pm:** Talks on social and biological anthropology, Daryll Forde seminar room, Anthropology Building, 14 Taviston Street, off Gordon Square, London WC1, and online. This meeting: 'Serpentine cosmopolitics: cross-cultural analysis of the rainbow serpent'. Speaker: Ivan Tacey. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: [www.facebook.com/events/2311418179226151](http://www.facebook.com/events/2311418179226151).

**Privatisation no way, the NHS is here to stay**

**Tuesday March 25, 6.30pm:** Protest outside Wes Streeting's NHS briefing, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Patients, workers and campaigners demand an end to privatisation. We need a fully provided, publicly funded and accountable NHS. Organised by Keep Our NHS Public: [www.facebook.com/events/664441102782973](http://www.facebook.com/events/664441102782973).

**Housing action needed now**

**Wednesday March 26, 11am:** Lobby of parliament, London SW1. Demand the government recognises the scale of the housing emergency - homes for people, not for profit. Organised by Homes for All: [www.facebook.com/Homes4AllUK](http://www.facebook.com/Homes4AllUK).

**Free the Filton 18**

**Thursday March 27, 9.30am:** Protest outside Central Criminal Court, Old Bailey, London EC4. The 18 were held for a week under the Terrorism Act before being charged with non-terror offences and remanded in prison, following an action in August 2024 at the Filton, Bristol site of Elbit Systems. Organised by Palestine Action: [palestineaction.org/event/the-filton-18-hearing](http://palestineaction.org/event/the-filton-18-hearing).

**How did German SPD become a mass party?**

**Thursday March 27, 6.30pm:** Online discussion in the series, 'Our history'. Speaker: Andrew Bonnell. Organised by Why Marx?: [www.whymarx.com/sessions](http://www.whymarx.com/sessions).

**Stop Farage and Reform UK**

**Friday March 28, 6pm:** Protest, Utilita Arena, Birmingham B1. **7pm:** March to rally in Centenary Square. Farage is bringing toxic politics to Birmingham - stand up, speak out and fight back! Organised by Stand Up to Racism Birmingham: [www.facebook.com/events/545776201959372](http://www.facebook.com/events/545776201959372).

**We demand change**

**Saturday March 29, 11am to 5.30pm:** Rally, The Cause, 60 Dock Road, London E14. Build a network of activists across campaigns and unions to turn the tide on despair. Registration £11.55 (£6.13). Organised by We Demand Change: [wedemandchange.uk](http://wedemandchange.uk).

**Renters unite!**

**Saturday March 29, 6.45pm:** Book launch, Housmans Bookshop, 5 Caledonian Road, London N1. Author Jacob Stringer introduces *Renters unite: how tenant unions are fighting the housing crisis*, taking readers to the frontlines in resisting criminal landlords. Tickets £3 (£1). Organised by Housmans Bookshop: [housmans.com/event/book-launch-renters-unite-by-jacob-stringer](http://housmans.com/event/book-launch-renters-unite-by-jacob-stringer).

**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.

**SCOTLAND**

# Sturgeon no more

Talented, personable, politically astute and, in the end, a complete failure. **Scott Evans** looks at the rise and fall of Scotland's former first minister

To the great surprise of essentially no-one, Nicola Sturgeon has announced she will be stepping down as an MSP at the May 2026 Holyrood elections. At age 52, it marks the end of her rise through Scottish nationalist politics spanning over 30 years. She was Scotland's longest-serving first minister and the first woman to hold the position.<sup>1</sup>

Sturgeon's fortunes peaked in 2015-16, after polling before the 2015 general election - which turned out to be very accurate - showed that the SNP was set to take almost every Westminster seat in Scotland. From then on until recently, there was only one, piddling Labour seat in all of Scotland. What is more, even many self-identified leftists found themselves rather enamoured by the political style and offerings of Nicola Sturgeon.<sup>2</sup>

The British shock jock, Piers Morgan, called her "the world's most dangerous woman that few outside Britain have ever heard of", on the basis of the rest of the UK losing the Scottish Armed Forces, the (imagined) potential sour Scotland-USA relations, and the questionable future of Trident. This was precisely one of the things which attracted some of the far left to this stuff: the illusory idea that Scottish independence might mean a significant weakening of the British state, and hence of US power in Europe. Left-liberals in particular fawned over her, while they were being driven blue (and yellow) in the face by the Brexit referendum; they wanted British nationalism to look more like the welfare-friendly civic nationalism the SNP appeared to be supporting.

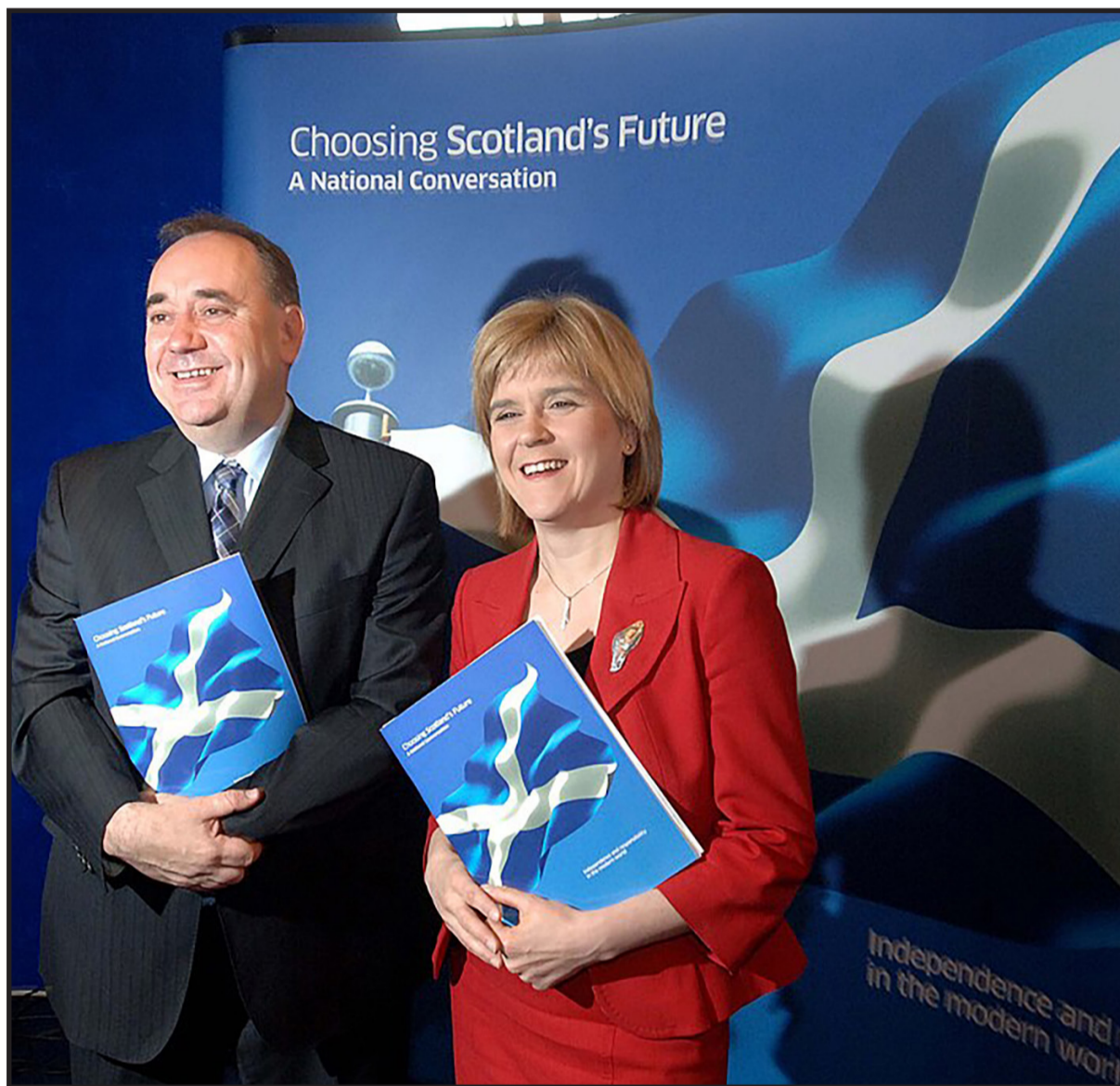
It is very unlikely that she will exit the political arena entirely, because, for her entire life, beginning in her teenage years, she has been a political creature. Unsurprisingly for a working class<sup>3</sup> woman growing up through the 70s and 80s in Scotland, her politics were an outgrowth of an anti-nuclear-weapons stance,<sup>4</sup> of anti-Thatcherism - "Thatcher was the motivation for my entire political career. I hated everything she stood for" - and, of course, of Scottish nationalism.

## Early backing

Sturgeon got early backing from prominent SNP member Kay Ullrich. In 1987 as a 16-year-old she approached Ullrich to help work on her election campaign. Later, when Sturgeon stood as a candidate for Glasgow Shettleston in 1992, Ullrich apparently remarked: "This lady here will be the first female leader of the SNP one day."

In these early years she was also appearing on TV in youth political debates. Ex-SNP chief executive officer Peter Murrell, who she was together with from 2003 and was to become her husband from 2010 until this year (they are now divorcing), has said of that time that he remembered "being impressed by her political skills, even at that early stage". At 17 she was on the national executive of the Young Scottish Nationalists.

Fast-forward through a number of unsuccessful election campaigns to 1997, when, during the Labour landslide a 27-year-old Nicola Sturgeon narrowly lost to Mohammad Sarwar (yes, father of current Scottish Labour leader, Anas), making it the only Scottish seat to swing away from Labour.



**Back in 2007: when they were a team**

The current Scottish parliament was established in 1999, with those elected in that year referred to by the moniker, '99ers'. Sturgeon was one of these (elected on the regional list, having again failed to win outright), as were her allies, Shona Robison and Fiona Hyslop, both of whom will also be stepping down in 2026. Of the 25 MSPs who will be stepping down then, 18 are SNP, including former first minister and Sturgeon continuity figure Humza Yousaf.

The formal alliance between Sturgeon and previous leader Alex Salmond began in 2004, when they stood on a joint ticket for first and deputy first minister. Ten years and one large financial crash later, David Cameron's independence referendum was held, with 45% voting 'yes' against 55% for 'no'. The white paper *Scotland's future* published in November 2013 had what David Torrance (who wrote a biography of Sturgeon after she secured the leadership) called "a curious mixture of 1980s leftwing rhetoric and orthodox neoliberal economics".

However, things began to go wrong. The Salmond-Sturgeon alliance collapsed in very messy public fashion in 2021 amid sexual misconduct allegations at the height of #MeToo.<sup>5</sup> Then Sturgeon's political journey as first minister ended rather ignominiously two years ago amid the 'triple crisis': the end of any realistic SNP strategy, the party finances scandal (her ex-husband has since been charged with embezzlement), and the gender recognition furore.

What was Sturgeonism, if anything? What did it stand for as a positive programme? If we take some

of its major promises - to close the educational attainment gap between rich and poor; to kick-start a Scottish National Care Service; to tackle the drug deaths crisis; and to achieve a legal route to independence after the 'no' vote won in 2014 - it has on all these counts been a miserable failure.

It is true that SNP policies have been better on various welfare measures than the legislation coming out of Westminster. The Scottish child payment, the 'baby box' of benefits for newborn children, the slightly more generous disability payments, free prescriptions (as in Wales), no tuition fees for first-time Scottish undergrads, and so on.<sup>6</sup> All of these things are, of course, genuinely helpful to people, but in a wider, sinking neoliberal economy and decaying capitalism it is sticking-plaster stuff that simply will not hold. While it is often used as an excuse, it is nevertheless the case that Holyrood often has to function within somewhat narrow constraints set by legislation and funding coming from Westminster, and the policies of the major opposition parties in Holyrood. Labour and the Tories are mere extensions of their Westminster parties. As the saying goes, when Westminster sneezes, Holyrood catches a cold.

Is Sturgeon's exit from the stage of frontline politics the end of an era? Yes, it is, symbolically speaking. But it is not the end of an era defined by her. Instead, it marks the end of the era of the SNP and Scottish nationalism defined by Alex Salmond, whose death we commented on at the end of last year.<sup>7</sup> She was a much better fit for the more leftist SNP which Salmond had a large part in helping to create.

Certainly, there would never have been a first minister Sturgeon without a first minister Salmond - she dropped her bid for the leadership in 2004 to stand for deputy leader under him. (She had been unlikely to win in any case). Of course, the real, long, drawn-out end of this era was made inevitable regardless of who did or did not lead it, with the one-two punch of 'no' from the Scottish population in 2014,<sup>8</sup> as well as 'no' from the supreme court in 2022.<sup>9</sup> Nothing is certain, but for the foreseeable future the SNP seems to have nowhere to go.

## Break

It is unlikely that the SNP will ever again be anything more than a tightly media-managed centre-left to centre-right political party. The openly neoliberal and more socially conservative Kate Forbes, who came close to winning the leadership election that crowned Sturgeonite Humza Yousaf,<sup>10</sup> is now deputy first minister. More and more than is already the case, they will follow in the footsteps of all parties after their inevitable capture by the influence of the bourgeoisie: on domestic policy, promise nothing good that is concrete, when it is not already a *fait accompli*, and promise not to do bad things that you have no need to do anyway; and, on foreign policy, bow before the feet of the suzerain USA.

In fact, this will be the fate of any actual left formation which does not take very seriously the need for independent organisation of the working class and independent working class media. That independence includes ensuring we will not be knocked off-balance by

smear campaigns in the bourgeois press (as the Scottish Socialist Party was), and, besides having our own strong media, means inculcating in the membership an understanding of the fundamental corruption of the bourgeois press, regardless of how many good journalists orbit it. Trying to appear 'respectable' to bourgeois politicians and media, trying to make our candidates appear as 'respectable' and 'electable' as possible to them, is a losing game.

Alliances with state-loyalist formations or nationalists (or both!) make working class independence impossible. Socialists need to break from tailing nationalism, break from supporting nationalism. Socialism in one country is a deeply dangerous delusion, and neither would an independent Scotland 'create space' for more effective socialist agitation. That does not mean we support the corrupt UK constitutional regime (much of the rather quieter left around Labour disastrously clings to British unionism): we would urge comrades to take up the immediate demand for a federal republic with full national rights. And we do not obsess over unity of the 'British working class' - we stand for something much wider than that: a Communist Party of Europe with a CPGB as one part, eventually forming part of a Communist International.

Last year marked the 10-year anniversary of the independence referendum, and now the two major nationalist leaders of that period are yesterday's news. It is a good time for the left to move on. But fully breaking from these left-nationalist errors will require an open accounting for the illusions the left has helped to spread about Scottish independence and an accounting for its *de facto* abandonment of the Marxist principle of political independence of the working class ●

## Notes

1. I am sure our comrades in the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain, who seem to occupy the same building as her constituency office, will be sad to see her go.
2. Of course, they still stood for a real 'independent socialist Scotland', whereas the SNP were speaking leftist, but stood for an 'independent capitalist Scotland'; at least the latter has the merit of not being completely unreal.
3. A 'working class woman from North Ayrshire' is how she is commonly described. As far as I can surmise, her mother was a dental nurse and her father an electrician. Like a lot of career politicians she studied law (at Glasgow University). For some this would make her middle class, with parents whose background was skilled working class.
4. Since 1963 when the first Polaris nuclear missiles were placed at Faslane, a few miles from Glasgow, they have been frequently cited as forming a part of many people's initial motivations for moving towards supporting independence.
5. [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1337/unionist-wishful-thinking](http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1337/unionist-wishful-thinking).
6. The kind of things socialists use to justify tailing the left nationalists: eg, "A Scottish welfare state nationalism worthy of the name must, and still can, be worked towards within the scope of these class dynamics and the disability politics connected to them" (see [scottishleftreview.scot/whither-welfare-state-nationalism](http://scottishleftreview.scot/whither-welfare-state-nationalism)).
7. 'Symbol of fatuity' *Weekly Worker* October 17 2024: [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1511/symbol-of-fatuity](http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1511/symbol-of-fatuity).
8. A mix of 'No, I don't want an independent Scotland' and 'Yes, I would like an independent Scotland, but I don't think it's economically wise, so no'.
9. [commonslibrary.parliament.uk/supreme-court-judgment-on-scottish-independence-referendum](http://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/supreme-court-judgment-on-scottish-independence-referendum).
10. 'A fruitless crown' *Weekly Worker* March 23 2023: [weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1435/a-fruitless-crown](http://weeklyworker.co.uk/worker/1435/a-fruitless-crown).

REVIEW

# Monistic and materialist

MEG Smith and T Hayslip *Thinking systematics: critical-dialectical reasoning for a perilous age and a case for socialism* Nova Scotia 2024, pp356, £21

Canadian Marxist sociologists Murray EG Smith and Tim Hayslip have written a profound and wide-ranging book that aims to elaborate and popularise the principles of 'dialectical reasoning'.

Karl Marx declared: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." Smith and Hayslip add to this observation: "Philosophers have only interpreted human thinking in various ways. The need, however, is to improve it - greatly." In the authors' view, this need cannot be satisfied through never-ending controversies and discourses presided over by the philosophical cognoscenti, but only by equipping the masses of working people and youth with a cognitive framework for understanding a rapidly changing and increasingly perilous reality: namely dialectical reasoning. There are real contradictions, mediations and laws of motion in three distinct (but also interpenetrating) 'ontological fields': the natural, the social and the consciousness (human conscious activity).

## Critical reasoning

Dialectical reasoning is essential if we are to improve our understanding of the natural world, human society and the relationship between the two. The particular paradigm of critical-dialectical reasoning that the authors propose is named Thinking Systematics (TSS). This refers to methods and ways of thinking that encourage a more systematic (scientific) view of the world - one that substantially improves our ability to discover "objective truths about the current human condition and to revolutionise our individual and collective understandings of a larger world that most of us engage with far too passively".

Throughout this 350-page book, the authors argue that TSS is necessary to cut through fake news and disinformation, to uphold facts over mere opinion, to defend the concept of objective truth against cultural and intellectual trends that permit or even encourage outright lying, and to increase rational thought against the irrational ideas generated by modes of thinking that rely on "blind faith" (both religious and secular) - what Smith and Hayslip refer to as "fideism".

According to the authors, TSS should be seen as a 'toolkit for the mind', designed to improve the ways we think about the world, tackle problems and analyse and evaluate information. "At its core is the insistence that a fully adequate understanding of our world and its problems requires serious attention to the specifically social forces at work within it." So the acronym, TSS, refers not only to 'Thinking Systematics', but also to 'Taking the Social Seriously'.

How do the authors proceed? Besides giving considerable 'weight' to the category of 'the social' in analysing the human condition and its relations to both 'the natural' and what traditional philosophy calls 'the ideal', they argue that we need to start from simple abstract concepts and build up to more complex ones. This follows Marx's own approach to analysing scientifically the seemingly chaotic world that we live in.

Marx's *Capital* does not begin with a discussion of the everyday, macro appearances of modern economies (eg, gross domestic product, taxes, tariffs, movements of money and banking). Instead, it starts with an analysis of the individual commodity, the tiny molecule of capitalist production, and



George Pencz 'Dialectic' (c1541)

its dual character as both use value and exchange value. The commodity, which he describes as the 'elementary form' of the wealth of capitalist societies, exists as a real, concrete phenomenon of everyday life under capitalism. Marx then takes his readers into more complex investigations and explanations of such phenomena as wage labour, capital, money, banking and capitalist crises.

The authors recognise that formal logic (eg,  $A = A$ , but not  $B$ ) is foundational and useful in many circumstances. But it is inadequate when dealing with change - both in nature and in society. Appearances can deceive. At one point, the authors present us with the example of a river. Each river has a unique and distinctive identity. Each plant is different from another, each animal is different.

But that only takes us so far. Rivers are moving and changing, acorns are seeding into trees, larvae are transforming into butterflies. As the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, said, you cannot step into the same river twice, because "upon those who step into the same river, different and again different waters flow". Indeed, even the act of stepping into a river contributes to making it different from moment to moment. Formal logic is static and offers no method for understanding processes of change

and contradiction. As Trotsky once said, formal logic is a snapshot, while dialectical logic is a movie.  $A$  is not always equal to  $A$ , because it may have changed to  $B$ . As the authors say, "Dialectical thought enjoins us to think temporally and to view the present itself as only a moment of history."

## Application

How can these insights be applied to current problems and controversies? One example, in my view, is that dialectical reasoning can help us to understand the nature of the Chinese economy and state. Many say that it is capitalist; others say it is socialist. In my view, it is neither. How can that be? In formal logic  $A = A$ , but not  $B$ . So China must be either capitalist or socialist. But, for those thinking dialectically (and 'systematically'), China can be seen as an economy undergoing change: it is 'in between'.

In 1949, capitalism and landlordism were overthrown by a peasant army led by the Maoist communists. The latter eventually nationalised industry and the land, and they tried, with limited success, to plan a mostly collectivised economy. But by itself this did not make China socialist: a large state machine was established, one controlled by a bureaucratic elite not accountable to the Chinese

working class or indeed the peasant masses. Today, under its post-Maoist leadership, it has a sizeable capitalist sector trying to maximise profits, with billionaires and wage labour.

None of this would exist in a truly socialist society - at least as Marxists would define it. 'Socialist China' is no more a correct descriptor than 'capitalist China'. If we rely on a strict formal logic, this is confusing. But dialectical reasoning cuts through the confusion by allowing us to see China through the lens of uneven and combined development and the concept of transitional forms.

In nature, Engels liked to use the example of the duck-billed platypus - a marsupial indigenous to Australia. The platypus lays eggs for its young, as reptiles do. But it is warm-blooded and suckles its young, as mammals do. It is both reptilian and mammalian: both  $A$  and  $B$ . In the evolution of nature, it is a transitional species (transiting from reptile to mammal).

Another philosophical pillar of TSS is 'monism', as opposed to idealist dualism. What does this mean? Dualism claims that consciousness (thoughts and ideas) is separate from material reality. In contrast, materialism is monist: both the thoughts in our individual brain and the world beyond it are located in a material, objective reality. Our

thoughts are the result of movements of energy in our synapses (cells in our nervous system). But, according to TSS, following the Russian philosopher, EV Ilyenkov, they are also the result of human social and cultural practices: the product of the social division of labour and accumulation of knowledge seeking to address concrete problems arising from human beings' relations both to nature and to each other.

At the same time, the 'outside, material world' is real and, though subject to human activity, it exists independently of our consciousness. It existed before the advent of human thought - and thus before the concept of god emerged in our thoughts. When an influential subjective idealist of the 18th century, Bishop Berkeley, claimed that the 'outside world' exists only in the perceptions placed in our heads by God, the great English critic, Samuel Johnson, responded: "See that rock? Go give it a kick with your foot and then tell me it only exists in your head!"

## Coach and horses

A materialist conception of nature and the world enables us to cut through the nonsense of magic, religion and moralistic madness. A monistic, materialist conception of history drives a coach and horses through theories that see the march of history as the effect of kings, lords and rulers deciding the fate of the passive multitude and not the result of the activities of masses of people responding to the changing material and social conditions in which they live. As Marx wrote in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."

Smith and Hayslip emphasise that dialectical reasoning and a monistic-materialist conception of reality lead ineluctably to practical projects to transform the world. And from all this flows the need to Take Socialism Seriously. TSS methodology requires us to consider socialism not just as a 'good idea' (still less, as a personal, subjective 'preference'), but as an objective, scientifically verifiable necessity for the survival and future progress of humanity, and the sustaining of nature and the planet. Only socialism will bring real freedom from poverty, environmental disaster and the rule of the oligarchs.

As the authors say,

Elon Musk possesses a huge fortune not because he 'earned' it, but rather because the rules of the game under capitalism permit capitalist investors like him to accumulate vast personal wealth at the expense of the larger working population. Musk has proven to be a particularly lucky and adept contestant in the game. But an appraisal of his personal attributes should in no way obscure this simple fact: outside of the socio-economic order based on private ownership of the productive assets of society and the pursuit of private profit through the exploitation of wage labour, a success of Musk's type and magnitude is simply inconceivable ●

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**TRADE WARS**

# Notes on America

Donald Trump's administration is contemplating a grand reordering of global finance and trade. Europe will suffer, but, argues Jack Conrad, China is the main target

**W**e are in the opening stages of a series of trade wars. Amongst many other measures the US has already slapped an across-the-board 25% tariff on steel and aluminium. In response there have been counter-tariffs. Showing who has the strongest hand, they have been met with an instant response: eg, the imposition of a 200% tariff on European wines and spirits.

True, spooked by the uncertainties, this has hit US stock markets harder than those in China and Europe. However, taking into account the fact that US stocks have in historic terms been way outperforming most others, this amounts to next to nothing.<sup>1</sup>

While a slowdown of the US economy is quite conceivable - even to be expected - the old adage that 'when the US sneezes, the rest of the world catches a cold' still applies. The US remains the global hegemon. Canada, Mexico, Europe ... China too, therefore, face stagnation, maybe a recession. Be that as it may, in and of themselves tariffs will tend to strengthen the dollar and therefore not give US manufacturers a competitive advantage, when it comes to exports.

So it would appear that the Trump administration is on a self-defeating course. The considered opinion of countless mainstream and left liberal commentators. Unable to think outside the post-1945 box of Bretton Woods, legally binding treaties and the neoliberal ideology of free trade, they think that the Trump administration thinks that tariffs are all that is needed. But, in fact, Trump thinks nothing of the kind. That is why recent speculation about a 'Mar-a-Lago accord', designed to depreciate the dollar and boost US competitiveness - and therefore devalue the \$36 trillion US national debt too - helps explain what seems to many to be utterly irrational.

Forty years ago the Plaza Hotel in New York became famous in economic circles. On September 22 1985, the US administration of Ronald Reagan arm-twisted the UK, West Germany, France - but crucially Japan - into agreeing what became known as the Plaza Accords, which allowed the dollar to depreciate: it was that or the sledgehammer of US protectionism. Japan took the main hit and tumbled from double-figure growth rates to decades of stagnation.

It looks like there will be an attempt - some expect it this year - at a new Plaza Accord under Trump. Naturally, there are some considerable hurdles to overcome. Germany, Japan, Britain and France will show not the least enthusiasm. Indeed Bruno Le Maire, Emanuel Macron's finance minister from 2017-24, calls upon Europe to avoid being "subjugated" and rediscover its purpose by "resisting" Trump's new empire.<sup>2</sup> China will be even more hostile. But, presumably, the current barrage of tariffs are designed to soften up friends and foes alike to ensure that they each agree, in turn, to US unilateral measures that allow the dollar to depreciate and thereby allow a corresponding industrial renewal in the USA.

There will, this time round, be no top-secret get-together of finance ministers in some swanky hotel. Trump prefers one-to-one negotiations. He wants a 'hub and spokes' relationship with the rest of the world, in which none of the individual spokes makes much of a difference to the functioning of the



**Idea that he is just stupid is itself just stupid**

wheel. Trump feels confident that he can tackle each spoke sequentially. With tariffs on the one hand and the threat of removing America's security shield (or deploying it against them) on the other, he feels he can get most countries to bend the knee. It amounts, suffice to say, to a grand plan to "force" the "reordering of global finance and trade".<sup>3</sup>

Stephen Miran, chair of Trump's Council of Economic Advisers, outlined the grand plan in a recent essay, *A user's guide to restructuring the global trading system* (November 2024). Miran expects economic and market volatility in the short term, but he is convinced that the long-term benefits for the US will be considerable. Because the dollar serves as the world's reserve currency, this means it is "persistently overvalued" and that weighs heavily on the manufacturing sector, while "benefiting financialized sectors of the economy in manners that benefit wealthy Americans".<sup>4</sup>

Trump has bemoaned the decline of US manufacturing for decades: "if you don't have steel, you don't have a country".<sup>5</sup> Whether or not he is prepared for a confrontation with Wall Street remains to be seen. Either way, Miran proposes to simultaneously maintain the dollar as the world's main reserve currency and "capture back some of the benefits other nations receive from our reserve provision".

He also writes about "a suite of policies designed to increase burden

sharing among trading and security partners": in short the US will demand extra tribute from abroad. We have already seen the results in Britain, with cuts to the overseas aid budget and disability benefits. It will be a similar story in France, Germany and elsewhere in Europe. There is bound to be an elemental rebellion from below, from the working class. Not something Miran or other Trump advisors factor in to their calculations.

## Sinister plot

But what is behind the proposed Mar-a-Lago accords? Yanis Varoufakis usefully explains: it is not that foreign central bankers are engaged in some sinister plot to bring down America. It is simply the fact that the dollar is the world's reserve currency. The euro, the yen, the renminbi do not make the cut. Therefore European and Asian central banks accumulate the dollars that flow in when Americans import European and Asian commodities. By "not swapping their dollars for their own currencies", the European Central Bank, the Bank of Japan, the People's Bank of China and the Bank of England suppress the demand for (and thus the value of) their own currencies. This helps their export companies to boost sales to America and earn even more dollars. In a "never-ending circle", these fresh dollars accumulate in the coffers of the foreign central bankers who, "to gain interest safely, use them to buy US government debt".<sup>6</sup>

The purchasing of US government bonds in turn underpins American hegemony by allowing it to maintain its huge budget deficit and ability to finance an oversized military machine that would bankrupt any other country. And, by controlling the international payments system and possessing unmatched armed might, the US can cock a snoot at international treaties, sanction any country and, when push comes to shove, mete out terrible punishment on any small to medium-sized country that dares show defiance.

In fact, the world is awash with surplus capital - capital that cannot be profitably invested in the production of surplus value. So, by fair means or foul, those with money seek out the "deepest, best-governed and friendliest markets they can find", which, as Miran notes, invariably means the US and, to a lesser extent, markets like those in the UK.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the Mar-a-Lago accord could see taxes imposed on capital inflows and other countries being "encouraged" to agree to the whole package: a depreciated dollar, hiking spending on expensive US weapons systems and perhaps swapping holdings of dollars, short-term Treasuries or even gold for long-term, even perpetual, low-yielding American bonds.

Under the Trumpian version of mercantilism, foreign governments would be asked to categorise themselves as 'red', 'green' or 'yellow' - ie, choose to be foes, friends or adjacent players. Green countries get

US military protection and tariff relief, but must embrace the Mar-a-Lago accord. Some yellow - or even - red - countries could conceivably negotiate transactional deals.

The FT's Gillian Tett is not convinced that the Mar-a-Lago accord will succeed. Nor should we be. There are all manner of unpredictable factors - not least the class struggle - that can suddenly impose themselves. But Mar-a-Lago does make sense of the ongoing tariff wars. They are not for sure the result of Trump being "ignorant" or "stupid" - a stupid claim made by genuinely stupid people, including on what passes for the 'left'.<sup>8</sup> No, says Tett, the plan for a Mar-a-Lago accord has "a potent internal logic".<sup>9</sup>

Trumpian mercantilism is redevelopment. That explains the ability of Trump to reach out to and connect with sections of the US industrial working class that feel, and were, abandoned by the 1980s turn to financialisation and neoliberal offshoring. Hence the United Steelworkers Union welcomed Trump's tariffs - but not when applied to Canada (where the union organises too). Instead, pitting worker against worker, it wants the president to concentrate on 'unfair' Chinese competition.

Of course, Trumpian mercantilism ignores, or refuses to acknowledge, the ultimate source of profit lying in the surplus value pumped out of living labour. It is a form of nationalist

mystification, but one admirably suited to the needs of a US state determined to reverse its relative decline - crucially by stopping the 'inevitable' rise of China.

Bridgewater, the hedge-fund manager, has modelled what it calls the "four tenets" of modern mercantilism. They are: (1) The state has a large role in orchestrating the economy to increase national wealth and strength; (2) Trade balances are an important determinant of national wealth and strength, and trade deficits should be avoided; (3) Industrial policy is used to promote self-reliance and defence; (4) National corporate champions are protected.<sup>10</sup>

Trump is, therefore, doing nothing more than following in the footsteps of China, which, although a member of the World Trade Organisation, has long pursued a policy of currency management, public procurement, state subsidies, protectionism and other implicit subsidies. As a result China has become the world's leading industrial country, including when it comes to high-tech sectors, such as electric vehicles, solar power, wind turbines, industrial robots and lithium-ion batteries.

While the administrations of Barack Obama and Joe Biden worked against the grain of the WTO order - tariffs on Chinese imports, using export controls to limit China's access to advanced semiconductors, and pushing industrial policies like the Inflation Reduction Act and the Chips Act - Trump has in effect adopted the old motto: 'If you can't beat them, join them'. He has gone 'full Chinese' in the attempt to Make America Great Again.

## Strong state

Interstate competition requires, by definition, a strong state. Clearly, the Trumpians believe that for their state to be exceptionally strong they need an exceptionally strong leader. True, some see nothing more threatening in Trump than an attempt "to recreate the imperial presidency that was buried in the mid-1970s after Richard Nixon's resignation".<sup>11</sup> A complacent, though thoroughly reassuring, establishment claim, somewhat strangely echoed by the SWP's Alex Callinicos.<sup>12</sup>

But, no, Trump is intent on going far beyond that. He wants to be America's uncrowned monarch. A combination of "a start-up CEO and a Roman Caesar who exercises absolute power".<sup>13</sup>

Ever eager to feed an already inflated ego, Trump has actually crowned himself "king" and likened himself to a king in social media posts. Eg, on February 19, following his administration's push to strike down new tolls for Manhattan drivers to raise funds for the city's ageing mass transit system: "CONGESTION PRICING IS DEAD," he wrote on Truth Social. "Manhattan, and all of New York, is SAVED. LONG LIVE THE KING!"<sup>14</sup>

No less to the point, since assuming office on January 20 Trump has used the monarchical powers of the presidency to launch a counterrevolution against environmental protection, established working conditions, women's reproductive health, sexual minorities, migrants and civil-rights-era gains. This has seen the defunding of programmes, mass sackings, hundreds of Venezuelans flown off in chains to El Salvador's notorious CECOT mega-prison using the 1798 Alien Enemies Act, and Mahmoud Khalil facing deportation for the crime of leading Columbia University students in pro-Palestine protests.

His language has been incendiary. Trump compares undocumented immigrants to an infection that is "poisoning the blood of our country". He pledges to "root out the communists, Marxists, fascists, and

the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country".<sup>15</sup>

There is, as a result, an almost hysterical liberal and left consensus that Donald Trump is taking America straight through the gates of fascism and into the abyss. Joe Biden says it. Kamala Harris says it. Mark Milley says it. Gilbert Achcar of the social-imperialist outfit, Anticapitalist Resistance, says it too ... except he calls it "neofascism".

Neofascism differs from traditional despotic or authoritarian regimes (such as the Chinese government or most Arab regimes), in that it is based, like last century's fascism, on an aggressive, militant mobilisation of its popular base on an ideological basis similar to that which characterised its predecessor. This base includes various components of far-right thinking: nationalist and ethnic fanaticism, xenophobia, explicit racism, assertive masculinity and extreme hostility to Enlightenment and emancipatory values.<sup>16</sup>

That describes reactionary socialisms of many stripes, reactionary nationalisms too. But, shorn of non-state fighting formations and negatively resolving an unresolved revolutionary situation, whereby the ruling class cannot rule in the old way and the ruled refuse to be ruled in the old way, then using the term 'fascism' - or 'neofascism' - owes more to fixed thinking than results from a scientific investigation.

There are too many on the left who are locked into the idea that the 1945-79 period represented some kind of capitalist normalcy: universal suffrage, strong trade unions, the social democratic consensus. That its defining capitalist 'other' began in 1922 with Benito Mussolini's march on Rome. 'Official communism' detected the seeds of fascism in everything, including left social democracy - till, that is, the 1935 decree urging, demanding the unity of the working class movement with the least reactionary sections of the bourgeois class in the name of defeating the growing and ever more ghastly fascist menace. Hence during this 1945-79 period, and thereon after, anything that challenged, let alone overturns, the so-called normalcy is classified as fascism, or something going in the direction of fascism (and not only by 'official communism').

I well remember Edward Heath being branded a fascist, Margaret Thatcher too. In the US it was Richard Nixon, then Ronald Reagan. Today it is Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen, Alice Weidel, Georgia Meloni and, of course, Donald Trump. But, to use a phrase, there are more things than are dreamt of in the black and white philosophy of fascism and anti-fascism.<sup>17</sup> In other words, we need to take time to think and try to grasp things in terms of where they come from and where they are going.

Trump, stating the obvious, has nowadays absolutely no need for non-state fighting formations - a defining marker of fascism qua fascism. The totally botched January 6 2021 attempted self-coup with its Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters and other boogaloes was another matter. Not that if his self-coup had succeeded - a highly unlikely scenario - that would have made the US a fascist state. Why? Because his bid to remain president relied on the cooperation of vice-president Mike Pence, congress, the supreme court ... and, ultimately, the army. The Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, etc were mere bit players. They certainly never constituted the disciplined fighting core of the Maga movement, as did the blackshirts with Mussolini's fascisti or the brownshirts

did with Hitler's Nazis.

Be that as it may, today Trump has executive orders, a thoroughly purged state apparatus, majorities in both houses of congress, the supreme court ... for Christ's sake, he even has a spaceforce. There is, moreover, no unresolved revolutionary situation. The working class poses not the least threat, neither to him nor the ruling class, that is for sure.

So Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, Vladimir Putin and their ilk need to be classified, grasped, both according to their *political origins*, but more importantly according to their *being and becoming*. In other words, if there is any 'neo' going on, it is closer - much closer - to neo-Bonapartism. Of course, each is an autocrat in their own unique way. Trump, Modi, Putin, etc each come with their own individual ambitions, quirks and absurdities, each stands atop a complex, constantly shifting, political and economic coalition which both propels and limits their actions, each uses, and doubtless internalises, their own national history and ideology: America's manifest destiny, Hindutva, a Greater Russia, etc.

## Made greater

Abroad, Trump's revolutionary counterrevolution has seen him threatening to close the Mexican border, offering to buy Greenland, promising to take back the Panama Canal and incorporate Canada as the 51st state.

With the cold war won and long gone, Trump has no need to cover America's imperialism with cant about freedom, justice and democracy. Trump can afford to arrogantly parade America's power and naked greed. America no longer asks the world to love it: instead the world is expected to fear it. Liberals are mortified, often reduced to spluttering incoherence. And most of the left miserably tails liberal opinion.

But here is Trump's Greater America. And it makes a perfect fit with manifest destiny. Beginning as 13 seaward-orientated former British colonies, the United States expanded westwards and southwards through genocide and seizing native lands, wars of anti-colonial colonial conquest and cash buy-outs. Alaska was bought from tsarist Russia for a paltry \$7.2 million in 1867. The Louisiana and Florida purchases served as the model. And throughout there were intermittent claims over British Columbia, Quebec and the whole of Canada.

No less to the point, what is to stop the US unilaterally annexing Greenland as some sort of incorporated territory? Indian troops overran the pocket-sized Portuguese colony of Goa in just 36 hours in 1961. The 626,000 population were not consulted. Why do liberals assume that Greenland's 57,000 population would be given any say (except in a sufficiently well-rigged referendum)? Were they consulted when Denmark first incorporated Greenland after the Danish and Norwegian kingdoms separated in 1814? Obviously not. Does anyone really expect Denmark to fight if American forces based in Greenland stroll in to occupy the key centres of Nuuk? Again, no. Will Greenland's indigenous population launch a winnable war of national liberation? Hardly.

Not that we communists are indifferent. On the contrary, we favour the *voluntary* union of peoples. But that does not prevent us from recognising the role of brute force in the past ... and in the future.

The same goes for Panama. Trump has recently ordered the US military to draw up plans to seize - 'reclaim' - the Panama Canal. The US Southern Command has produced a series of options to ensure that America has "full access", reports the *Daily Mail*.<sup>18</sup>

They range from partnering closely with Panamanian security forces to using American troops to forcibly take the waterway - which, it should be stressed, officials say is the least likely option. Note, defence secretary Pete Hegseth is expected to visit Panama next month, with, one presumes, the expectation of extracting a deal that satisfies Trump. Failing that, yes, there is brute force.

Remember, in December 1989 the US invaded Panama to overthrow the *de facto* ruler, Manuel Noriega, who was wanted in the US on drug trafficking charges. Operation Just Cause concluded in January 1990 with the "surrender of Noriega" and Panama's defence forces "dissolved".<sup>19</sup> Will it be any different in 2025 or 2026? Unlikely - the odds are simply overwhelmingly against Panama.

True, Canada is a different matter. It has a population of over 40 million and would be no pushover. No wonder Trump talks of *persuading* Canada to join the United States ... in return for the lifting of those tariffs.

Pan-Americanism has, though, little purchase in Canada at the moment. Only 25% are prepared to consider the proposition, only 6% positively support it.<sup>20</sup> Pierre Poilievre, leader of its Conservative Party - endorsed by people close to Trump - has made his position abundantly clear: "We will never be the 51st state."<sup>21</sup> A short while ago he was the shoo-in to be Canada's next prime minister. Now, because of his association with Trump, polls show him running neck-and-neck with Mark Carney, the new Liberal leader.

So America has to find, or create, a unionist party, and bring around a good section of the electorate. Not impossible. England did something like that with Scotland in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Swingeing tariffs were imposed, Scotland's Darien colonial adventure wrecked and bribes were liberally doled out. The union of the two parliaments in 1707 saw an end to tariffs, compensation paid to the elite for Darien, and an economic boom in Scotland.

## Ukraine

JD Vance spelt out the new global realities at the 61st Munich Security Conference on February 14. Breaking with the normal diplomatic conventions, the vice-president berated European mainstream politicians for their liberal intolerance and apparent indifference to mass migration. Hence, he described the greatest dangers in Europe being "internal", rather than from the external challenges of Russia or China. Adding insult to injury, he subsequently met with AfD leader Alice Weidel - not chancellor Olaf Scholz, not the CDU's chancellor-in-waiting, Friedrich Merz.

Weidel and Vance discussed the war in Ukraine. Weidel and Vance discussed German domestic politics. Weidel and Vance agreed that the so-called *Brandmauer*, or 'firewall', that bars the AfD from joining governing coalitions in Germany, was an outrage that should immediately be extinguished. Those who do not, or cannot, understand the significance of this change in US policy and its impact (and not only in Germany) understand nothing.

What about Ukraine? Instead of Joe Biden's ironclad insistence on Ukraine getting everything back and seeing the back of the last Russian soldier, there are bilateral negotiations. Vance bluntly announced that neither Europe nor Ukraine have a seat at the table.

Trump wants an agreement with Russia, freezing the whole of the 800-mile front line and then, immediately after, establishing a buffer zone. We have seen Volodymyr Zelensky humiliatingly whipped into line. We have also had the first

formal negotiations between Trump and Putin.

Trump is ready to allow Russia to keep what it has got: ie, around 20% of pre-2014 Ukrainian territory ... the return is not so much peace: rather cleaving Russia away from China (a long shot, in my opinion). Doubtless, if negotiations continue, as is generally expected, there will be haggling over nuclear power stations, contested towns and rare metals. Given the Ukrainian scuttle, Kursk it is now a non-issue. So Vladimir Putin can claim a victory. He has already won a commitment that there will be no Ukrainian membership of Nato for the foreseeable future. Also Russia will once again be able to base its warships in Crimea's Sevastopol and thereby allowed free access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean.

However, things are not so straightforward. Sir Keir Starmer has put together a 30-country-strong 'coalition of the willing' - the idea being to act as a peacekeeping force in Ukraine (something only possible with full US approval). Hence, we can envisage 100,000 foreign troops stationed along the expanded borders of the Russian Federation. Putin might not like it. But he might have to live with it though. Meanwhile, one might guess that the rump Ukraine will be armed to the teeth and provided with various security guarantees. A sort of Israel, but much, much bigger.

For the moment Trump has discarded Biden's goal of regime change in Moscow. However, a *de facto* extension of Nato could easily see splits and divisions open up around Putin. Once that happens - more accurately, if that happens - conditions could be readied for a colour revolution.

Meanwhile, Trump comes not only bearing an olive branch: he carries a big stick too. If the Putin-FSB regime rejects his peace deal, there is the threat of "increased American support for Ukraine".<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Trump would dust off Zelensky's now almost totally forgotten victory plan ... and then add some more. Not only more and better military supplies, but the direct involvement of those 100,000 'peacekeepers' as *peace enforcers*.

In other words, though Trump is seeking some kind of accommodation with Russia, failing that, there is the "phasing into World War III" that he once warned against ●

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## FUSION

# The snowball effect

Mike Macnair details the long and difficult road to the 1875 Gotha congress of the 'Eisenacher' SDAP and 'Lassallean' ADAV. With unity there was an organisational take-off and an ability to survive harsh state repression

In May 1875 at a congress at Gotha two parties unified: the Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiter-Verein (ADAV - General German Workers' Association), founded in 1863 under the leadership of Ferdinand Lassalle and identified with his doctrine; and the Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei (SDAP - Social Democratic Workers Party), founded in 1869 at Eisenach and identified as 'Eisenachers'. They created the Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands (SAP - Socialist Workers Party of Germany).

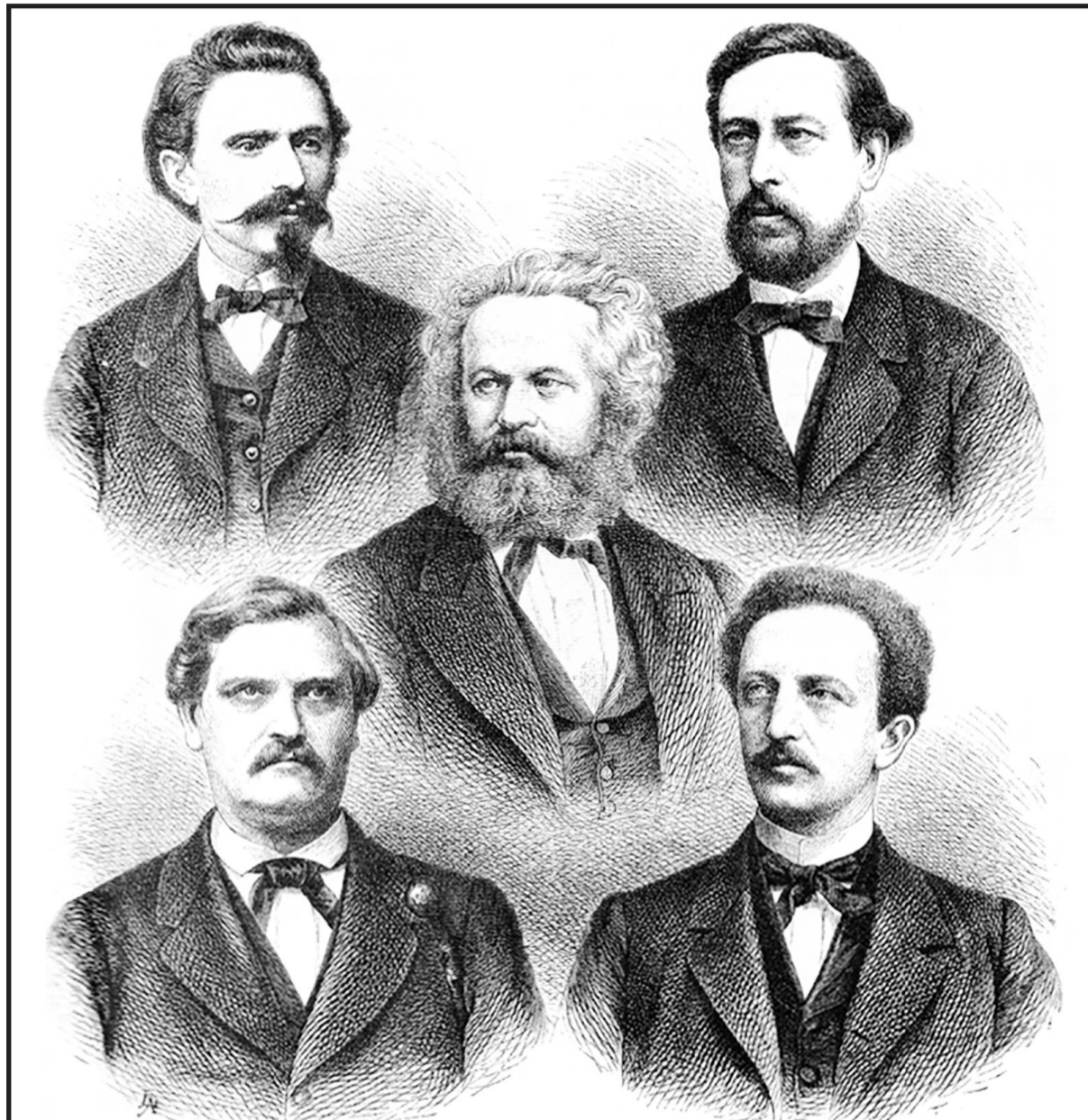
The Gotha fusion is politically two-sided for the left. On the one hand, the unification led to a 'snowball effect'. At the fusion, the ADAV had 15,322 members and the SDAP 9,121. By 1876, SAP membership had risen to 38,000. In March 1876 the party was formally banned by the Prussian police, but the circulation of the party press was up to around 100,000, and in the 1877 Reichstag election the SAP obtained 9.14% of the vote and 13 seats. The SAP was illegalised under the 'Anti-socialist laws' of 1878-88, but was able to continue semi-legally through elections as a loophole, plus smuggling in newspapers from Switzerland; and, when the 'anti-socialist laws' were abandoned, the refounded Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany) was the largest party in the country.

Unification leading to a snowball effect was repeated in Austria in 1888-89, France in 1905 and elsewhere. The SAP-SPD's strategic and organisational conceptions were at the foundations of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and of Bolshevism.

On the other hand, the draft party programme put to the Gotha congress was very sharply criticised by both Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in private correspondence with SDAP leaders. Published in 1891, as part of the discussion round the drafting of the SPD's new Erfurt programme, Marx's *Critique of the Gotha programme* has become one of the 'foundational texts' of Marxism, excerpted in the 'Marxism' taught to those university students who touch it.

Relying on this text, a significant part of the far left identifies Gotha with unity between 'revolutionaries' (the Eisenachers) and 'reformists' or 'state socialists' (the Lassalleans), on a programme that made undue concessions to the Lassalleans. This is then identified by this far-left narrative as the 'original sin' that led the SPD in August 1914 to vote for war credits and to pursue the *Burgfrieden* ('castle truce') policy of suppressing dissent and strikes.

This narrative is misleading. The 'Lassalleans' were not exactly 'reformists' and the 'Eisenachers' were not exactly 'revolutionaries'. And the original-sin narrative of the history of the SPD has the wide credit it has on the left because of the intervention of academics from the Anglo-American security apparatus after World War II, who actively promoted, in the interests of Nato, the idea that the only possible left politics were 'right, but repulsive' state-loyalist coalitionism (the SPD



Founders: (top) August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht for the SDAP; (middle) Karl Marx; (bottom) Carl Wilhelm Tölcke, Ferdinand Lassalle for ADAV

right; Labour; etc), or 'romantic, but wrong' mass-strikism (Luxemburg; the young Trotsky; etc).

The real history is closer to the problems of modern left unification. The Eisenachers and Lassalleans were both heavily influenced by the arguments of the *Communist manifesto* and both were advocates of a radical break with capitalism.

## ADAV

We begin in 1862-63.<sup>1</sup> A group of German worker activists, who had recently visited London, approached the German liberals for support for universal suffrage - without success. Someone suggested they approach Ferdinand Lassalle - he had been an activist in the revolution of 1848, for which he had done some time. He had subsequently become something of a celebrity lawyer for his defence of Countess Hatzfeld in her divorce proceedings. In 1861 he had published *Das System der erworbenen Rechte* ('The system of acquired rights'), a Hegelian account of the history of property law, with some unacknowledged borrowings from Marx - and one which made history end in socialism rather than (as in Hegel) in the 'modern state'.

Lassalle, in response to the worker activists' inquiry, issued his *Open letter* (April 18 1863). This was a longish pamphlet, which argued that trade unionism is useless due to the 'iron law of wages': that is, that the internal logic of capital will inevitably produce wages

falling to subsistence levels. Hence, for the working class to achieve anything of substance, it has to take political action. The political action that it needs to take consists in the first place of campaigning for universal suffrage (meaning manhood - universal male suffrage). The second task is to campaign for state-backed cooperatives. These will be the means of abolishing the wages system.

The *Open letter* was enthusiastically received, and in May 1863 the ADAV was formed - in Leipzig, Saxony, probably for legal reasons (that the Saxon state was more likely to register a legal association than the Prussian state).<sup>2</sup> It was an individual-membership organisation, like a trade union, but also 'centralised' by electing a president (Lassalle) with absolute power: this commitment was proposed by Lassalle on the basis of Hegelian arguments for the need for unity of will.<sup>3</sup> Its political basis was the *Open letter*: that is, not a party platform, but agreement to Lassalle's theory.

The liberals responded to this initiative by forming their own 'workers organisation', the Verein Deutscher Arbeitervereine (VDAV), politically committed to 'self-help' and opposition to state aid, and without the suffrage demand. Unlike ADAV, VDAV was a federation of local associations. It was much bigger than the ADAV, which reached around 5,000 members around the time of Lassalle's death

in September 1864; but the VDAV by that time had around 20,000.

## Liebknecht

In October 1863 the ADAV recruited Wilhelm Liebknecht, another old 1848er. Liebknecht had been in exile working with Marx and Engels. But, finding it very difficult to make a living in London, he went back to Germany on the basis of an announced amnesty. (Marx also attempted to take the amnesty, with Lassalle's support, but was excluded by the Prussian government on political grounds.)

By spring 1864, Liebknecht was in opposition to Lassalle within the ADAV, on two political grounds. The first was Lassalle's *kleindeutsch* ('small German'), policy on German unification: that is, support for German unification round Prussia without Austria, which Prussia would inevitably dominate. Liebknecht supported the opposed *grossdeutsch* ('big German') policy, to include the German part of Austria-Hungary. The second issue was suspicions of Lassalle's dealings with Prussian minister-president Otto von Bismarck (these suspicions were confirmed much later): Bismarck thought the ADAV could serve as a political lever against the liberals, while Lassalle thought the Prussian monarchist conservatives might support the workers against the liberals.

Liebknecht's opposition to Lassalle was cut short because in August 1864 Lassalle was killed in

a duel. There was a brief moment afterwards where Liebknecht tried to nominate Marx as president of the ADAV, but Marx refused to stand: he was already busy with the founding of the International Workingmen's Association - the First International, launched in September.

December 1864 saw the appearance of Jean-Baptiste von Schweitzer's *Der Sozialdemokrat* newspaper (actually indirectly funded by Bismarck through an aristocratic proxy). Schweitzer was a lower-aristocrat playwright and author. He had been involved in radical politics for some time, but was prosecuted for allegedly picking up a teenage boy in a cruising area in a public park; this temporarily killed his political career, but Lassalle brought him into the ADAV.<sup>4</sup>

Liebknecht (and Marx and Engels) were suspicious of Lassalle's, and hence also of Schweitzer's, relations with Bismarck, but at the outset came on board: Liebknecht worked for *Der Sozialdemokrat*, and Marx and Engels lent it their names. Though this was supposed to be a pro-IWA initiative, in fact the December 1864 ADAV conference did not discuss IWA affiliation.

By February 1865 *Der Sozialdemokrat* was openly supporting the line of a Prussian-led Germany. Liebknecht resigned from the editorial board, and a week later Marx and Engels did the same. Liebknecht now went into opposition to this line in the ADAV, and won a majority in Berlin. The Prussian government in June, demonstrating its view that Schweitzer was useful to it, had Liebknecht arrested and deported from Prussia. He went first to Hamburg, where the *Nordstern* (*North Star*) newspaper was in opposition to the Lassallean ADAV leadership (but it went bankrupt), and then to Leipzig.

That said, in November 1865 Schweitzer was convicted of press crimes and *lèse-majesté* and imprisoned.<sup>5</sup> Schweitzer was a politician and journalist Bismarck was willing to use; but not a fully-legal and loyalist one.

## VDAV-DVP

In Leipzig, Liebknecht joined the liberals' VDAV, and began to work with August Bebel to push it towards taking up political demands. In September 1865 the VDAV adopted the demand for manhood suffrage. In the same month, Bebel and Liebknecht and their co-thinkers in the VDAV in Saxony launched the Deutsche Volkspartei (DVP - German people's party), a left-liberal party.

The result is two groups, neither of which looks that close to the 'Marx party'. Neither the ADAV nor the VDAV-DVP was affiliated to the IWA - an issue that was central to Marx's and Engels' politics in 1864-1872. The ADAV was a 'socialisation first' group to the point of playing footsie with the conservative monarchists. The VDAV-DVP was a 'democracy first' group to the point of actually being a left-liberal movement and party.

In fact, between 1864 to 1872 Marx's and Engels' correspondence shows that they had ambiguous relations with both sides. They were not prepared to back Liebknecht and



Bebel unequivocally. They equally were not prepared to wholly break with Schweitzer and the ADAV. They had closer relations with the direct supporters of the IWA in Germany, organised in a 'network' of local sections of the IWA promoted by another old 1848er exile, Baden revolutionary militia commander Johann Philipp Becker, from Geneva in Switzerland.<sup>6</sup>

June 14-July 26 1866 saw the Austro-Prussian War, rapidly won by Prussia. Bismarck funded a revival of Schweitzer's *Der Sozialdemokrat*, which campaigned for Prussian victory; Schweitzer was amnestied. Meanwhile, Liebknecht had been agitating against the war before it broke out and, in August, Bebel and Liebknecht, through the VDAV-DVP, called a conference of anti-Prussian leftists, which adopted the 'Chemnitz platform'. This combined calls for democratic change with the Lassallean idea of state-backed cooperatives (Engels was sharply critical).

In practice, however, the Austrian defeat had settled (until 1919) the debate between *grossdeutsch* and *kleindeutsch* perspectives. In addition, on the back of victory, Bismarck launched the North German Confederation with a (advisory) Reichstag elected by manhood suffrage and secret ballot, with two rounds of voting. It is fairly clear that Bismarck's reasoning was the same as his grounds for supporting Lassalle and Schweitzer before: worker suffrage was to be expected to counterbalance the liberals in the interest of the monarchy.<sup>7</sup> Both the ADAV and DVP won constituencies: Bebel was elected to the Constituent Assembly in February 1867, and then to the parliament; Liebknecht was elected to the parliament in August and Schweitzer in September.

## Unity manoeuvres

Meanwhile, in May 1867 Schweitzer was elected ADAV president, and the party adopted a platform including democratic demands and internationalism - a move towards the IWA. The result was a split led by Countess Hatzfeld to form the "Lassallescher ADAV" (LADAV).

January 1868 saw the DVP get its own paper - or, more accurately, back Wilhelm Liebknecht's *Demokratische Wochenblatt* (*Democratic Weekly*). Spring 1868 saw Schweitzer print a series of favourable articles on Marx's *Capital*, volume one (published late 1867). In July, Liebknecht and Schweitzer made a private agreement for both the ADAV and VDAV-DVP to join the IWA. In August the ADAV congress voted to *adopt the IWA's political platform* (not quite the same thing as joining). In early September, the VDAV congress voted by 69-46 delegates to join the IWA.

On September 8 the Leipzig police dissolved the ADAV as an illegal party. Schweitzer now abruptly changed course: *Der Sozialdemokrat* printed the claims of the VDAV anti-IWA faction at Nuremberg and denounced the VDAV. In October Schweitzer re-established the ADAV, this time as a Berlin-registered organisation. The ADAV now broke partially with its opposition to trade unions, beginning to create *ADAV-controlled* trade unions (*ex officio* president of all of them: Schweitzer).

Schweitzer's abrupt turn away from unity caused problems in the ADAV. At its Easter 1869 congress, Liebknecht and Bebel were allowed to speak, and argued that, while they fought for unity, Schweitzer opposed it. Schweitzer called for personal vote of confidence, which passed, 43 delegates for, with 14

(representing a third of membership) abstaining. The Congress voted to increase the powers of the ADAV's executive committee relative to the president.

On June 18 Schweitzer responded with a coup: he announced reunification with Hatzfeld's LADAV, "return to Lassallean organisation", abolishing the powers of the EC and returning them to the president, and giving five days to reply to a yes/no referendum. On June 26 ADAV dissenters Wilhelm Bracke and others in *Demokratische Wochenblatt* publicly denounced Schweitzer's scheme and called for a unity congress at Eisenach on August 7.

The Eisenach congress then founded the Social Democratic Workers Party, SDAP. It was a unification between Bebel and Liebknecht and their supporters who had been in the VDAV; the ADAV dissenters (Bracke and co); and at least a considerable part of Becker's network of local German sections of the IWA. The *Demokratische Wochenblatt* was 'adopted' by the party and renamed *Der Volksstaat* (*The People's State*).

The Eisenach programme, the basis of the unification, has most of the faults Marx and Engels criticised in the Gotha programme in 1875. But the *principle* of having a programme was accepted by the former Lassallean dissidents. And the organisational form was a membership party - not a loose federation like the VDAV or a network of local groups like the IWA sections linked by Becker; but one which had an elected executive, not an all-powerful president. And, once the SDAP was underway, Liebknecht in 1870 broke up the VDAV-DVP alliance with left liberals by arguing for collectivisation of the land (starting with church land).

## Towards Gotha

July 19 1870 saw the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war (to continue till January 28 1871). Liebknecht and Bebel campaigned against the war, and both abstained on the war credits vote in the parliament. On the other hand, Schweitzer and *Der Sozialdemokrat* called for German victory.

Liebknecht and Bebel were initially isolated: the SDAP EC argued that this was a German war of defence against French aggression, which was also Marx's and Engels' initial view). However, the crushing defeat of the French at the battle of Sedan (September 1-2) transformed the visible politics of the war, and on September 5 the SDAP EC denounced a shift to war of conquest. First the EC, then Bebel and Liebknecht, were arrested.

The crackdown led SDAP membership to fall from 11,000 to 6,100. The German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine in January 1871 showed the truth of Bebel's and Liebknecht's diagnosis that this was a war of aggression. The declaration of the German Reich in the same month led to new Reichstag elections in March - though Bebel managed to retain his seat, both Liebknecht and Schweitzer lost theirs. Schweitzer then resigned as ADAV president: the effective end of his political career. The 1872 ADAV congress expelled him on the ground that there were "great, impressive grounds to distrust" him as an agent of the Prussian government.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, the issue of the IWA became successively a driver towards unity, a ground for disunity, and - like German unification - a moot issue. The background was the entry operation of the Bakuninists in the IWA between June 1868

and September 1872, and the related debates.<sup>9</sup> In 1868 the IWA had been a driver towards unity - though Becker's network of local sections of the IWA was a (weaker) competitor to both the ADAV and DVP.

In 1869-70 Bakunin's polemic against the Eisenach programme was a part of the struggle.<sup>10</sup> In March 1870, the general council's 'Confidential communication on Bakunin' (drafted by Marx) for the first time characterised the ADAV as a sect - effectively the IWA took sides with the SDAP.<sup>11</sup> In summer-autumn of 1871, the split in the IWA was consummated. The London congress of the IWA was denounced by the Bakuninists and the ADAV; on the other hand, the Bakuninist conference in Switzerland was supported by the ADAV.

In September 1872 the Hague conference of the IWA formally adopted a commitment to political action and expelled the Bakuninists - but also moved the general council to New York, which turned out to be a killer for the organisation. This was not immediately apparent, but the IWA issue between the SDAP and the ADAV was now moot.

In March 1872 Bebel and Liebknecht were convicted of treason by campaigning for a republic, and jailed for two years. In August 1872, the SDAP congress issued a new call for unity with the ADAV, and prohibited *Volksstaat* polemics against them. In reality, polemics and debates continued; but the SDAP leadership continued to press for unity, while the ADAV rejected it. In autumn 1874, however, factional warfare in the ADAV led both sides separately to approach the SDAP for unity. Bebel was still in jail, but the SDAP leadership seized the moment, and the ADAV and SDAP announced unity negotiations on December 11.

By the end of that month the negotiators had agreed an organisation statute, which retained the principle of individual membership, as opposed to federation, but otherwise broke with Lassallean 'centralism'. By March 7 1875, they had agreed a draft programme - the famous, or infamous, Gotha programme - which reflected compromises between the Eisenachers and the Lassalleans. It was this draft that Marx and Engels both criticised. (Lars T Lih has pointed out that important changes were made in the programme actually adopted).<sup>12</sup>

It is certainly true that the programme contained compromises with the Lassalleans. But the fact that it was a programme, rather than agreement to theory, was a capitulation on the part of the Lassalleans. And, like the Eisenach programme, and like the earlier six points of the 1838 People's Charter, the 1848 'Demands of the Communist Party in Germany' and the later 1880 Programme of the Parti Ouvrier, 1889 Austrian Hainfeld and 1891 German Erfurt programmes, it was a politics-first document.

As I already indicated, the result of the unification was a very rapid take-off - leading to an almost as rapid illegalisation under the 1876 ban and 1878-88 'anti-socialist laws'; but also the ability to *survive and prosper* in illegality, using the combination of electoral activities with smuggling in newspapers.<sup>13</sup> It was this approach to organising in illegality that Lenin sought to urge on the Russians in *What is to be done?*

This was not a broad-front party. It was a unification of two groups, which had emerged through a process of splits and fusions arising originally out of *one* group,

the ADAV, with a series of splits, including that in 1869, which created the Eisenach SDAP. Lassalle was significantly influenced by Marx, although he muddled his arguments as well as plagiarising some of them; as already mentioned Schweitzer published strongly positive reviews of *Capital* volume one in 1868.

## Political

The ADAV was *in a certain sense* a 'socialisation-first' party, but it was a *political party* which fought for manhood suffrage as the first step to the proposed state-backed cooperatives. In the debates in the 1860s international workers' movement, the Lassalleans were in this sense closer to the 'Marx party' than to the Bakuninists, who argued for general-strikism; or to the Proudhonists, who argued for self-help cooperatives and political abstention; or to the Blanquists, who argued for conspiratorial preparation for insurrection.

It is all too easy to forget the context of the German socialists, existing on the margins of legality. Becker was engaged in clandestine correspondence from exile. When the ADAV adopted part of the platform of the IWA, the police promptly dissolved the organisation. And so on. Both Lassalle in 1863, with registering the ADAV in Leipzig, and Bebel and Liebknecht in 1865, with forming the DVP, are trying to find ways to conduct political work legally (as far as possible) in a regime that sharply limited legal political action.

That the result turned out to be, in the SAP-SPD, a highly successful model was perhaps serendipitous. Political parties, beginning around 1678-83 in England, were organised on the pattern of parliamentary caucuses, plus national clubs, plus local clubs. This is a wonderful mechanism for organising the capitalist class, because the national caucuses and clubs are nexuses of national-level bribery, while the local clubs are nexuses of local bribery. This institutional form - which persists to this day in the US Republican and Democrat parties and the British Conservative party - was still the form used by Chartism, and was still conceived by Marx and Engels as the form of the workers' political party in the March 1850 *Address*: "The speedy organisation of at least provincial connections between the workers' clubs is one of the prime requirements for the strengthening and development of the workers' party."<sup>14</sup>

Lassalle's *theoretical conception* in the *System der erworbenen Rechte*, being Hegelian, entailed the idea of the state bureaucracy as expressing the general interest, argued by Hegel. But his *political proposal* in trying to make deals with Bismarck was the idea that the working class can ally with the feudal aristocracy against the bourgeoisie. This had a certain basis, in that the 'Ten-Hour Day Act', the Factories Act 1847, passed the UK parliament with Tory votes over Liberal opposition. Indeed, in 1893 Engels argued in a letter to Bebel that under some circumstances it might be desirable in Britain to call for a tactical Tory vote in order to force concessions from the Liberals.<sup>15</sup>

Engels' point in the letter is that Keir Hardie's advocacy of a Tory vote does not look tactical. Lassalle's argument in 1863-64 similarly does not look tactical. And Schweitzer, who succeeded him, was plainly dependent on Bismarck.

The most fundamental point is that it is deeply mistaken to see the Gotha unification as the 'original sin' that led to the SPD's collapse in 1914. In the first place, as RH Dominick argued in his 1982 biography of Liebknecht, it is probable that

Marx's and Engels' judgment that the ADAV would collapse if left alone was just wrong. Dominick makes the point that the ADAV had already survived several splits, and that the SDAP membership would have been deeply unhappy with a turn away from unity.

Secondly, and more fundamentally, though the cult of Lassalle as founding hero persisted in the SPD, the people who became the revisionist right were not, in the main, ex-Lassalleans. Eduard Bernstein, for example, was Engels's literary executor. Georg von Vollmar was a mass strike advocate in the 1880s, before becoming an advocate of reform coalitions with the liberals in 1891. And so on.

Indeed, the SPD was in summer 1914 planning for a strike campaign to demand manhood suffrage in Prussia.<sup>16</sup> But then this was overtaken by the war crisis. And shortly before the war-credit vote, Reich chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg met with the SPD trade union leaders, with the stick: we are about to be invaded by the Russians (which actually happened, but was defeated at Tannenberg by August 23-30 1914, so that the war *ended up* being fought on Russian soil). And the carrot: deliver SPD votes for war credits, and we will deliver major concessions to the trade unions. And the unions did, in fact, deliver.

In short, the standard far-left version, according to which the Gotha unification is the original sin of the SPD, just does not work ●

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This article is adapted from Mike Macnair's talk to the Why Marx? 'Our history' series. See: [www.whymarx.com/sessions](http://www.whymarx.com/sessions)

## Notes

1. A great deal of what follows is from RH Dominick III: *Wilhelm Liebknecht and the founding of the German Social Democratic Party* Chapel Hill NC 1982, which is thoroughly documented.
2. This was before the completion of German unification. Saxony and Prussia were independent states.
3. For example, against Julius Vahlteich, who was expelled and went to the IWA, later to the SDAP: Lassalle quoted in CW Fölke *Zweck, Mittel und Organisation des Allgemeinen Deutschen Arbeiter-Vereins* Berlin 1873, pp21-22, 29-30.
4. H Kennedy 'Johann Baptist von Schweitzer: the queer Marx loved to hate' *Journal of Homosexuality* vol 29 (1995).
5. Derived from the Roman *laesae maiestatis* (closer to English law: treason); but the offence used against Schweitzer and occasionally against other socialists down to 1918 was closer to the English law, 'seditious libel' (abolished in 2009).
6. RP Morgan *The German Social Democrats and the First International 1864-1872* Cambridge 1965, especially chapter 3.
7. See, for instance, GB Pittaluga, G Cama and E Seghezza 'Democracy, extension of suffrage, and redistribution in nineteenth-century Europe' *European Review of Economic History*, vol 19 (2015), pp317-34.
8. Quote from Dominick p104.
9. A useful summary is in J-C Angaut 'The Marx-Bakunin conflict in the First International: a confrontation of political practices' *Actuel Marx* (2007); translation: [shs.cairn.info/article/E\\_AMX\\_041\\_0112?lang=en](http://shs.cairn.info/article/E_AMX_041_0112?lang=en).
10. [libcom.org/article/critique-german-social-democratic-program-mikhail-bakunin](http://libcom.org/article/critique-german-social-democratic-program-mikhail-bakunin).
11. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/03/28.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1870/03/28.htm).
12. LT Lih, review of KB Anderson's and K Ludenhoff's new translation of Marx's *Critique*: [plattypus1917.org/2023/06/02/a-review-of-karl-marxs-critique-of-the-gotha-program](http://plattypus1917.org/2023/06/02/a-review-of-karl-marxs-critique-of-the-gotha-program).
13. See, for example, VL Lidtke *The outlawed party* Princeton UP 1966.
14. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm).
15. Engels to Bebel, January 24 1893: [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93\\_01\\_24.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_01_24.htm).
16. J-U Guettel 'Reform, revolution and the "original catastrophe": political change in Prussia and Germany on the eve of the First World War' *Journal of Modern History* 91 (June 2019), pp311-40. The meeting between Bethman-Hollweg and the trade union leaders is in H Strachan *The First World War*, volume 1, *To arms* Oxford 2001.

**IRAN**

# Saluting those who went before

There were plenty of illusions, but there can be no disguising the courage. **Yassamine Mather** pays tribute to the women who took up the cause of the working class and fought for revolution



Last week I gave a talk about the women of the Iranian left - partly because in the 'Woman, life, freedom' protests of 2023 the struggles and role of these women were rarely mentioned, undermining their history.

The younger generation seems unaware of the courage and the sacrifices of those who paved the way for the women's movement in Iran. Some have illusions about the superficial aspects of unveiling during the Pahlavi dynasty, not knowing that this only affected a minority of middle class and upper class women in urban areas, and that dozens of leftwing female activists were imprisoned or killed for their political activities by the same regime.

So this article is an attempt to put the record straight.

I am going to start with Maryam Firouz (or Maryam Farman Farmaian). I have previously written extensively against the Tudeh ('official communist') Party. However, its women's association, the Democratic Organisation of Iranian Women, led by Firouz, did play a significant role when it came to the struggle for women's emancipation. The origins of this movement go back to 1943, marked by the establishment of two key groups: the Women's Organisation for Party members and the Women's Society for Party Supporters.

In 1949, these two entities were merged into a single organisation known as the Society of Democratic Women. It should be noted that the leadership of these groups was often comprised of women who were related to prominent party figures. Still, many were also distinguished by their own professional achievements or

active involvement in the early women's movement. Notable figures included Zahra and Taj Iskandari, Maryam Firouz, Khadijeh Keshavarz, Akhtar Kambakhsh, Badri al-Monir Alavi and Aliyeh Sharmini - some of whom had been associated with the Patriotic Women's Society, an initiative launched by the Socialist Party.

The Women's Organisation of Tudeh primarily focused on engaging students, teachers and other urban-educated women, as well as women working in factories and offices. It was focused on women's rights, including suffrage, education, employment and social opportunities.

Maryam Firouz: She was born into an aristocratic family in Iran and, despite her privileged position, became involved in progressive politics, breaking away from the expectations of her social class. She is also known as the 'Red Princess', as she was a direct descendant of the Qajar dynasty.

It was when she was a student in Europe that she became a communist. Tudeh had a very problematic history, before and after the revolution of 1979, with inconsistent positions when it came to Mohammad Reza Shah's rule, and it often mirrored the USSR's changing attitudes to the late shah. However, what distinguishes Firouz is her activities in organising the democratic organisation of women in Iran.

Of course, as part of the political bureau and the central committee, she was responsible for Tudeh's support for the Islamic Republic after 1979 - only to be arrested herself, once they were no longer of any use to the new regime.

## **Fedal women killed before 1979:**

**Fatemeh Nahani,**  
**Afsar Sadat Hosseini,**  
**Pouran Yadollahi,**  
**Mehrnoush Ebrahimi,**  
**Asmar Azari,**  
**Sepideh Sharif,**  
**Saba Bijhanzadeh,**  
**Marzieh Ahmadi Oskoui,**  
**Zahra AghaNabi,**  
**Fatemeh Rokhbin**

Following torture in prison, the leadership of Tudeh appeared on various TV programmes to denounce their politics and their history. However, Maryam Firouz was the only member of the leadership who refused to appear in these humiliating events, even though she most probably faced the same kind of pressure - and torture - as anyone else.

Vida Hajebi Tabrizi: She is the second one who is definitely worth highlighting. Born in Tehran, she pursued her studies in architecture in Paris during the 1950s, and she was a friend of Farah Diba (later the wife of the shah). Of course, they fell out and if you read what Hajebi Tabrizi wrote about her life, she adds that she protested against Diba's visit to France, years later. Hajebi Tabrizi was married to a Venezuelan socialist, Osvaldo Barreto, and moved to Venezuela, where she worked with the Venezuelan Communist Party and participated in their guerrilla activities. She later returned to Iran, where she worked at the Institute of Social Science Studies.

Her activities led to her first imprisonment in July 1972, and she endured appalling treatment during that time. Her plight drew international attention, with Amnesty naming her Prisoner of the Year in 1978. She was released just before the Islamic-led revolution in early 1979.

After the revolution, in exile, she wrote valid articles criticising armed struggle and she became involved in a journal, *Left Wing*, in collaboration with author Nasser Mohajer. She also wrote a book about the experience of women political prisoners, called *Dade Bidad*.

Pouran Bazargan: Pouran was born

into a devoutly religious family that barred her from attending high school after the ninth grade. In her own words:

After enduring years of confinement at home, I pursued education independently, completed high school, and even earned a university degree. My academic record was exceptional. My time at Mashad University in Iran (1960-63) coincided with a surge in social and political activism, prompting me to join the movement. As one of the few female political activists at the time, I faced persecution by Savak, the shah's brutal security apparatus, which only deepened my commitment to the struggle for freedom and democracy. Though I initially framed my activism as resisting patriarchy and defending human dignity, I soon became part of a broader wave challenging state censorship and oppression. My comrades were many; we could not remain indifferent to the suffering around us. Politics, we believed, would inevitably shape our destinies - the question was not 'why', but 'how' to engage.

Influenced by the religious, reformist culture surrounding me, I co-founded the Islamic Association of Women in Mashad. My colleagues included young women from politically active families - some with relatives executed by the regime, others even identifying as communists. Five members of my own family were killed in these struggles.

# 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.

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Later, while pursuing a master's degree in Tehran and working as a high school teacher, I connected with individuals who would establish the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran. My brother, Mansour, affiliated with the group, and facilitated my introduction.

Though I learned much from them, I refused uncritical adherence, even questioning Islamic dogma. For instance, I challenged a comrade's interpretation of *Quran* 23:6, which permits men to exploit enslaved women sexually. His justifications rang hollow.

The Mojahedin, like many political movements, selectively invoked scripture to suit their aims - a tactic mirrored today by the Islamic Republic. Yet on women's issues I insisted on autonomy - a stance that clashed with the organisation's hierarchy ...

In 1969, in Rafa, I married Mohammad Hanif Nejad, a Mojahedin founder. Revolutionary demands left no room for traditional private life; our existence was subordinated to the struggle against dictatorship.<sup>1</sup>

Her account counters the claim that Marxism infiltrated the Mojahedin-e-Khalq via 'entryism' - allegedly a strategy where Marxists covertly take over religious groups. Instead, her writings reveal authentic ideological evolution among members. They also highlight the Iranian left's internationalist ethos.

Following her husband's execution in 1973, Pouran recounts:

I went underground for over a year, striving to sustain the armed resistance against the regime and its imperialist backers. By August 1974, I relocated abroad, joining the Mojahedin's international branch in Iraq. My work with the Palestinian movement began then - I served at a Red Crescent hospital in Damascus and later in Beirut's Sabra refugee camp during Lebanon's civil war. Those years with resilient, oppressed communities were among my most fulfilling.

Assigned to Turkey, I laboured in sweatshops and hotels, while covertly smuggling arms into Iran. As our organisation matured politically and militarily, we critically re-evaluated our religious ideology, ultimately embracing Marxism. While the leadership formally announced this shift, many members, myself included, had already gravitated toward Marxist principles. However, the clandestine nature of guerrilla struggle - where information and debate were restricted - enabled problematic methods during this transition. These errors, though irreparable, cannot negate the revolutionary imperative to break from religious dogma.

## Killed before 1979

Fedayeen women killed before 1979 include Fatemeh Nahani, Afsar Sadat Hosseini, Pouran Yadollahi, Mehrnoush Ebrahimi, Asmar Azari, Sepideh Sharif, Saba Bijhanzadeh, Marzieh Ahmadi Oskoui, Zahra Agha-Nabi and Fatemeh Rokhbin.

The life story of every one of these women - and many more not listed here - is an example of bravery, political dedication, commitment to Marxist ideals and internationalism. For brevity, I will concentrate on just two of them.

Pouran Yadollahi (when I went to Kurdistan I chose her name as my cadre name): A member of the Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas, was born in 1950 in Isfahan. Due to her father's occupation, she spent her childhood in Abadan. Her father, an oil company worker and a politically conscious worker, played an active role in the oil company strikes during that period. Following the UK-US organised coup of August 19 1953, her father was arrested and imprisoned due to his ties with Tudeh. After his release, he was dismissed from the oil company and resettled with his family in a village.

Rural life allowed Pouran to witness first-hand the poverty and suffering of villagers. Growing up in a working class, politically engaged family, she developed political awareness from a young age, gaining insight into the root causes of mass poverty and the anti-people nature of the shah's regime. The class inequalities she observed daily in society deeply pained her.

After some time in the countryside, the family moved to Tehran. There, during her fourth year of high school, Pouran delivered a conference presentation on history, defying the conventional approach by analysing events through a scientific and materialist lens. She defended the oppressed as the true makers of history and condemned the exploitation practiced by the ruling classes. News of this reached Savak, which interrogated her and her father, forcing him to pledge to curb her "subversive" activities.

In June 1968, Pouran completed high school and passed the university entrance exam, enrolling at the University of Tehran's prestigious faculty of technology. The politically charged environment on the campus resonated with her militant spirit, and she fronted student protests. Born into a working class family and eager to study Marxism, she immersed herself in the world view of the working class.

The Siakhali uprising (1970) opened new horizons. She broke from the narrow confines of trade union politics and came to see armed struggle as the path to liberation. In 1971, Pouran joined the Fedayeen-e-Khalq guerrillas, determined to shatter what the organisation called the "cemetery silence" imposed by the shah's regime.

She was sent to Mashad with Behrouz Abdi to establish a branch, where they planned an operation to expose the shah's reactionary policies on the anniversary of the so-called 'White Revolution'. However, on February 3 1972, a bomb they were preparing detonated prematurely at their base. Behrouz was killed and Pouran was critically injured. En route to the hospital, she took cyanide to avoid capture. Despite the regime's efforts to revive her, she died three days later.

In a 1973 biography, the organisation wrote: "Comrade Pouran proved, in her final moments, that her faith in the working class's cause was so

profound that she chose death over betraying the people's secrets."

Marzieh Ahmadi Oskoui: She was born in March 1945 in a suburb of Tabriz. Her friends affectionately called her "Marzieh Jan" ('Dear Marzieh') and later "Marjan". Comrade Marzieh was a poet, writer, teacher, leftwing political activist, organiser of the student movement and a member of the Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas during the Pahlavi regime. She lost her life at the age of 29 in April 1974 during a clash with Savak agents in Tehran.

She completed her primary and secondary education in Osku and Tabriz, then enrolled at Tehran Teacher Training College to continue her studies. She was one of the organisers of the college teachers' strike in 1970. During her student activism, she was arrested and sentenced to one year in prison. In 1973, she joined the Democratic People's Front, a group preparing for armed struggle. Among prominent members of the Front were Mostafa Shoaiyan and Nader Shaygan Shami Asbi. She became a member of the People's Fedai Guerrillas the same year.

According to all who knew or encountered Marzieh Ahmadi Oskoui, she was an elegant woman, dressed in stylish coats and skirts - with long, braided hair that lent her a distinctive grace and beauty. Generous and warm-hearted, she shared everything she had with her comrades. She had a deep knowledge of theatre, film and literature, and tirelessly sought out the finest works, frequenting intellectual circles. Simultaneously, she organised lectures for her politically conscious friends. During her years at teacher training college, she served as a student representative. Initially representing female students, her exceptional capabilities led all students to recognise her as the best candidate to hold the responsibility of representing them.

She was one of the leaders and organisers of the student hunger strike in March 1971 at the Sepah-e Danesh Higher Teacher Training College. The hunger strike was held to demand the release of two arrested students and ultimately succeeded in securing their freedom. While she was negotiating in the university president's office, news spread outside that Marjan had been arrested by Savak. Some of her comrades swiftly surrounded the building where she was being held and managed to gain her release.

## Killed since 1979

Activist women executed or killed since 1979 include Zahra Behkish, Nastaran, Ashraf Ahmadi and Roghiyeh Akbari Monfared. Zahra Behkish (Ashraf): She was born in 1946 and after completing her secondary education she studied physics at university and then began teaching at high-school level.

Comrade Ashraf was banned from teaching because of her opposition to the Pahlavi regime. After contacting the Iranian People's Fedai, she joined this organisation and went into hiding.

After the February revolution in 1979, she worked in the organisation's publications department and, following the split between a minority and the majority of the organisation, Ashraf joined the minority faction

and was in charge of the district committee (incidentally, the minority were a minority on the central committee, but a majority when it came to the membership). I met her briefly in Kurdistan, where she had come from Tehran to discuss and prepare her plans for future activities.

In the early hours of September 2 1983, the residence of comrade Zahra Behkish in Tehran was surrounded by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards and she was arrested. At the moment of her arrest, she tried to swallow her cyanide tablet, so that she would not fall into the hands of the regime's security forces. However, sources have confirmed that the Revolutionary Guards were able to get her to the hospital in time. She was subsequently imprisoned and tortured. The authorities wanted to obtain information from her. However, she died after a few days, keeping the organisation's secrets safe.

## Executed in 1988

In the summer of 1988, shortly after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, supreme leader ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini issued orders for the mass execution of thousands of political prisoners. Lasting around five months from July onward, these killings occurred nationwide and spanned at least 32 cities, conducted without judicial oversight. Trials, where they occurred, ignored due process and made no effort to assess guilt or innocence.

Reports indicate widespread torture of prisoners during this period, while authorities systematically concealed the scale and details of the executions. Although the exact death toll remains uncertain, human rights organisations estimate that up to 5,000 individuals were executed, amongst them many leftwing and Muslim women, including members and supporters of Mojahedin-e-Khalq. These executions were just mindless revenge - the excuse was the Mojahedin's military incursion into western Iran in the final stages of the war with Iraq, which was eventually defeated by the Iranian military.

A large proportion of those executed were members and supporters of leftwing organisations and had nothing to do with the Mojahedin, but, even in the case of those associated with the Mojahedin, they had nothing to do with this military operation, as they were serving long prison sentences.

While celebrating the life of Fedai women, who will remain symbols of resistance and heroism, especially in the era of individualistic, neoliberal feminism, the Iranian guerrilla left was ultimately an extreme form of activism - hopelessly outmanoeuvred, when it came to the reality of revolution in Iran ●

## Notes

1. transcribed from video and translated by Yasmine Mather (March 2025).

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# weekly worker

Opportunism,  
but there is  
also genuine  
belief

## Divine right of CEOs

What explains the dominance of the 'tech right'? Paul Demarty traces the ideological evolution of the Silicon Valley oligarchs from new-age woo to the hard right

The early days of the second Donald Trump administration have brought unusual scrutiny to a broad ideological tendency known as the 'tech right'.

Already, during the lame duck period, there was the initial flurry of interest over the new 'Department of Government Efficiency' (DOGE), to be run by Elon Musk and the similarly-minded Vivek Ramaswamy. Musk is unambiguously a product of the American tech industry, who has recently swerved hard to the far right, while Ramaswamy's background is more in pharmaceuticals (and, let us say, not spotless), but he is very much plugged in to the California tech elite. (Alas, he was offloaded from DOGE after ill-advised comments about American culture caused a great brouhaha in the Trump camp.)

Above all, vice-president JD Vance was, until recently, best known for his 'rags to riches' memoir, *Hillbilly elegy*. The 'riches' part consisted of him becoming a partner at a venture capital firm and a protégé of Peter Thiel. Thiel is the most ideologically driven of the Silicon Valley billionaires and has been a significant presence on the rightward fringes of American politics for decades. For a long time he seemed like an outlier; the great and the good of Silicon Valley largely backed neoliberal Democrats for national office, and their cosmopolitan, globe-spanning businesses chafed awkwardly with the nativist passions stirred up by Trump's first campaign.

### Alongside Trump

But, come January 20 of this year, one could hardly miss the ranks of tech billionaires prominently placed at Trump's inauguration ceremony - from Musk himself to new converts like Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg. It was, at last, possible to see the Thiel worldview as something more than a mere individual hobby-horse, but rather an intelligible ideology for a class fraction like the Valley oligarchs. The story of this ideology is interesting, not merely because it is a major player in the world of Trump 2.0, but because it illustrates something of how ideologies fit into historical situations.

Though there are many variants, the core of this ideology is that human progress is to be measured in essentially technological terms; that technological progress is advanced by the heroic exertions of great inventors and entrepreneurs; and, crucially, that democratic political institutions are a fetter on the development of new technology so conceived. The project is to directly subordinate the state to the tech oligarchy, either by a strategy of 'secession' - the creation of the so-called 'network state' that organises economic and armed force orthogonally to the existing state system - or by direct takeover, as perhaps seems to be happening in America.

The story of how this ideology



Elon Musk plus sidekick

became a plausible contestant in contemporary high politics is in part the story of how it came to be. Silicon Valley has always been an ideologically fecund place, by the usual standards of capitalist industrial centres. Stewart Brand, the 60s counterculture icon, became an unlikely guru to many of the key figures in the early days of personal computing in the following decade. Brand published the *Whole earth catalog*, which promoted a kind of radical ideology of self-sufficiency permeated by new-age woo; but before long he was collaborating with Douglas Engelbart on the famous 'mother of all demos', which showed off extremely rough early versions of everything from the computer mouse to the web, which went on to shape the first graphical user interfaces at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (better known as Xerox PARC) and then Apple.

Brand's thinking was increasingly techno-utopian, but generally shaped by his fundamental political commitments to environmentalism and LSD-tinged global harmony guff. The libertarian side of his worldview, however, was to prove more adaptable in the 1980s, as Reaganism swept into power. Self-reliance was increasingly to be grabbed back from the government. Such, after all, was the sense of Ridley Scott's famous 1984-themed advert for the Apple Macintosh. (Apple's Steve Jobs, of course, had been a disciple of Brand, and remained so for the rest of his life.)

The explosive success of the personal computer in the 1980s, and the opening of the internet to the general public in the 1990s, had the effect of massively increasing the sheer size - in terms of numbers employed - of the tech industry. One follow-on effect of this was the development of a distinct ideological culture among the technical professionals who staffed these businesses. It was, characteristically, a highly libertarian environment. Paranoia about spies and feds abounded. Members of the tribe who found themselves on the wrong side of the law - the hacker, Kevin Mitnick, for example - became *causes célèbres*. In terms of class position, the software and hardware

engineers of the 90s and 2000s were more or less identical to the other highly-salaried professions (lawyers, financial analysts, etc).

Yet their dominant political outlooks - perhaps because these were early adopters of unorthodox proto-social-media like Usenet and IRC - were idiosyncratic, compared to the pretty mainstream liberalism and conservatism to be found on Wall Street. So were their modes of expression, influenced by the science fiction and fantasy literature that then, before *The matrix* and *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the rings* films, remained somewhat stigmatised as sad and geeky.

It was during this time, in the mid-to-late 1990s, that Thiel made his fortune, famously bringing PayPal to the public markets and making out like a bandit (knifing Elon Musk in the back in the process). Thiel is a curious hybrid. Financier he may have been, but like the stereotypical programmer of those days, he had spent more than a little time poring over Tolkien and rolling dice in games of *Dungeons and dragons*. Yet he had also shown a more serious interest in the humanities from his college days, where he eagerly attended lectures by the idiosyncratic French philosopher, René Girard. Girard explains human societies by means of the idea of mimetic desire - of wanting what others have - which, universalised, leads inevitably to violence. Human societies therefore adopt practices of propitiatory sacrifice to place these urges under cultic regulation.

Thiel's view of the human condition, then, was rather less sunny than Brand's. As with all such misanthropic pessimisms, however, Thiel's mysteriously stopped at his own doorstep, and those of his fellow tech-business *Übermenschen*. As with Ayn Rand's heroes, John Galt and Howard Roark, everything depended upon the self-realisation of these men, however little the ungrateful mob might appreciate it. By 2009, per a notorious essay, still primarily identifying himself as a libertarian, he "no longer believe[d] that freedom and democracy are compatible" - a situation he blamed on "the vast

increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women".<sup>1</sup>

His solution at that time was 'seasteading' - basically building libertarian utopias in international waters (a sort of floating Galt's Gulch). But he has always been open to other ideas, and the anti-democratic thrust of Thielism was to be taken in far darker directions by others associated with him, like the monarchist 'neo-reactionary', Curtis Yarvin (long-time pen name: 'Mencius Moldbug') and an expanding cast of believers in biological racism. Also lurking in the background here is the former libertine-leftist philosopher, Nick Land - one of the pioneers of so-called accelerationism (the idea that it is imperative that capitalist development be sped up in order to hasten ... well, either the revolution or the counterrevolution, depending on one's political priors). The appeal of accelerationism to tech business people, especially in its reactionary-authoritarian form, is clear enough.

I have emphasised the longer-term roots of all this madness because, for those not given to online political coprology, it could seem that it all just appeared overnight. That is because Silicon Valley was just as much subject to corporate 'diversity' ideology as any other industry in the decade beginning, roughly, in 2013. The Obama administration cosied up to tech oligarchs, and largely reaped the rewards. Barring the most obviously Thiel-affiliated enterprises like Palantir, corporate culture in Silicon Valley and its imitators became cartoonishly liberal.

### Everyone

If we ask why, suddenly, everyone - from venture capitalists like Marc Andreessen to tycoons like Mark Zuckerberg and Jeff Bezos - was prepared to switch teams (we leave aside Elon Musk for now, since his brain truly seems to have been pickled), we must view it as opportunism. There are a few elements - first of all the limits imposed by the official liberalism of the 'great awakening' era. This tended to disrupt the functioning of tech companies, in particular the 'hyperscaler' cloud computing vendors like AWS and Google Cloud, who faced workforce rebellions when they competed for juicy contracts at the pointy end of the US state apparatus - the CIA, Immigration and Custom Enforcement, etc.

This need not have made much impact outside the company offices, but the major social networks became increasingly liable to campaigns for speech controls and, after the outbreak of the Covid pandemic, increasingly suborned by state agencies, leading to increasingly assertive action against 'big tech' on the part of the Republican right.

On top of that, the Biden administration undertook far more assertive anti-trust enforcement than had been the case since before the

Reagan years - a serious problem for venture capitalists especially, who typically cash out by selling their companies on to larger ones. There was, finally, the problem that Biden was increasingly obviously going to lose his re-election, and that the victor was going to be - equally obviously - the vengeful, egoistic, but somewhat malleable Donald J Trump.

*Mere* opportunism would not be good enough, however, since, after all, these men *really do* believe that they are the hinge on which history turns. There had to be a larger project, something *visionary*. And so each has affixed himself to one or another variant of the tech-right, divine-right-of-CEOs ideology.

Like all ideologies, this one is both rooted in reality and false. It is rooted in the reality that the capitalist workplace is a dictatorship: the worker is free to enter into any contract of employment, but, without meaningful protection from either the political state or organs of defence like trade unions, that contract is likely to constrain her. Like the navy pressgangers conning young men into accepting the 'king's shilling' before stealing them away to sea, the ordinary course of capitalist employment makes a mockery of the freedom of labour. In the factory (or the office, or on the cargo ship) management has the same prerogatives as the officer corps in an army. The liberty of the capitalist is the liberty to enslave - if not always *de jure*. It is thus perfectly *intelligible* that a capitalist might come to see his social role as heroic (in the Carlylean or Nietzschean sense) as that of a Napoleon or a Barbarossa.

It is false because, in the end, capitalism needs the very state that these people suppose themselves to be destroying in the name of the 'network state'. Suppose we take the tech-right privatisation agenda to its logical conclusion - Palantir fills in for the CIA, Anduril for the Department of Defense's DARPA, and so on - the result would be either generalised warlordism and attendant technological collapse (as supply chains cease to support all the hi-tech hardware), or the transformation of the victorious warlord regime into a new state in the old-fashioned sense, that issues currency, fights wars and throws you in jail if you don't pay your taxes. Either tech-rightism surrenders the tech or it surrenders the rightism; on the road to such defeat, who knows how much blood might be spilled?

The lesson of the rise of the tech right, then, is not that we will get the promised dystopia, but that the ideological crisis of post-liberal capitalism has yet to be decided. And, of course, we have every interest in not leaving our rulers to decide amongst themselves ●

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### Notes

1. www.cato-unbound.org/2009/04/13/peter-thiel/education-libertarian.