A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity



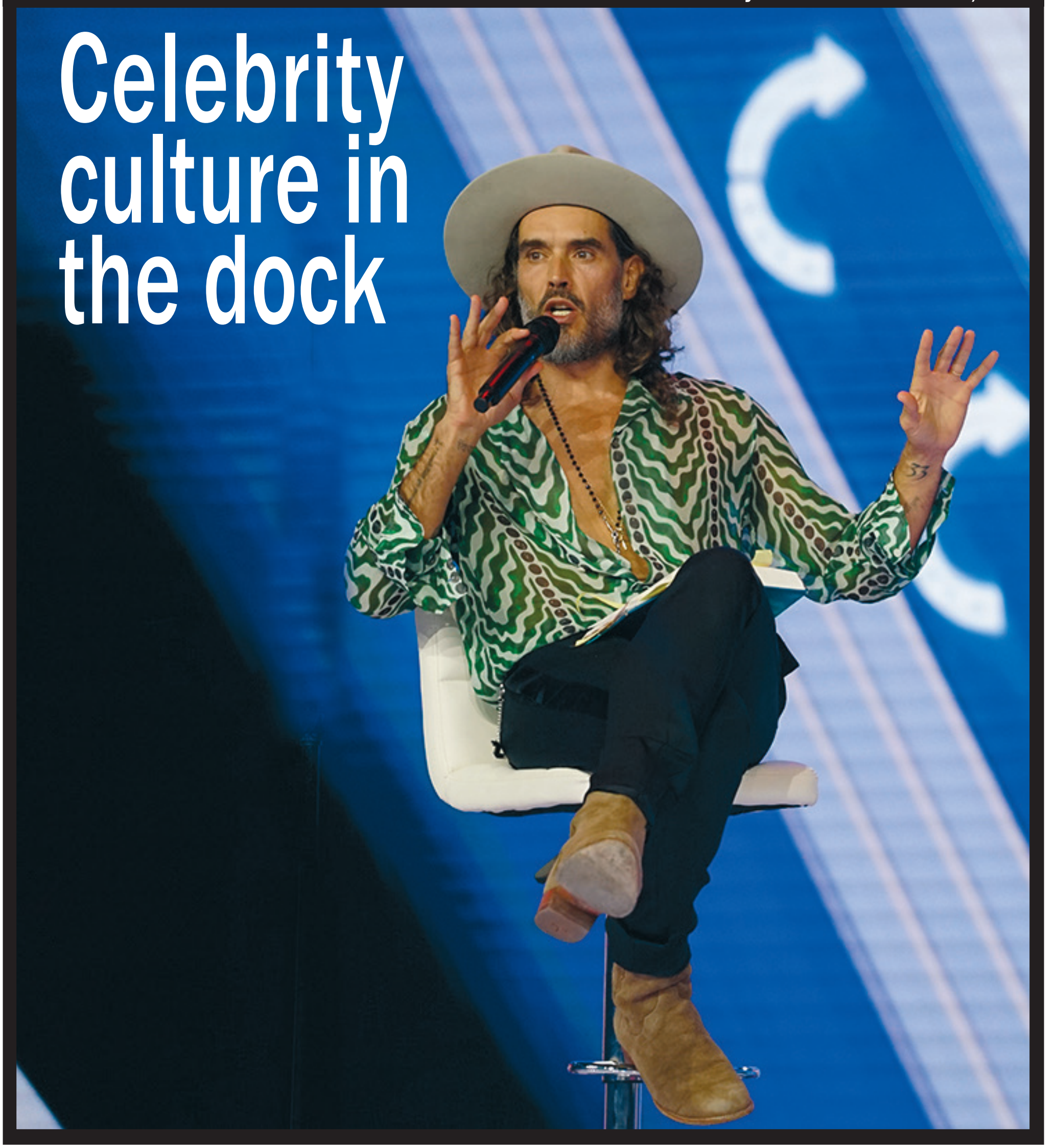
# weekly worker

**Charles Windsor has not apologised for Britain's role in Caribbean slavery. Nor has Andy Burnham. Why the equivication?**

- Letters and debate
- DSA in Congress
- HM conference
- Language origins

No 1609 November 12 2026 Towards a mass Communist Party £1/€1.10

# Celebrity culture in the dock



# LETTERS

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

## Yorp branch

Since the tragicomic reports of happenings on the Your Party central executive committee (CEC) slowed to a trickle and eventually stopped, with that ill-fated body's effective disintegration some months ago, I had all but forgotten about 'Yorp'. Imagine my shock when I received an email imploring me to register for the official first meeting of the Plymouth branch, to be held on Zoom. Seized by morbid curiosity, I decided I had to attend and bear witness.

The meeting was chaired by a YP organiser, who had been involved in running the inaugural party conference of last year - 'The Many' slate CEC campaign - and now also served as chair of the Sefton branch. Apart from the out-of-towner chair and myself, the meeting was attended by two other members - one of them an erstwhile CEC candidate on 'The Many' slate. We were informed that the Plymouth branch, which encompasses both parliamentary constituencies making up Plymouth, has a total of 186 Yorp members (all of whom were emailed about this first official branch meeting) - of those a mere four registered to attend, and in the end only three attended! A very pale shadow of the now long discontinued proto-branch, which at least managed to get around 15 people to attend in-person meetings regularly, between the founding conference and the CEC election.

The meeting agenda was to discuss the branch priorities and inform us of the nomination process for the five branch officer roles (chair, secretary, treasurer, organiser and workplace liaison) listed in the constitution as required to establish a branch, alongside the attendance of 20% of local members at an inaugural meeting. When I pointed out that we were a few short of the quorum to establish the branch, I was informed the quorum had been 'interpreted' as merely requiring 20% of local members to vote in the election for the officer roles on the online ballot; moreover that only the chair, secretary and treasurer needed to be elected for a branch to be established rather than a minimum of the five officer roles set out in the constitution.

We were also told that, while low attendance has been common across branches rolled out so far, the Sefton branch of some 200 members had had an attendance of nine at their meetings, but managed to get at least 40 people to vote online for the officer roles. We'll have to wait and see how many more people put themselves forward for officer roles and vote for them than attended the inaugural meeting.

It was agreed that the sole priority for the branch was engaging the remaining local members, with the question of member data access being raised and shot down with the familiar refrain that it would have to wait till officers were elected. At this point the other attendee pointed out that it's a bit of a catch-22 for us to be unable to find and engage with local members until electing officers, but needing to find and engage them in order to have people to elect and vote. It was conceded by the chair that we might be able to contact the official YP email account with a request to contact other local members on our behalf in the meantime - a request repeatedly raised in the proto-branch many months ago, when there actually were many engaged members, and never responded to.

Finally the question of party programme, policies, conference and delegate election was raised, with the chair reassuring us that several committees have been formed on various policy areas. Who got to be on these committees and how, as well as what they actually did, if anything, was left unanswered. Similarly I had to ask three times about the conference before getting any sort of straight answer - something only possible due to being one of only three members in the Zoom meeting.

We were initially told that the conference doesn't need to be annual, and the membership merely needs to be consulted annually, and that not only won't there be a party conference this year, but also next year, with a 'policy conference' possibly taking place sometime next year instead. I expect this means Karie Murphy intends to put out an online poll sometime soon for what members remain to rubber-stamp her decision to not hold a conference this year (or any other year for that matter).

When I cited the constitution and standing orders explicitly mandating an annual party conference with delegates, and making no mention of 'policy conferences', I was instead told that a party conference was actually impossible to hold, as delegates can't be elected until all branches are set up - which, with their slow, meticulously controlled rollout, should happen sometime in the 2030s.

In the meantime, it seems the substantial treasure trove of member dues, jealously guarded by Karie Murphy, will not be spent on anything as frivolous as party conferences, while she bends or abrogates the rules she for all intents and purposes wrote herself.

The three member inaugural meeting of Yorp concluded with a comment about how, despite the difficulties, it was 'nice to attend a meeting without 15 SWP members in it'. To which I could only reply that they have better things to do!

**Rafał B**
Plymouth

## Congress tactics

After November 3, many here in the US surely will benefit from an education on the "structural provisions" of the 1787 constitution, as outlined in Ian F's 'Revolutionary road to democracy' (November 5) and summarised at the end as a series of "veto points": Senate, president, and courts. Without that, there can be no measure of the results.

Yet, regarding the conclusion that "no socialist legislative program is likely to be successful", one must reply: will socialism be legislated at all? And, if not, how does such an understanding determine attitudes on the House?

For example, on the fundamental question of the state budget, recalling the historical principle of the socialist movement ("not a man and not a penny for this system") and borrowing a little from Brecht: *whose* veto is *the* veto?

On this universal problem of states, we learn from Lenin that even the tsarist duma, with its "insignificant" rights "according to the letter of the law", in certain conditions possessed a "voice" with "tremendous significance": "Nobody else could do so much to deprive Stolypin and co of European financial support as the duma can" ('The duma and the approval of the budget', written after the famous 1906 French loan). A budget declaration then might also be appended with "an exposition of the socialist view of the budget of a bourgeois class state".

With the outgoing 119th Congress, we witnessed one government-wide and two partial government shutdowns, connected legislative fights over healthcare and immigration, and continued growth of the annual deficit to nearly $2 trillion in fiscal year 2026 ($218 billion more than in 2025) and the soaring public debt. Yet those shutdowns, like the 2021 attempt to hold the infrastructure bill hostage to Build Back Better, were bargaining over terms within the budget.

Such tactics are hardly equal to the moment.

**Sam Moews**
USA

## Priority reading

As a priority over other books, I'm reading and enjoying Jack Conrad's *USSR: a Marxist post-mortem*.

I think Jack has really found his voice in this book, which is very easy to read, and, apart from a few minor typos, I think most people would breeze through it over the more stuffy other books on the subject.

One thing that caught my eye though appears in the chapter, 'Wages so-called', under the sub-heading, 'Quantity and quality', on page 220. Jack declares that perhaps "Marxists are theoretically underequipped" on the political economy of wage-labour. In the *Weekly Worker* years ago I came across the criticism that Marx's *Capital* wasn't the finished article, and the footnote at the bottom of the page of the book explains what was really intended.

My argument isn't a complaint: it's rather a celebration that Marx's *Capital* was produced at all and that its subject is such a large, ambitious topic. I think that only people like Marx and Engels were likely to pull this one off, regardless of this or that shortcoming.

**Frank Kavanagh**
email

## Former RCP

I think Paul Demarty writes far too much for his own good, which means the quality inevitably suffers. I suspect that his latest article on the ex-Marxists behind the Reform paper ('A long old road' *Weekly Worker* November 5) was similar to those old ones I used to watch him bang out during lunch breaks a decade ago.

Leaving that family history aside, Paul contends: "A group around Frank Furedi decamped to form the Revolutionary Communist Tendency, whose theorisation of the Soviet Union and satellites was essentially the extremely critical analysis of Hillel Ticktin with the serial numbers filed off …" I think that's unfair.

I wasted a few years of my errant student life as a supporter of what had become Furedi's Revolutionary Communist Party in the late 1980s and Ticktin's influence wasn't hidden. I was given a photocopy of Ticktin's 'Towards a political economy of the USSR' article to study under the blankets after cocoa and lights-out, and the influence was generally acknowledged. Similarly, in Furedi's *The Soviet Union demystified* (1986) the author said: "Of present-day Marxist writers, Ticktin has been the most useful and stimulating."

I did ask Ticktin about this popularisation (although that's slightly unfair, as I still rate *The Soviet Union demystified*) of his work later on and he did concede that Furedi had *partly* beaten him to the punch on a generalisation of some of his concepts. I was told by RCP adults that *The Soviet Union demystified* had been one of its best-selling books. That's difficult to quantify and the RCP's bureaucratic optimism was always tedious, but Furedi certainly introduced Ticktin to a wider audience.

To be clear, I have zero interest in *Spiked* and the likes of Furedi, Mick Hume, etc, or of defending the RCP as some 'good old cause' of my youth. I am, however, suspicious of endless RCP bashing, as I have written on my blog, because I think it is usually a cover-up for alternative sect idiocies in other groups. I rather suspect that Paul Demarty's article fits into that groove and the ex-RCP is now easy meat. It's the apostates who remain Marxists who are more difficult to deal with.

I am interested, however, in Nigel Farage's almost hypnotic effect on middle-aged women in Hampshire. A vigorous study of such erotic phenomena takes up much of my waking hours, as the dark night of winter descends. I will be writing to Furedi and Hume about this topic, you can be sure.

**Lawrence Parker**
London

## Scrap juries

For England and Wales, it is estimated that 1.4 million women (or one in 14) have experienced rape or attempted rape since the age of 16. Most cases are never formally reported to the police, although a large number are disclosed to close friends, the family, a doctor, therapist, etc.

Officially reported rapes are around 70,000 per annum. Shockingly, only 2%-3% of these result in charges being laid. There are around 1,000 to 1,300 actual convictions a year, so around 1.7% officially reported rapes result in actual conviction. The sheer length of time it takes from the offence being reported to the trial must be a massive (deliberate?) deterrent factor for victims taking it further, and traumatising in itself.

To say that the criminal justice system is failing women at every stage would be an understatement of profound proportions. It has been said that rape and other forms of sexual assault are effectively decriminalised in this country.

The English court system – based on an adversarial procedure, involving highly paid, performative thespian barristers, competing with each other for rhetoric and fake drama to swing juries and to 'destroy' complainants - seems the worst possible system to try cases of sexual assault, putting off tens of thousands of real victims from seeking justice and redress.

Many rape and sexual offence cases are inherently one person's word against another, incapable of meeting the absurd criminal bar of "beyond all reasonable doubt". Random juries throw a massive element of chance and individual prejudice into the mix. I have never understood how or why 12 randomly selected individuals with all sorts of backgrounds and possibly with their own criminal records are in any way an adequate method for assessing justice.

In some more obvious 'political' cases, juries have proved to be of some use, in acquitting in the name of the real public interest and against the direction of the judge: eg, the Clive Ponting case in 1985. Equally, as in a recent example, they are fully capable of committing howlers and ignoring the facts and evidence obvious to most people.

I think we need very radical reform of the court system, including a massive speeding up of cases. We can and should effect this, even this side of any socialist revolution. We could start with radical changes to the way sexual offences are investigated and tried, before applying more widely. If there is to be truly democratic law, it should not be so complex or intricate that only extremely expensive lawyers from certain strata in society are able (or formally qualified) to understand and practise it. If we call for elected representatives of the people to be genuinely 'of the people' and only paid an average worker's wage, then surely this should apply to law practitioners as well as lawmakers.

We should replace the very costly and performative adversarial system with an inquisitorial one, based on objective investigation and trying to establish the true facts. Starting with sexual offence cases, we should replace random juries with appropriately selected panels - the chair should probably be legally qualified and experienced, with, say, two lay assessors. The majority of each panel should ideally be of the same gender as the alleged victim, so they can properly empathise and appreciate what they may have been through. Such panels would be empowered to determine guilt or innocence and to impose appropriate sentences.

**Andrew Northall**
Kettering

## French protests

Comrade Nicolas Girard is sadly mistaken in his letter in the last issue of *Weekly Worker* (November 5). His false premisses begin with imagining that a front-page picture of students with the superimposed text, 'Readying for the next stage', *necessarily* suggests endorsement of Jean Laurel's article by the paper's editors. If he is indeed a regular reader, he must have realised that *Weekly Worker* articles are not *required* to adhere to a CPGB 'line' in order to be published.

More important, though, is the apparent beam in his own eye over what to do when these overwhelmingly orderly demonstrations are battered and gassed by the thugs in uniform. We know that the most recent Paris demonstration was pushed to the outskirts by '*les keufs*'; and in Lyon, as Nicolas mentions, cops freely exercised their bourgeois right - *passer à tabac* (to beat up) - demonstrators.

But eliding too far, the comrade then wonders if "Laurel and the *Weekly Worker crew*" would have railed against street-fighting students in 1968; he then scoffs at guarding petty bourgeois shops and cafés from getting trashed/looted. He could not be more wrong.

Comrade Girard misses two crucial points in short order. First, the defence of our working class and democratic demonstrations is paramount. *Weekly Worker* articles and those in its predecessor paper, *The Leninist*, made the point over and over again: strong defence squads and militant marshalling must be a priority for demonstrations, marches, strike pickets and all other public manifestations; certainly, many a British miner on strike in the 1980s agreed. (See R Hardy, 'Workers' militias' *The Leninist* No8, May 1984: https://bit.ly/3Ujh49B.)

This question comes back to bite our class in the arse time and again. Tragically, others in the supposed revolutionary left utterly fail even to understand the principle of and the need for organised self-defence. Unresisted batterings dispirit our struggle.

Second, and connected with the first point: with a revolutionary perspective, workers' defence squads, of course, must exercise organisational discipline and prevent attacks on small shopkeepers' premises on the route of our demonstrations. These petty bourgeois are not the enemy; *au contraire*, they are potential allies - or at the very least can be kept from flocking into the ranks of reactionary parties - by protecting their businesses in such circumstances. The message becomes: 'We, not the capitalist state's forces, are your defenders'.

In fact, during the most recent demonstrations - and something that this comrade raises, but dismisses - police numbers were reduced substantially, while demonstrator numbers were going up: it suggests strongly that small businesses *were* deliberately made sacrificial lambs, to be served up in the bourgeois media, along with crocodile tears at the rioters' actions.

Come April, the way things are going, it could be 'Madame la Présidente'.

**Jim Moody**
email

MEDIA

# Celebrity culture in the dock

With the conviction of Russell Brand on one count of rape and three of sexual assault, and now the David Walliams allegations, **Paul Demarty** calls for self-critical reflection on the left and a healthier, more egalitarian sexual culture

Three years after allegations of rape first broke in the media, Russell Brand has been convicted of a series of sexual crimes.

Of the seven charges for which he was eventually tried, Brand was found guilty on four - three of sexual assault and one of anal rape - for which his sentence is ten and a half years. The police are investigating two further allegations, and many more are circulating. The charges (so far) all refer to incidents that took place in the 2000s, when Brand was at the height of his fame as a risqué popular comedian and his reputation as a sexually voracious philanderer was already in place.

Few indeed are his defenders now, but some attention must be paid to the strange life he has led since then. In the mid-2010s, he decided - oddly - to get political all of a sudden. His orientation at that time fit his general presentation as a 'Wildean rake' - anarchistic, but definitely of the left. He was part of the furniture, for a time, of the anti-austerity movement. This culminated with his guest-editing of a *New Statesman* issue on the theme of "revolution" (by all accounts, this did not involve him doing much actual work) and then publishing a book of the same name - a strange follow-up to his memoir, *My booky-wook*.

Thenceforth, he became a political influencer, an early example of the species. His presence among the left was always controversial. Millennial feminist suspicion of his right-on bona fides - given his general habit of carrying on with groupies, like the lead guitarist of an '80s band - was rife.

That in turn yielded Mark Fisher's notorious essay, 'Exiting the vampire castle', which defended Brand in a remorseless philippic against the censorious mores of modern identity politics. Fisher's own fame made this essay the first counterblast against the identitarian turn in left politics outside of small journals like this one; it is, let us say, unfortunate that, on the specific point of departure, his adversaries turned out to be correct, and there is therefore a certain amount of score-settling going on. Fisher, having died by suicide in 2017, is not around to defend himself; but others who bigged up Brand in his 'revolutionary' period are. Owen Jones is under pressure, and not only him.

Brand faded somewhat from prominence - celebrity leftism is a fickle beast - but there was another twist to come with the Covid pandemic. Brand's soft-focus anarchism led him to a hard turn against the public health measures of that time. He was absorbed into the 'anti-Covidian' conspiracy world, ranting about the World Economic Forum and the 'great reset' and so on. This, inevitably, pulled him into the orbit of the 'new right', which was - more or less - where he could be found at the time that rape allegations were reported by the *Sunday Times* and Channel 4. Having flirted with Christianity, he now formally converted and was baptised in the Thames by celebrity survivalist Bear Grylls. It seems now that god was wise enough to let his call go to voicemail.

## Celebrity

As we wrote back in 2023, his bizarre political trajectory is surely not unconnected to the rape allegations surfacing when and how they did; yet only a truly blinkered superfan could deny, at this point, that they were nevertheless at least partly true. They were also not surprising. That is the trouble with shagging everything that moves, after all: one inevitably drifts into 'grey areas' of consent, and from there over lines that definitely should not be crossed.



**Madam Tussauds: will he be melted down there too?**

It is an article of faith of contemporary 'sex positivity' that rape is not a product of sexual desire, but the desire to inflict violence; this is in fact false (studies of straight male sexual desire, for example, find that the age distribution of desirable women maps closely onto the age distribution of victims of rape). As that most libertine of '80s bands, Jane's Addiction, put it, "sex is violent!" There is no bright line between the two, which coexist murkily, especially in male psychology. The question is one of restraint and the cultivation of healthy desire, whether obtained by social sanction or by quaintly old-fashioned individual virtue.

Thus, also in the dock - in principle, if not in messy legal reality - is the whole system of capitalist celebrity culture that indulged Brand's sexual misconduct. In the years concerned, popular media was "intensely relaxed", as Peter Mandelson would put it, about Brand's behaviour. He won the *Sun*'s coveted "shagger of the year" award for three years running. Brand himself described his early fame as being "thrown into a washing machine of tits and money".

Capitalist ideology, after all, must always be an ideology of desert - the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, everyone in their right place. The particular ideology of modern celebrity culture dramatises this in the form of the star: a heroic individual, exceptional in their beauty and talent, whose fame is readily, if mysteriously, connected to their charisma (a word derived, after all, from the 'gifts of the Spirit' enumerated in the Pauline corpus of the *New Testament*). The movie star, the pop singer, the priapic comedian: all are intensified - and typically more pleasant - images of the capitalist entrepreneur.

## Three classes

To both these classes of persons, nothing is denied: such is precisely the grain of truth in the problematic phrase, 'Epstein class'. Yet, as with the Epstein clique, occasional disclosures of depravity are unavoidable on a long-enough timeline. Brand's personal history as an award-winning shagger, and personal present as a fringe political ideologue, rendered him exceptionally vulnerable to such disclosures, since their impact could be readily contained, unlike the chaotic drip-drip of the Epstein affair. It is a short hop from fame to infamy: the appearance of exceptional character is easily transformed into an appearance of exceptional malignancy. The tabloid press, and its modern digital equivalents, is designed to manage such transitions.

There remains, then, the matter of drawing lessons from this sorry business. Two matters present themselves: one of leftwing political hygiene, and another - more fundamental - of the long-term equality of the sexes.

On the first, we must return to the readiness with which Brand was welcomed into the fold *as a celebrity*, rather than an ordinary comrade who happened to have an unusually large following in wider society. Mark Fisher defended him thus:

> I've long been an admirer of Brand - one of the few big-name comedians on the current scene to come from a working class background … I had seen Brand's stand-up show, *Messiah complex*, in Ipswich. The show was defiantly pro-immigrant, pro-communist, anti-homophobic, saturated with working class intelligence and not afraid to show it, and queer in the way that popular culture used to be (ie, nothing to do with the sour-faced identitarian piety foisted upon us by moralisers on the post-structuralist 'left').

But this was not good enough for the 'vampires':

> For the moralisers, the dominant story was to be about Brand's personal conduct - specifically his sexism. In the febrile McCarthyite atmosphere fermented by the moralising left, remarks that could be construed as sexist mean that Brand is a sexist, which also meant that he is a misogynist. Cut and dried, finished, condemned.[1]

Given the events of recent years, this has aged badly, but it should be said in Fisher's defence that the accusations against Brand *at that time* were, precisely, of common-or-garden male chauvinism, not serial sexual violence. The problems are rather that a working-class *background* is elided with membership of the working class *per se*, first of all (Fisher complains that some had asked how a millionaire could be working class, as if that was a ridiculous question); and, above all, in the sheer excitement of someone famous finally talking our language. By the end of his life, Fisher was obsessed with somehow cutting through like this, which was a regression from his best work.

Even more so Owen Jones, whose career as a significant public figure has been characterised by the search for an appropriate great helmsman, judged invariably by their temporary popularity. He was, not long ago, a big fan of the rogue financier, Gary Stevenson; more recently, he is a camp follower of Zack Polanski; others will no doubt follow. Politics in the Jones mould is entirely a matter of charisma. It is no surprise that he should have been so enamoured of Brand at the time.

The point here is not to be wise after the fact, but to indicate a more fundamental weakness of this obsession with short-term 'cutting through'. Capitalist celebrity culture is its own structure, with its own laws. It cannot be ignored, any more than we can avoid speaking in this language rather than that. Yet we must not lose sight of the basic idea that socialist politics is about the working class and broader popular classes taking power *for themselves*. Capitalist celebrity culture is an instrument for preventing this from happening. There is always a tension there.

For a more recent example, the US midterm elections have thrown up the character of Abdul el-Sayed - a ferociously eloquent and talented individual, now elected to the Senate from Michigan. He is not a socialist, but perhaps he is recruitable. Really recruiting him, however, would mean him placing his talents under the accountability and discipline of an organisation. Relating to him merely *as fans* accomplishes nothing in this regard. It therefore cannot contribute to the building up of the power of the masses as such: their office, in this scheme, is to wait for rain and sunshine from above.

## Egalitarian

This itself poses the second problem - of a more egalitarian sexual culture in broader society. The second-wave feminists were right, at least, that abuses of the Brand sort are fundamentally a male problem. This may be wholly a problem of culture and socialisation, or it may be partly a matter of basic human biology (it cannot be *wholly* a matter of basic human biology, since human species being is irreducibly social and cultural); and so, in either case, social norms and structures are the lever we have available to mitigate or fix this problem.

Capitalist celebrity culture, as we have argued, is entirely opposed to this goal, as were premodern social forms that gave ruling classes the right to the bodies of their slaves and serfs. Yet other kinds of normative structures are out there. Extant hunter-gatherer tribes have elaborate mechanisms for disciplining men who get too big for their boots; it is reasonable to assume that similar structures held in the vast extent of human history, when we more or less universally lived in such societies.

This is not something we want to *copy*. These are typically societies with strictly fixed gender roles, that happen to be fixed in such a way that more or less guarantees broad equality between the sexes. We should not want to give up the self-determination partly won in the social struggles of the modern period. Yet really generalising this self-determination means collectively determining its *limits*. Christopher Lasch, in his magnum opus, *The true and only heaven*, errs in finding the best expression of this idea in the 'morality of the petty bourgeoisie' (his words, not mine), but is surely correct that a realism about human limitations is essential to republican thought.

So we impose limits: in place of the centralised machinery of mass culture, we must fight for a genuinely popular culture, where the line between producers and consumers is radically permeable; and, alongside that, democratic forms of popular power that can legitimately enforce egalitarian taboos on sexual misconduct. Neither naive, liberal sex-positivity nor bureaucratic-conservative sexual regulation will answer to this need, as amply demonstrated by the history of sexuality in the modern period, and - in a small way - by the criminal career of Russell Brand ●

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## Notes

1. https://web.archive.org/web/20131129003704/https://thenorthstar.info/?p=11299.

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USA

# Setting terms in Congress

Democrats won more convincingly than expected in the midterms, and the DSA now has its eight-strong Bloc in Congress. There is also talk of a presidential run by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. How to navigate the coming challenges? DSA member **Joseph Perez** analyses the results and suggests ways forward

By the Associated Press count following the November 3 midterm elections, the Democrats had won 255 House seats, with about a dozen races still uncalled - its biggest House majority since 2008. In the Senate it holds 54 seats after flipping seven Republican ones, among them Texas, Kansas, Iowa and South Carolina. It also leads narrowly in the two races still being counted, in Alaska and Mississippi. Six candidates endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) won House seats: Darializa Avila-Chevalier and Claire Valdez here in New York, Melat Kiros in Denver, Donavan McKinney in Detroit, Chris Rabb in Philadelphia and Angela Gonzales-Torres in Los Angeles. Counting Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib, that makes eight.

Before drawing any lessons, I want to add two cautions. The first is that the wave was carried mostly by candidates no-one would call socialists, such as Roy Cooper, Sherrod Brown and James Talarico. Our own House wins came in districts the Democrats would have held regardless. The second is that our platform was not what people voted for. Republicans spent the fall tying Democrats, moderates included, to the DSA's platform and were routed anyway, which ought to retire the claim that socialists drag down the ticket. But people were voting *against Trump*. The president is already blaming the voting machines, so the fight to defend the count is far from over, even though the count went against him.

These results change two of the arguments I made in my *Cosmonaut* article last week. The central one, in my view, still stands.

## End of alibi

A Democratic Congress still cannot override a veto, which takes two-thirds of both chambers. But 54 senators are enough to scrap the filibuster by a simple majority, as both parties have already done for nominations. From January, the filibuster is no longer something the Senate does to the Democrats. It is something they choose to keep, and any bill that dies there dies with their consent.

The closest precedent is 2006, not 2018. That year the Democrats won both chambers under a president of the other party, on a wave of anger at the Iraq War. In the spring of 2007 they sent George W Bush a war-funding bill with a timetable for withdrawal. He vetoed it, and within weeks they passed the money without the timetable. Voters who had sent them to Washington to end the war learned what a majority without the presidency is worth. The Democrats learned that they could ride out the disappointment, as long as they had the veto to blame.

The new members already know what they want this majority to vote on. Kiros has named Medicare for All, an end to corporate capture and an arms embargo on Israel as the conditions progressives should set. Before the election, the Bloc - an informal group of leftwing primary winners – signalled that it would use its votes to force floor votes on Medicare for All, defunding Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and cutting aid to Israel. These are the DSA's demands too. The DSA programme, *Workers deserve more*, calls for Medicare for All, an end to military aid to Israel and the abolition of ICE, and DSA's statement the day after the election named those three as what voters had endorsed. They are popular: KFF's September poll found two-thirds of Americans in favour of Medicare for All, the highest share it has recorded. And the leadership will not easily grant them. In August, Hakeem Jeffries told *Meet the Press* that Medicare for All is not legislation he supports.




**New York: one of DSA's strongholds**

DSA should take up these demands, but it also has to explain why they keep losing. A floor vote on Medicare for All is a concession that a Speaker with 30 votes to spare can easily afford. He knows how it ends: if the bill clears the House at all, it dies in the Senate, and the defeat reads as one more lost policy fight. The problem is not public opinion. Medicare for All loses to the filibuster, to the donors both parties answer to, and, if it ever passed, to a Supreme Court that has the last word on what Congress does.

This is why the demands I proposed for the Speaker vote matter more now than they did before the election. A voting rights bill that answers Callais[1] and proportional representation for the House can both be passed as ordinary legislation. The requirement that House members be elected from single-member districts is an act of Congress, not a clause of the Constitution. A voting rights bill would still have to survive the same Court that struck down Louisiana's map on equal-protection grounds. Even so, with both chambers the Democrats could put both bills on Trump's desk, and socialists should demand exactly that: end the filibuster to pass them, and make the president veto them in public. If he does, everyone will be able to see what blocks democratic reform. It is the presidency and the Supreme Court, the two institutions our programme calls for replacing.

Taken together, the slate makes a single argument. We want the votes on Medicare for All and an arms embargo, and we want the reforms that would let a majority for them actually govern. A vetoed voting rights bill would make the case for a new constitution better than any pamphlet we could write.

My case for treating the Speaker vote as a test assumed the Democrats would win a narrow majority. They did not. With 255 seats and counting, Jeffries could lose more than 30 Democratic votes and still win on the first ballot. DSA will have eight members in the next House, and not all of them intend to break. The holdout strategy that Steven R proposed in *Tribunes in the Halls of Congress*[2] is simply not available in this Congress.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the vote no longer matters. What has changed is what it tests. When a handful of votes could hand the House to the Republicans, members had a real argument for falling in line. That argument is gone. A first-ballot vote for someone other than Jeffries now costs the Democratic majority nothing. What it can still cost is the member: a committee assignment, the leadership's goodwill, help in the next primary. A Speaker with 30 votes to spare can punish defectors cheaply. The vote therefore comes down to one question, which is whether our members value their standing in the Democratic caucus more than they value DSA's claim on them.

## Conditions

One might object: 'Why ask our members to cast a vote that changes nothing?' But a vote that changes nothing in the chamber can still change something in our organisation. It would be the first public record of whether DSA's members in Congress act together, on DSA's terms, when it costs them something.

The early signs are more mixed than I expected. Back in June, Kiros told *Axios* that she would not back anyone for leadership who takes corporate PAC money,[3] and that progressives should spell out their conditions before giving their votes on leadership and spending bills. That is the right instinct. But the bargaining plans belonged to the Bloc. Before the election, working with progressives already in Congress, its members privately floated committee seats, resources for their districts, changes to House rules and floor votes on their priorities, without any formal list of demands. Since the landslide, one Democrat told *Axios* that the Bloc "has way less influence", and some on the left now want the Congressional Progressive Caucus to take the lead instead. Its chair, Greg Casar, endorsed Jeffries for Speaker in September.

With the bargaining power gone, I expect the floor votes to fall away and the committee seats and district money to stay. Those benefit the members themselves, and only the members. If that is the trade, DSA's name will have been used to bargain for careers. That is exactly what the party-surrogate model produces.

Where the new members stand is still an open question. Valdez has told the *Washington Examiner* she is "so far uncommitted" and Avila-Chevalier says she has not decided. Kiros went further, saying a progressive may need to step forward if Jeffries does not offer an ambitious platform. No Democrat has announced a challenge, but this is the clearest hint yet of a real alternative on January 3 2027, when the new Congress takes office, and it changes what a first-ballot protest could look like. Scattered votes for whoever each member happens to prefer would be a gesture. One named progressive, backed by every DSA member in the House on a shared platform, would be a statement.

It matters, though, who chooses that candidate and who writes the platform. Jeffries has already met some of the holdouts. If the alternative and its platform come out of conversations like those, among a few members and their advisors, we are back where we started, with individual politicians deciding what DSA stands for. If DSA's own bodies adopt the platform and ask our members to vote for it, then even a vote that cannot 'win the gavel' would be the closest thing we have had to a socialist fraction acting as one.

I also have to concede a point. In my previous article I wrote that our members, unlike the Freedom Caucus, had no base that would reward them for a fight. *Axios* reports that House Democrats, incoming members among them, have been fielding calls urging them to vote against Jeffries (about 150 in one new member's case). There is more appetite for confrontation than I gave it credit for. Phone calls are not an organisation, though. They do not decide anything, and they cannot hold anyone to a decision.

## After the wave

The window I described, between election day and Ocasio-Cortez's decision, is now open. Her team has circulated a memo to "interested parties and allies" that lays out her role in the midterms: her endorsements, more than $3 million in contributions to Democrats, and her billing as a top surrogate alongside Barack Obama, Kamala Harris and Pete Buttigieg. The memo leaves the presidency, a Senate run and the House all on the table. It is a good document of its kind. It presents her as an asset to the Democratic Party, on her own timetable, which is exactly what a candidate's memo is for. DSA, meanwhile, has an endorsement timetable, but still no standing policy on what it would ask of any candidate.

The wave will strengthen the day-one camp. The argument will go something like this: 'The left is winning, so DSA should tie itself to its strongest figure before the moment passes.' There are two answers. The first is the one I gave above: this was the whole party's wave, and mostly its centre's. The second is a problem my previous article did not anticipate. Ocasio-Cortez will spend 2027 as a member of a governing majority, casting votes on spending bills, aid to Israel, war powers and whatever deals the Democratic leadership cuts with a lame-duck president. The danger I described from 2009 and 2010, of sharing the blame for a majority's record without ever holding real power, now arrives before she has even declared.

DSA will have to decide how it treats that record, and some of the test will be set by others. House progressives, among them Jayapal, plan to force a floor vote on Medicare for All next year, *Axios* reports, partly to make support for it a must-have for anyone hoping to win the 2028 primary. Jayapal frames the goal as preparing for the day Democrats hold the White House, as well as Congress. It is a fair test, and DSA should want Ocasio-Cortez to pass it. But it is a test for a Democratic president, set inside the Democratic Party. It says nothing about what she owes the organisation whose name she carries, and our conditions have to cover what theirs leave out. A standing policy adopted now would settle that in advance. Without one, every vote she casts in 2027 will turn into a fight over whether we should have endorsed her.

The landslide took away the bargaining power that made the Speaker vote interesting to reporters, and it left the part that matters to us. If the National Political Committee lets January 3 arrive without a decision of its own, the Bloc, the Progressive Caucus and Jeffries will settle what our members do, and we will read about it in the press. If it acts now, we will find out whether DSA can set terms for its own members, when nothing is at stake but its own principles ●

## Notes

1. Supreme Court majority decision in Louisiana v Callais, April 2026.
2. www.marxistunity.com/tribunes-in-the-halls-of-congress.
3. Political action committees (PACs) are tax-exempt organisations that fund election campaigns.

ECONOMY

# Low expectations

Reportedly, it was the economy that sank Trump and the Republicans in the midterms … that and the unpopular Iran war. Yet, even with a clear majority in both houses, the Democrats are not going to bring about major change. And then there is the AI bubble, says **Michael Roberts**

The Democrats won the 2026 US midterm Congressional elections by a landslide. Before the vote, Donald Trump told voters to think of him and his record when they voted - it seems that they did so.

About 124 million people voted in the elections, according to preliminary data from the University of Florida Election Lab.[1] That is up from the 112 million in 2022 and 118.6 million in 2018. But, while the overall number of votes cast was up, the voter turnout rate for 2026 still lagged behind both the 2022 and 2018 midterms. So that means that more than half of Americans eligible to vote failed to do so in this drubbing of Trump and the Republicans.

Of the less than 50% that did vote, there was a massive swing to the Democrats. On the national vote, the Democrats led by around a huge 13% - the largest lead recorded since 1982. It was biggest congressional landslide in 50 years, marking the heaviest Republican defeat since the 1974 Watergate era. The Democrats will end up with up to 255 seats in the lower House of Representatives, marking their largest majority in nearly two decades (218 seats is the pass mark). And they will take 55 seats in the 100-seat Senate and thus control the upper house too.

In every state and every demography the Democrats led. This was particularly the case with those voters aged 18-29. Whereas there was a small majority of white males who voted Republican, that was not the case with the under-30s, where white males polled 57-40 for the Democrats. In every other category the lead was higher, with 96% of black females under 30 years voting Democrat.

Moreover one-third of *all* voters under 30 self-identified as "democratic socialist", according to NBC's exit poll - three times as many as those under 30, who considered themselves as Trumpist/MAGA supporters.

And the issues were clear. According to data compiled by the Pew Research Center in October 2026, the economy was the number-one priority for 84% of all voters, followed by 47% who ranked the Iran conflict started by Trump as most important. Healthcare was also high up the scale of issues. The vote for the Democrats was against Trump's unnecessary war against Iran; the rising cost of living in food and energy; his brutal attacks on immigrants in the streets; and disgust at his corruption, lies and bombastic hubris. Opinion polls showed that Trump has the lowest ever approval rating for a US president.

So a Congress now controlled by the Democrats is in a position to investigate and challenge Trump's activities and policies and to propose alternatives. Leftist liberal economist Daron Acemoglu saw the Democrat victory as "a lifeline for US democracy"[2]. But only a lifeline, because voters who took Trump to power in 2024 and have now turned against him could easily swing back, if the Democrats cannot deliver on the issues of the "obscene levels of inequality in this country, with the real affordability crisis and with the vexing problem of creating good jobs for Americans of all skills." Acemoglu reckons that "neither progressive Democrats' reliance on taxes, transfers and traditional regulations, nor centrists' attachment to the status quo, nor the wishful thinking of those banking on AI-driven 'abundance'[3] is radical enough". That is because things are going to get worse under the AI-led economy.




**Election day people voted more against the Republican than for the Democrats**

What is the answer, according to the Nobel prize winner? Americans need "well-paid, career-building jobs for all workers, and especially those without a college degree, who have been left behind in the post-industrial economy of the last half century". There should be a "workable plan for redirecting AI, so that this promising technology isn't shaped by the dreams of a small cadre intent on artificial superintelligence and automation of most of what humans do. We must instead articulate why it is feasible and desirable to build pro-worker AI and how this can create jobs and decent incomes for workers."

## Racing costs

Meanwhile, the 'affordability crisis' is acute - and not just in the US. Households worldwide are struggling with cost-of-living increases due to the wars and the aftermath of the Covid-19 outbreak, with wages struggling to keep up with persistent price pressures. Global prices for many commodities have remained elevated for several years - fuelled first by the pandemic-induced supply chain shortages and then by the wars in Ukraine and Iran.

The war in the Middle East, which began last February, has raised the annual global rate of inflation towards 5%, well above the 2% target set by many central banks around the world. Price increases in necessities like food and energy have been particularly sharp. The global food price index is up 42% since the pandemic-led slump of 2020. And, in just the last year, crude oil prices are up 57%, while diesel is up 50%. The danger is that inflation could accelerate further next year, if the Middle East conflicts continue until the end of this year and beyond. The global supply chain is already under renewed pressure, and international trade growth is dropping back.

There are many areas of spending for American consumers - like health, education and childcare - where costs have been racing past wage increases in the last 20 years. But now, since the pandemic, price inflation in food, fuel and other necessities is also shooting past wage increases. One year ago, consumer prices in the US were rising by 2.7% year over year. US workers' average hourly pay was growing by 4%. Fast-forward to now: prices are rising 3.5% yoy, but wage growth has slowed to just 3.2%. Pay, after accounting for inflation, turned negative back in April. In the last year before the election, average real hourly earnings decreased by 0.7%.

Average mortgage rates have doubled since the end of the pandemic to over 7% a year. As a result, in the US (and across Europe), the housing market has dived. The International Monetary Fund's mortgage-based affordability index (which measures the ratio of actual to required income for a typical home loan) shows sharp declines. In the US, the index fell from roughly 150 down to the mid-80s (where values above 100 represent affordability).

In contrast, under Biden and Trump, the richest 10% of households saw their median net worth jump from $2.8 million to $3.67 million, about $872,000 (30% up) from 2022 to 2025. The bottom 40% of households (by income) lost ground. Then Trump signed his 'big beautiful' bill, handing the biggest tax cuts to those at the very top.

No wonder Americans voted out Trump's Republicans. But what now? The Democrat leaders are now in control of Congress, but what are they proposing to do? What are the chances that the Democrats have any idea how to stop the rise in inflation and the cost of living? And can or will they end the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine that have contributed to the affordability crisis?

Democrats claim they will roll back Trump's tariffs, reverse cuts to Medicare, lower healthcare and housing costs, and increase regulation on tech sectors like AI. But there will be no cuts in the grotesque level of 'defence' spending. Indeed, support for Ukraine in the war against Russia will probably be increased. In his new book, *Twilight of American imperialism*, Jack Rasmus calculates the astounding rise in US government 'defence' spending and costs. According to his estimates, the total has more than doubled from 2019 at $1.5 trillion to the staggering $3 trillion expected next year.

It seems the Democrats have no idea about how to control accelerating inflation, except to rely on the Federal Reserve to raise interest rates - a policy that will only increase the likelihood of a recession. And there are no proposals to reverse accelerating inequality.

## Motoring along?

Much is made in the mainstream media and among mainstream economists that the US economy is motoring along.[4] It is true that US real gross-domestic-product growth is stronger than in Europe or Japan, but that is hardly a high benchmark. US real GDP increased at an annual rate of 3.4% in the third quarter of 2026 - a seemingly big bounce from Q2. But this hides the trend. Year-on-year real GDP growth is slowing. At 2.1% in Q3 2026, it was near a low since the pandemic. The US economy is still growing, but at no more than 2% a year.

Moreover, US real GDP growth, investment and with it, jobs, are almost totally dependent on the AI investment boom. As former White House economic advisor Jason Furman showed, "The only big real construction increase in the United States over the last year has been data centres, up 64%. The power plants that feed them are up a more modest 4%, and everything else is down, with a particularly large decline in manufacturing - down 24% - which is off what had been a very high peak in 2024."

These mega-investments are managing to drive up output per worker. The productivity of labour rose 3.6% in the third quarter. That meant the trend growth in productivity now matches the long-run post-war average and is well ahead of the 1.5% pace of the 2007-19 cycle.

But will this last? There are already signs that the AI investment boom/bubble is beginning to leak, if not burst - at least in Asia. And now the Democrat victory has sparked a sell-off in broad-based tech and AI stocks, with the Nasdaq stock market index sinking 5.5% in a single session, as investors worry that a Democrat Congress will stop or slow data centre builds.

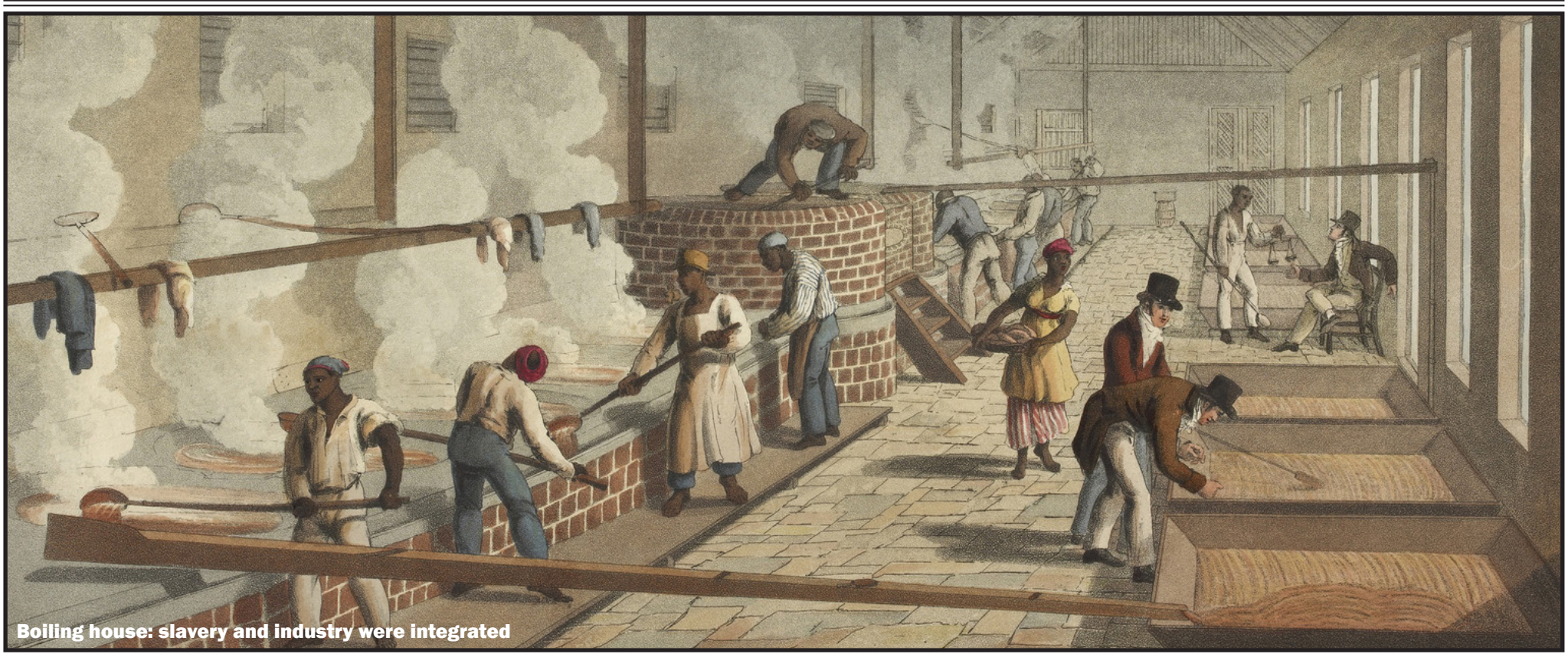
The question now is whether investor fears about over-investment and declining prospects for profits from AI will spread.[5] Unless the massive investments in data centres and other AI-connected equipment, chips and software start delivering increased profitability, then a bust is not far away ●

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## Notes

1. election.lab.ufl.edu.
2. x.com/DAcemogluMIT/status/2118058302798016761.
3. See thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2025/04/21/abundance-or-scarcity for my views on this.
4. See thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2026/10/15/resilient.
5. thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2026/09/26/ai-the-biggest-economic-bet-in-us-history.

POLITICS



Boiling house: slavery and industry were integrated

# Slavery's imperial apologists

Charles Windsor has not apologised for Britain's role in Caribbean slavery. Nor has Andy Burnham. **Mike Macnair** says the official arguments against apologies and reparations are bogus. But to really right the wrongs of the past requires the overthrow of the world capitalist order

King Charles, attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Antigua and Barbuda, made a speech in which he said: "… that shameful chapter of history is one that fills my heart with horror and my soul with the most profound personal sorrow". But he did not offer any apology from his government, let alone reparations.

On the contrary, he argued that "History is not ours to choose or to change. It is bequeathed to us in complex synthesis by forebears we can never know. Our inheritance includes both their achievements and their failures - the good they did as well as the wrongs." That is, this is all history and does not affect the UK's current moral or political obligations.

At the same event, Andy Burnham is reported as saying: "I've been very clear that we do not support reparations. But it's not the case that we don't support countries in the Commonwealth around development, and helping them with debt issues that they've got, green finance. That's what we've done under all governments and in my view we should continue to do as part of being a Commonwealth."[1]

These royal and prime-ministerial arguments for treating the history of British involvement in the slave trade, and British promotion of slave plantations in the Caribbean (and in the southern USA, Brazil and …) as merely history without present moral and political implications are flatly wrong. *Why* they are wrong is a matter of considerable importance for the left.

On the other hand, an apology would be merely empty; and reparations, even if they were formally conceded, would be rapidly recuperated, as long as the capitalist world order continues. Witness (for example) South Africa. This is not a reason for the Brit left to back Andy Burnham and Charles Windsor: it is a reason for proposing the overthrow of the global money system and its replacement by democratic planning, and in that context *material* forms of compensation for the continuing injuries of imperialism.

An admission of liability and compensation are due and overdue. June 23 2027 will be the 350th anniversary of the Court of King's Bench's decision in 1677 in *Butts v Penny* that "negroes being usually bought and sold among merchants, as merchandise, and also being infidels, there might be a property in them sufficient to maintain trover."[2] 'Trover' was an action for damages for dealing with claimant's 'chattels': that is, moveable property (the word originally meant cattle).

Holly Brewer has offered persuasive arguments that Charles III's 10th cousin, 10 times removed, Charles II (king 1660-85), was actively involved in the case management for *Butts v Penny*. The case was necessary for the ability of the Royal African Company to enforce security over slaves, and hence its financial stability. Charles had promoted the RAC, and his brother, James (king later James VII of Scotland and II of England), was its president.[3]

*Butts v Penny* was certainly not the beginning of British involvement in the slave trade. But it is a striking symbol of the role of *British government policy* in this activity.

## Common

The argument that this is just history (and, by implication, we should let bygones be bygones) is inextricably involved with the defence of Britain's imperialist status and its current assets and overseas holdings.

The first point is the argument that slavery was common practice when the English were engaged in the slave trade and plantation slavery - common practice that had been accepted for centuries. Hence, when the Brits were doing it, no-one thought it was wrong.

This is a half-truth and misleading. It is certainly true that slave personal status is an institution of great antiquity, going back certainly to the Bronze Age and probably to the Neolithic; and that it was endemic, and central to the extraction of social surplus product, in classical antiquity. It is also true that in the 1600s-1700s north African slave raiders from time to time landed on the south coast of England to take slaves.[4]

However, the idea that slavery was *wrongful* was also present from an early date. The Roman jurist, Ulpian, writing in the 210s CE, argued that slavery, though practised by *ius gentium* (the law, meaning common practices, of peoples) was contrary to *ius naturae* (natural law). His doctrine was drawn from the Stoic school of philosophy, contrary to the Aristotelians, who argued that some peoples are natural slaves: for example, north Europeans. Ulpian's line was adopted by the compilers of the *Institutes* or elementary law textbook, issued by the government of the emperor, Justinian, in 534 CE.[5] It thus came to be taught in universities, where the *Institutes* was part of the rhetoric course to undergraduates; and Ulpian's argument became one of the central arguments of advocates of abolition of the slave trade and later of slavery.

Secondly, the early Muslim 'ulama' developed a doctrine that Muslims may not enslave other Muslims; and Christians later said the same about other Christians. For whatever reason, but perhaps partly through the influence of these ideas, from around 1100 personal unfreedom in Europe principally took the form of 'serfdom' or 'villeinage'. The unfree were bound to the land and obliged to work for the lord of the manor. But the lord could only sell them *with* the land, and, unlike the slaves of classical antiquity, the lord was not permitted to kill or maim them. Thompson, counsel for the defendant in *Butts*, argued that English law only recognised villeinage (which was obsolete at the time of the case), not chattel slavery. A bare 19 years later in *Chamberlain v Harvey* (1696) the court of King's Bench adopted Thompson's line: chattel slavery, it declared, did not exist in English law.[6] (The Dutch author, Arnold Vinnius, similarly argued that *within the* Netherlands there was only villeinage - "adscripticii" status - not chattel slavery.[7]) The issue remained *controversial* in English law down to the early 19th century.[8] So slavery was not a universally accepted practice.

Thirdly and most fundamentally. The Atlantic slave trade and plantation slavery were on a different *scale* to pre-capitalist slavery. Pre-feudal slavery was predominantly domestic: creating a small-scale surplus product by freeing the small slaveowner from tasks like grinding grain on a hand-quern or cutting wood and fetching water. This small-scale surplus product was then *centralised* through rent and taxes to support class elites. Other forms were for elite display (including the human sacrifices of the Roman gladiatorial games). Industrial slavery was marginal (chiefly in the mines).

With capitalist slavery we became concerned with the industrial-scale acquisition and shipping of slaves. They were shipped to destinations - the plantations - which were a form of agri-factory, producing raw materials inputs to feed the industries and supply the consumers of the imperial centre. Both the sources of the supply of slaves and the places where plantations were set up had their economies substantially and permanently distorted in the interests of the capitalist imperial power.

Conversely, Joseph Inikori's 2002 book, *Africans and the industrial revolution in England*, shows elaborately the role of the Atlantic slave trade and related activities in the accumulation of capital for the industrial 'take-off' in England: reprising with much more rigour and evidence, if in a neoclassical framework, the argument of Eric Williams' 1944 *Capitalism and slavery*.

So from both these points of view, capitalist slave-trade and plantation-slavery is not *the same thing* as pre-capitalist slavery.

Of course - again - the Brits were not the original inventors of this practice. Late medieval Venice and Genoa have that dishonour. It was continued in the Portuguese empire (interlinked with Genoese finance) and the Dutch. But to use this argument to excuse British responsibility is an example of what is commonly damned as 'whataboutery'[9] - and worse, because it is not saying, 'What about the crimes of west Africans against the Brits?' (you can't point to any), but rather: 'There are lots of other burglars - why are you prosecuting me?'

## Time

OK, so the enslavement and transportation of millions of Africans, treated as animals,[10] with long-term distorting effects on both the economies of western Africa and of the Caribbean, was wrongful. But, argue the opponents of reparations, it is too long ago for compensation to be claimed.

Length of time is certainly an objection to claims in all legal systems, though some of the 'school of natural law' authors of the 17th-18th centuries argued that this should *not* be the case - and the argument has been revived in relation to property claims in the recent past.[11] In English law the current position is based on the Limitation Act 1980, requiring claims for torts (wrongs) to be brought, in general, within six years. (There are special provisions applying where the damage does not become apparent till a later date.)[12]

There are a variety of underlying reasons why length of time should bar claims: it may be that there was an agreement in the remote past; the claimant who delays suing may be seen as acquiescing in the wrong done to him, or as careless; it may merely be that it is impractical to establish the disputed facts of what happened a long time ago.

But suppose that this reasoning might apply (other things apart) to the wrongs done by British capital's activities in, and the British government's support for, the slave trade and plantation slavery. There are 'other things'. In general, time does not run against a claim where the defendant has fraudulently concealed the possibility of it coming from the potential claimant; or where the claimant is prevented from bringing an action by force: as, for example, in *Annesley v Anglesey* (1743), where a rival claimant had the under-age true heir to a peerage and estates sold as an indentured labourer to a plantation in Delaware to prevent him from claiming.[13] Or, more generally, though the Indemnity and Oblivion Act 1660 prevented (most) prosecutions for conduct during the Civil War and Commonwealth, time did not run for limitation purposes against royalists unable to claim because they were in exile.

How this is relevant to reparations for slavery is that the victims of the slave trade and plantation slavery are

*both* defrauded of recognition of the claim *and* kept out of it by force.

They are defrauded of recognition of the claims through capitalists' and governments' support for a variety of forms of fraudulent economic arguments that deny both the long-term damage inflicted by the slave trade and slave-plantation regimes, and the long-term benefits that accrued to the imperialists. Institutional subsidies support these fraudulent arguments.

The immediate form of this fraud emanates from the USA, but with the active support of the UK. By taking the dollar off gold in 1971, Richard Nixon's administration converted the world economy into a global Ponzi scheme, in which more money has continually to be printed to keep the financial operations afloat each time a crash approaches or arrives. An early stage in this fraud was the misrepresentation that countries could achieve 'development', without expropriations and planning, by *borrowing* from Anglo-American and other banking syndicates. In reality, floating currencies implied that the debt interest already consumed the income from investments funded by borrowing; leading to the 1980s 'third world debt crisis' (which also affected those eastern European countries that allowed themselves to be sucked into the scam). There has been *partial* debt forgiveness, but never an acceptance that the 1970s move into loans was a systematic fraud. That fraud continues.

They are kept out of claiming by force, in the continuing imperialist military operations to protect imperialist bases, to intervene against leftist governments, and so on. Haiti was still paying indemnities to France for the abolition of slavery until 1947, and has been subjected to a succession of US interventions, including current indirect support for 'multilateral' forces. Cuba remains under US siege operations (the USA has sought regime change in Cuba consistently since 1960, though varying the intensity of its undeclared warfare). The January 2026 US kidnapping of Nicolas Maduro, the president of Venezuela, was in part aimed to block Venezuelan oil supplies to Cuba. The US invaded the Dominican Republic in 1965,[14] conducted destabilisation operations in Jamaica in 1980[15] and invaded Grenada against the New Jewel Movement government in 1983.[16] This is absolutely an incomplete list …

In a sense, the continuing use of force takes us back to Justinian's *Institutes*: "Things again which we capture from the enemy at once become ours by the law of nations, so that by this rule even free men become our slaves, though, if they escape from our power and return to their own people, they recover their previous condition."[17]

The unwillingness of the UK state to concede apology and reparations for slavery reflects the fact that the UK *still defends* title to territory by conquest, in relation to most of the British Overseas Territories;[18] and, more generally, that, given the wrongs the British empire also inflicted on its other colonies, any other stance would open a can of worms.

So the argument from the lapse of time against apology and reparations is also false. This is not about a *past* injustice committed by British capital and its state. It is about *continuing* injustices, in which the UK client state and its US patron protect immunity from liability for past injustices, as well as inflicting new ones.

## Bankrupt

The crimes of British imperialism are not merely long-dead history. The UK state, and UK capitalist firms that support the UK state, remain morally responsible for them. Demands for an apology and for reparations are entirely morally justified. This, however, does not mean that they are the right way forward for the movement.

The case of the call for an apology is straightforward. Since the end of apartheid in 1991-94 there has been an endless series of apologies for historical injustices. What have they achieved? The answer is, quite plainly, *nothing* except to make some participants feel a little better. If the injustice was *merely* historical, this might have some merit. Since it is continuing, this amounts to 'Sorry for hitting you in the face', followed by immediately repeating the offence.[19]

The case of a call for reparations is, in principle, stronger. There has been real relative impoverishment of the colonised countries by the African slave trade and plantation slave production, and real relative enrichment of the UK and other imperial powers. So surely compensation is in order?

The problem is that the UK is at present close to absolute bankruptcy. After the loss of imperial dominance to the USA, in the 'cold war' period it was, like the rest of Europe, allowed to preserve industry, full employment and welfarism as a sort of Potemkin village to show that capitalism could do better than the Soviet regime. In the 1970s these concessions began to be withdrawn (with Nixon taking the dollar off gold and what followed, and Carter redirecting political finance from right social democrats to neoliberals). As part of this exercise, Thatcher dumped British industry, claiming that the country could live from services (and especially finance) in a free-trade regime.

What has in fact followed is persistent trade and balance of payments deficits since the mid-1980s. These deficits have been met partly by attracting 'hot money' into the UK (aka the 'London laundromat'); partly by selling UK capital assets to overseas (mainly US) investors. The UK is like a debtor who is selling off the furniture in order to stave off complete bankruptcy. There is now very little furniture left to sell. This situation explains the decay of UK infrastructure (not unique) and the budgetary paralysis of recent governments. It also explains regulation scandals, like those in water: only asset-strippers are willing to buy UK assets, so they cannot be penalised for the consequences (water scandals, post office scandal, and so on). Default is close to being inevitable in the near future.

The UK in relation to its liability for imperial slavery is, therefore, like a criminal who has stolen a high-value car, driven it around and crashed it into numerous other cars; but proves on investigation to have no resources to pay for the damage. Punishment may be possible: thus Karl Marx on the 1857 Indian rebellion:

> The outrages committed by the revolted Sepoys in India are indeed appalling, hideous, ineffable - such as one is prepared to meet - only in wars of insurrection, of nationalities, of races, and above all of religion; in one word, such as respectable England used to applaud when perpetrated by the Vendeans on the 'Blues', by the Spanish guerrillas on the infidel Frenchmen, by Servians on their German and Hungarian neighbours, by Croats on Viennese rebels, by Cavaignac's Garde Mobile or Bonaparte's Decembrists on the sons and daughters of proletarian France.
>
> However infamous the conduct of the Sepoys, it is only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England's own conduct in India, not only during the epoch of the foundation of her eastern empire, but even during the last 10 years of a long-settled rule. To characterise that rule, it suffices to say that torture formed an organic institution of its financial policy. There is something in human history like retribution: and it is a rule of historical retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended, but by the offender himself.[20]

In the present case, "the instrument" is "forged by the offender" because the UK's clinging to its imperial pretensions - the British Overseas Territories (and the Six Counties), the (US-controlled) nuclear weapons, the UN Security Council seat, the vanity aircraft carriers, Brexit - is a substantial element in the paralysis of the governments and the pressure towards the coming default. Reparations, then, would merely trigger default.

Suppose that reparations *could* be paid. Without structural transformation of the world economy, the result would be *at best* a temporary palliative. (This assumes that the local Caribbean governments handles the money in good faith, rather than its merely disappearing into offshore bank accounts.)

I have referred repeatedly in this article to debt and the control of subordinated economies through debts. Money is money because it serves as a means of exchange. It can only serve as a means of exchange if it also serves as a store of value: this is visible in the German hyperinflation of 1923 and the Zimbabwean of 2008-09. These, in turn, were triggered by failures of the relationship of the national money to world money (which in 1923 was sterling, in 2008-09 the US dollar.

The demand for reparations is thus the equivalent in relation to the crimes of imperialism of the slogan, 'Tax the rich', that has become widely popular. Such slogans *appear to* challenge capitalism, but do not, in fact, do so at all. The money of the rich - or money paid for reparations for slavery - is only worth having if it can buy useful goods and/or services. When the power of the rich is attacked, they go on 'capital strike', and hyperinflation and economic dislocation results. This is not a matter of bad faith on the part of political actors (though you do also get US sanctions and destabilisation activities): it is inherent in the nature of the capitalist system of money.

This does not mean that there should not be compensation for the wrongs of capitalist slavery and imperialism. It means, rather, that the only real road to such compensation is the actual overthrow of the global capitalist regime, and the withdrawal of large elements of production from market organisation to democratic planning.

Under conditions in which the *global* power of capital was broken, and large-scale production activities were taken into planning, it would now become possible to plan seriously for compensation for the wrongs of capitalist imperialism - in the form of the free supply of tech now protected by intellectual property rights, and of material goods (machinery, infrastructure, and so on).

That is an objective need, which the demand for reparations stands as an obstacle to, just as 'tax the rich' slogans stand as an obstacle to real communist politics ●

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## Notes

1. Both Charles and Burnham are quoted in the BBC News report, 'King calls slave trade a "shameful chapter" during Commonwealth address': www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cr89znnnn7dno.
2. The printed reports of the case are available at slaverylawpower.org/chapters/reacting-absolutism/butts-v-penny-1677. Sir John Baker, *Sources of English legal history: public law to 1750* Oxford 2024, p456 - note 102 has a summary of a manuscript report.
3. 'Creating a common law of slavery for England and its New World Empire' *Law and History Review* Vol 39, pp765-834.
4. L Colley *Captives* London 2002.
5. Justinian Institutes Book I, title 2, sections 1-2; JB Moyle's English translation is available at www.gutenberg.org/files/5983/5983-h/5983-h.htm.
6. Printed reports are available at slaverylawpower.org/chapters/whig-moments/chamberlain-v-harvey-1696.
7. *In quatuor libros institutionum imperialium commentarius academicus et forensis* (Commentary on the four books of the imperial institutes for academic and judicial use) 4th edition, book 1, title 3, section 1: cujasweb.univ-paris1.fr/book/app/resource/0607001512/#page/1/mode/2up.
8. See, for example, *Forbes v Cochrane* (1824) 2 B & C 448. My point is not to cite, as Sir Nicholas Mostyn comments, "Mr Justice Best's magnificently self-righteous judgment in *Forbes v Cochrane*" (www.counselmagazine.co.uk/articles/law-disorder), but that, notwithstanding the usually celebrated case of *Somerset v Stewart* (1772), the line in *Butts v Penny* was still seriously arguable in court this late.
9. For a useful discussion and references see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whataboutism.
10. Thus in *Gregson v Gilbert: the Zong* (1783) slaves were thrown overboard for the sake of an insurance payout, and Lord Mansfield said that, "though it shocks one very much, the case of slaves was much the same as if horses had been thrown overboard" (www.counselmagazine.co.uk/articles/law-disorder).
11. There is discussion in several of the essays in H Dondorp, D Ibbetson and EJH Schrage (ed) *Limitation and prescription: a comparative legal history* Berlin 2019.
12. The point here is only the general principle, not the details of modern English limitation law.
13. AR Ekirch, *Birthright: the true story that inspired 'Kidnapped'* New York 2010.
14. espaillat.house.gov/media/in-the-news/remedying-past-unlawful-military-interventions-case-dominican-republic.
15. www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00845R000100190003-4.pdf.
16. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_invasion_of_Grenada.
17. Inst. 2.1.17, Moyle's translation (above n5).
18. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Overseas_Territories. In a few of them (eg, British Antarctic territory), the claim is 'res nullius': the land was previously uninhabited (Justinian, *Institutes* 2.1.22: "When an island rises in the sea, though this rarely happens, it belongs to the first occupant; for, until occupied, it is held to belong to no-one." *Not* the same thing as the colonialists' claim that land occupied by hunter-gatherers was "terra nullius" because no-one was fencing and ploughing.
19. See, for instance, the discussion in the October 2022 special issue of *Global Studies Quarterly*: academic.oup.com/isagsq/issue/2/4.
20. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/09/16.htm.





**Online Communist Forum**

Sunday November 15 5pm

**Cop31 - more fiddling while the planet burns: political report from the CPGB's Provisional Central Committee and discussion**

Use this link to register:
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Organised by CPGB: communistparty.co.uk and
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For further information, email Stan Keable at
Secretary@labourpartymarxists.org.uk

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


## Fighting fund

# See us home

Once again, we've fallen well behind, when it comes to the *Weekly Worker* fighting fund. True, over the last week there were some very useful contributions, but overall, in the last seven days, a mere £234 has come into the kitty - less than a tenth of that £2,750 monthly target.

The most useful of them was comrade TB's excellent £95 standing orders, which came alongside other such SOs or bank transfers from comrades DV (£30), NR (£25), RD (£12), CC (£11) and SM (£10). Then we had donations via PayPal from comrades ST (£20), AB (£11), MW (£10) and NL (£5). Finally, comrade Hassan handed his usual £5 note to one of our team.

That means that, with a third of November already gone, our running total stands at just £665 - less than a quarter of that target. Of course, within a week or so, we'll have received the usual batch of substantial SOs that always come our way in the middle of the month, but they won't be enough to see us home.

So please do your bit if you possibly can - send us a cheque, click on that PayPal button or make a transfer - or even hand a fiver (or more!) to a *Weekly Worker* comrade, if you know one. For more details on how to contribute, please go to the web address below.

We rely on your support, comrade readers, so don't disappoint us! ●

**Robbie Rix**

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To make a donation or set up a regular payment visit
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HM CONFERENCE

# Grappling with digital speed

**Yassamine Mather** dipped into the sessions on imperialism and Iran. They were not only poorly presented, but the politics were awful. So, instead, she took to the 'AI and capitalism' stream. It proved much more interesting

The 23rd annual Historical Materialism conference took place at SOAS University in London from November 5 to 8, under the title 'Planetary warscapes ablaze: imperial mutations in infernal times'. It was the largest conference to date, with 317 panels and approximately 1,600 participants.

Imperialism and war were central themes. The 'Call for papers' hub presented US hegemonic decline as producing sharper inter-imperial rivalry rather than a more peaceful multipolar order. It highlighted Gaza, the US-Israeli war on Iran, Ukraine, tensions over Greenland and the confrontation with China. A dedicated 'Imperialism and anti-imperialism' stream addressed these developments, including debates over whether China should be considered imperialist and how international solidarity might be built without falling into liberal humanitarianism or uncritical campism.

However, I will concentrate on the sessions I attended. I had intended to follow the series on Iran and the war, but the second session was so appalling in both content and presentation that I decided to follow the 'AI and capitalism' steam instead.

This examined artificial intelligence in relation to capitalist accumulation, corporate power, labour, social reproduction, imperialism and political resistance. A central argument running through the discussion was that AI cannot be understood independently of the social relations within which it develops. The enormous investment in computing infrastructure, the growing influence of a small number of technology corporations and the integration of algorithmic systems into workplaces, households and state institutions reflect the priorities of capitalist accumulation, rather than technological innovation alone.

However, important theoretical differences emerged. Does AI represent a qualitatively new stage of capitalism? Is the concentration of digital power evidence of a transition towards techno-feudalism, or does the extraction of rent remain subordinate to the production and appropriation of surplus value? Can AI restore profitability and initiate a new period of capitalist expansion, or is the extraordinary investment in the sector creating another speculative bubble?

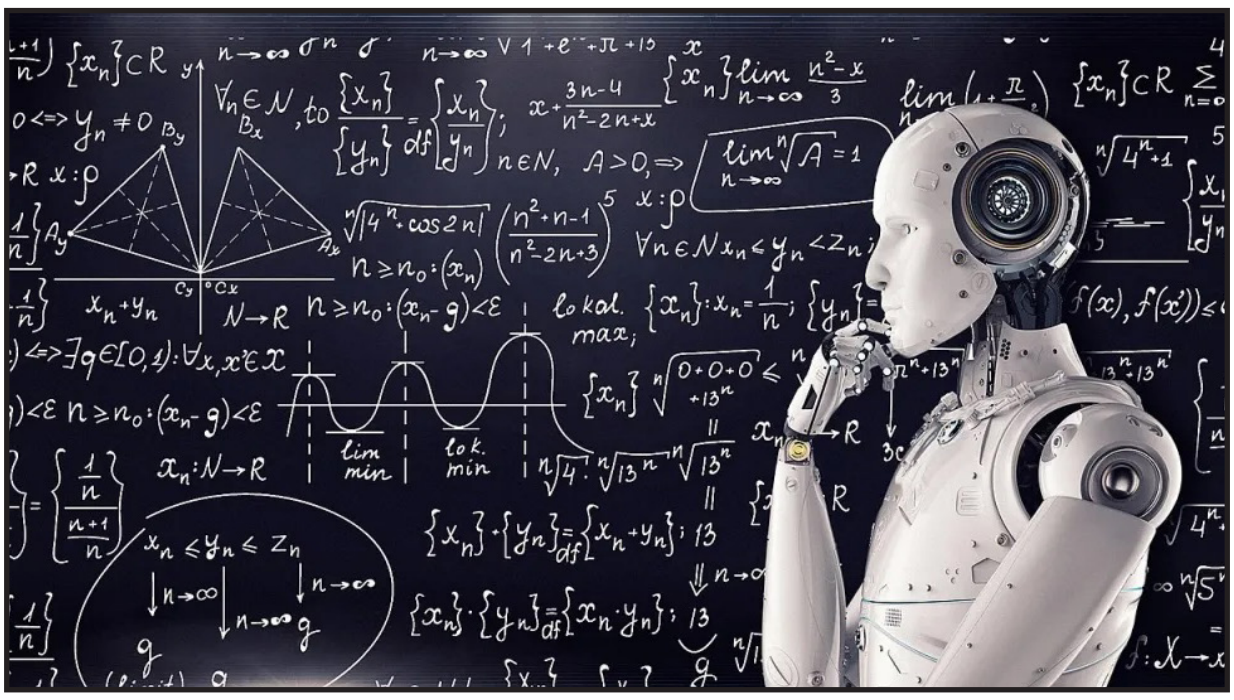
Three discussions provided a useful framework for examining these questions: the political economy of AI and corporate power; the debate over techno-feudalism and capitalist profitability; and the wider analysis of algorithmic capital, social reproduction and resistance.

## Corporate power

The session on 'The rulers: corporate power in the age of AI and the cloud' featured Cecilia Rikap and Jodi Dean. The session provided a starting point for examining the concentration of economic and political power in contemporary digital capitalism.

The central issue is not simply whether large technology corporations possess excessive market power, but how their control over cloud computing, digital infrastructure, data and AI systems enables them to shape the conditions under which other capitals operate.

In her introduction, comrade Rikap argued that developing AI requires enormous computing capacity, specialised hardware, data centres and investment. These requirements create high barriers to entry. Although AI is frequently promoted as a means of empowering small businesses, its underlying infrastructure is concentrated in the hands of a few corporations.



Standard image of AI

Companies controlling cloud infrastructure and computing resources can determine the terms on which other businesses access essential technological services. They do more than sell products: they influence the environment in which production, communication and scientific research take place.

From a Marxist political economy perspective, this demonstrates the continuing tendency towards the concentration and centralisation of capital. Competition has not disappeared, but increasingly takes place within structures defined by unequal control over data, infrastructure and finance.

Cecilia Rikap challenged the argument that the dominance of big tech indicates a transition to an entirely new economic system. Economic concentration and centralisation are longstanding features of capitalism. Powerful technology monopolies therefore represent an intensification of existing capitalist tendencies rather than necessarily constituting a break with the system.

Another important issue concerns the relationship between corporate technological power and the state. AI development depends heavily on state investment, publicly funded research, military expenditure and geopolitical competition. According to comrade Rikap, this relationship is reciprocal. Governments increasingly rely on privately controlled digital infrastructure, while technology companies benefit from public contracts, favourable regulation and military procurement. The integration of AI into intelligence, surveillance, military planning and weapons systems demonstrates the political significance of this alliance.

For countries outside the principal centres of technological accumulation, these developments deepen digital dependency. Access to advanced computing, proprietary models and cloud services remains largely controlled by corporations based in dominant capitalist economies, reinforcing unequal international divisions of labour and technology. Rikap added that regulation may limit particular corporate abuses without transforming ownership of the infrastructure itself.

Jodi Dean, author of *Capital's grave* (Verso, 2025), challenged comrade Rikap's concept of "intellectual monopoly capitalism", arguing instead that contemporary capitalism is moving towards neo-feudalism.

I found her intervention on political strategy more persuasive. She emphasised the importance of party organisation, whereas comrade Rikap advocated digital sovereignty as a means of democratising technological governance without embracing techno-nationalism.

The differences between these approaches raise questions extending beyond the classification of contemporary capitalism: what political forces could challenge the concentration of technological power, and through what forms of organisation?

## Techno-feudalism

In a related session, 'Techno-feudalism: rent or profits?', the panel included Michael Roberts, Renu Gehring, Tavo Espinosa and AK Norris. Comrade Roberts questioned whether the growing power of big tech signifies a movement beyond capitalism.

According to the techno-feudalism thesis, digital platforms and technology monopolies increasingly resemble landlords controlling digital territory. Businesses and individuals must pay for access to the infrastructure, markets and services these corporations dominate. Rent, rather than profit derived from capitalist production, supposedly becomes the principal organising mechanism.

This interpretation draws attention to the revenues platform owners extract through intellectual property rights, proprietary software, digital marketplaces and cloud infrastructure. The question, however, is whether these forms of monopoly appropriation amount to a new mode of production. Comrade Roberts argued that they do not.

Capitalism remains organised around the production and appropriation of surplus value, even when the mechanisms through which value is distributed become increasingly complex. Rent and monopoly revenue have always existed alongside industrial production, competition and wage labour. Their expansion does not, in itself, demonstrate that capitalist relations have been replaced by feudal ones.

This distinction is particularly important in discussions of AI, which is sometimes presented as though it creates wealth independently of material production and human labour.

In reality, AI depends on extensive physical infrastructure: data centres requiring construction and maintenance; semiconductors produced through complex industrial processes; electricity, water and raw materials; and workers engaged in software development, logistics, content moderation and data labelling. Knowledge and algorithms acquire economic significance through their incorporation into capitalist production and their contribution to profitability.

A further question concerns whether the extraordinary investment in AI will generate sufficient returns. Companies anticipate that automation, productivity improvements and new markets will increase profits. Yet gains for individual firms, achieved through lower labour costs or a greater market share, do not necessarily translate into higher profitability across the economy.

In Marxist economics, replacing living labour with machinery can increase productivity, while raising the proportion of capital invested in machinery relative to labour. The implications for the general rate of profit remain contested. This contradiction is particularly relevant to AI, where enormous expenditure on computing infrastructure is justified by expectations of future revenue and productivity gains that remain uncertain. The possibility of an AI investment bubble cannot therefore be dismissed. Corporate valuations and infrastructure spending may be growing faster than the sector's capacity to generate sustainable profits.

Nevertheless, a collapse in speculative valuations would not render AI economically irrelevant. Previous technological transformations have also been accompanied by speculative booms. Financial crashes can destroy inflated paper values, while leaving behind infrastructure and technologies subsequently incorporated into capitalist production. The distinction between financial speculation and longer-term technological change is essential.

The debate also has an international dimension. Corporations and states controlling digital infrastructure may appropriate revenues generated through productive activity elsewhere. Understanding this process requires distinguishing between productive labour, monopoly power, rent, profit and imperialism rather than treating every form of appropriation as equivalent.

Ultimately, the techno-feudalism debate is not simply a disagreement over terminology. Different explanations suggest different political responses. If the dominance of technology corporations represents a system primarily based on digital rent, limiting monopoly power or restoring competition might appear to be the appropriate response. If, however, these developments remain rooted in capitalist relations of production, the fundamental questions concern ownership, exploitation, accumulation and class power.

Comrade Roberts' argument was that AI transforms the exercise of capitalist power without abolishing capitalist relations of production.

## Algorithmic capital

Jonathan Martineau presented 'Algorithmic capital: accumulation, power and resistance in the age of AI', co-authored with Jonathan Durand Folco.

He described algorithmic capital as a transformation affecting production, political power, social relations and humanity's relationship with nature. The theoretical framework draws on Nancy Fraser's understanding of capitalism as an institutionalised social order, encompassing not only markets and wage labour, but also the state, social reproduction and the natural conditions that make accumulation possible.

Building on this approach, the authors identify four interconnected dimensions of algorithmic capital: accumulation, power, social mediation and the relationship with nature. According to comrade Martineau, the first dimension concerns the incorporation of data extraction into capitalist accumulation. Digital platforms continuously collect information generated through work, consumption, communication and everyday activities, transforming it into commercial assets, predictive systems and targeted advertising. While recognising that theories of surveillance capitalism have drawn attention to behavioural data extraction, the authors criticise approaches that neglect the centrality of human labour. Data does not exist independently of social activity. Its production, annotation, organisation and application depend on workers ranging from highly skilled software engineers to poorly paid labourers engaged in content moderation and data labelling.

Rather than eliminating exploitation, platform labour and algorithmic management reorganise and intensify it. Algorithmic technologies also extend capitalist imperatives into activities traditionally located outside direct wage relations. Through household devices, digital platforms and online services, capital increasingly monitors and mediates care work, emotional relationships, domestic tasks and leisure. Capitalism has always depended on unpaid or underpaid labour, particularly in social reproduction. What is changing is capital's capacity to collect information about these activities and turn aspects of everyday life into opportunities for commercial extraction. This development raises questions about the boundaries between production and reproduction, paid and unpaid labour, and the growing commodification of social relations.

Algorithms increasingly organise decision-making across

workplaces, consumer markets and state institutions. Under algorithmic management, decisions concerning wages, schedules, performance assessments and dismissals may appear automated or technically determined.

However, according to comrade Martineau, treating algorithms as autonomous forces creates a misleading impression of neutrality. These systems are designed, implemented and controlled within existing structures of managerial and political authority. Their decisions remain political and can therefore be challenged through collective organisation and worker resistance.

Algorithmic power also extends beyond the workplace. Digital systems influence cultural consumption, communication and self-perception, while their incorporation into surveillance and military technologies strengthens the relationship between corporate profitability and state coercion. The authors argue that privately owned platforms do not merely transmit social relations: they increasingly structure the conditions under which those relations develop.

Technologies embody choices shaped by the economic and political priorities of those who finance, design and deploy them. Nevertheless, a Marxist analysis must avoid technological determinism: algorithms are not independent actors governing society.

The supposedly immaterial digital economy also depends on extensive physical infrastructure, including data centres, electricity networks, water supplies, semiconductor manufacturing and mineral extraction. Comrade Martineau also spoke about AI expansion's significant environmental consequences.

These burdens are distributed unequally. Under conditions of digital imperialism, resource extraction and labour-intensive activities are frequently concentrated in peripheral economies, while ownership, profits and technological control remain disproportionately located in dominant capitalist centres. The author then addressed possibilities for resistance.

The objective is not necessarily to reject technology, but to challenge the social relations determining its development and use. Struggles surrounding data centres, surveillance and algorithmic management, including those in Chile and Ireland, demonstrate how technological questions intersect with labour organisation, environmental politics and community resistance.

Three strategies emerged from this discussion. The first was technical sobriety: questioning whether every technically possible innovation should be developed, and prioritising social needs over profit-driven technological expansion. The second was public ownership and socialisation. Regulation and taxation may constrain corporate behaviour, but they do not necessarily transform private control over digital infrastructure and data. The third was coalition-building between technology workers, platform drivers, logistics workers, communities affected by extraction and movements opposing surveillance. Such alliances could connect struggles that are often treated separately, despite their common relationship to capitalist accumulation.

These discussions provided a valuable analysis of AI's place within contemporary capitalism. Yet they also left me with a question that I believe the left has not addressed adequately: how can we use existing AI technologies to strengthen socialist organisation and political struggle?

## The left

I did learn a lot from the sessions I attended; however, I must admit that I question aspects of the left's approach to artificial intelligence. Much of what I read and hear is dominated by fear: fear of unemployment, surveillance, corporate control, ideological manipulation and the enormous power accumulated by a handful of technology companies. These concerns are entirely legitimate. However, there is remarkably little discussion of how the left might use the same technology to its own advantage, including in the struggle against capitalism itself.

In response to the concentration of AI technology in corporate hands, we are frequently offered familiar solutions centred on regulation, public ownership and democratic accountability.

Cecilia Rikap and others, for example, advocate democratic control over the infrastructure underlying large language models (LLMs). But what exactly would democratic ownership mean in this context? Who would exercise control: national governments, international institutions, workers' organisations or some new form of transnational democratic authority? Given the global infrastructure on which AI depends, the question is far from straightforward.

Michael Roberts has proposed a more radical alternative: bringing the so-called 'Magnificent Seven' technology companies - Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Meta, Nvidia and Tesla - into public ownership under democratic workers' and public control, potentially through expropriation without compensation to major shareholders. This is certainly a proposal worth supporting. However, its realisation would require a fundamental transformation of existing property relations and, ultimately, the overthrow of capitalism.

The question remains: what can the left do now, under existing capitalist conditions, rather than waiting for a future socialist transformation? I would argue that there is already considerable scope for using existing LLMs, including technologies developed by the very corporations we oppose, to strengthen anti-capitalist organisation, research, education and political intervention.

Part of the difficulty is that many social scientists writing about AI do not have a sufficiently detailed understanding of how the technology works, how rapidly it is changing or what can be built using it. This is not to dismiss political economy, sociology or historical analysis. These are essential to understanding the social consequences of AI. But they cannot substitute for technical knowledge of the systems being analysed. There is also the problem of time.

Books and academic articles necessarily take time to research, write and publish. In most areas of political theory, a year is a relatively short period. In AI development, however, it can encompass several generations of technological change. An analysis that was accurate when written may already be describing systems whose capabilities and limitations have substantially changed.

This does not make theoretical analysis obsolete. On the contrary, it makes closer collaboration between critical social scientists and technically knowledgeable software developers, computer scientists and AI researchers increasingly important.

There are already leftwing technical specialists who understand the possibilities of these systems and can imagine using them to challenge capitalist power. However, such individuals are often dispersed, work in isolation and are rarely taken seriously in broader political discussions. The left needs to bring these different forms of knowledge together rather than treating technical expertise and political theory as separate spheres●

# So much to choose from

**Tam Dean Burn** followed the 'Culture' stream. Walter Benjamin was very much mentioned. But what particularly struck him was the presentation given by Håkan Thörn and Carl Cassegård on postapocalyptic environmentalism




**Håkan Thörn: it's already happened**

The Historical Materialism conference in London began under a disgraceful dark cloud created by the Labour government that warranted this statement by the editorial board:

> The decision of the UK government to deny Andreas Malm, a member of our editorial board, entrance to the United Kingdom, is shocking and disturbing. An internationally recognised academic, whose work has shaped the way the very question of climate change is discussed globally, is now facing the outrageous claim that his "presence in the UK is not considered to be conducive to the public good".
>
> The fact that he has repeatedly expressed his solidarity with the Palestinian people and has condemned the genocide in Gaza, in the same manner as millions of UK citizens in the past years, provides no ground for such a ban, unless the UK government has opted to assault the right to free speech and endorse censorship.
>
> We unite our voice with all the voices that protest this outrageous decision and demand that Andreas Malm's right to visit the UK is reinstated immediately.

But there was no way of stopping this quite extraordinary event, with hundreds of participants attending around 80 different sessions each day in a range of nine political streams - from 'Marxism, culture and the arts' to 'Imperialism and anti-imperialism' and 'Workers and capital' and much else besides.

To multiply the content even further, sessions were often then split between three or four different papers delivered under one banner over an hour and three quarters, with a question-and-answer period always included. I know some comrades, schooled in the Communist University approach of lengthier solo subjects and extended discussion, have criticised this approach, but it does allow for a large number of participants from many countries, who are often not experienced in presenting papers on public platforms.

This inevitably means that the quality of sessions can be variable and it is an enormous task in itself just working out which sessions to go for. It reminded me of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, where, as a completely unique experience, you find an exhausting choice with some angst over what you will miss. But you are guaranteed to stumble over unexpected gems and many memorable political experiences, with Marx's name mentioned more than any other. As I inevitably chose the 'Culture' stream to often paddle in, seeking like-minded comrades, Walter Benjamin was the other name that was often raised.

The most memorable session of the many I attended was the first on Saturday morning. Esther Leslie and I had once again made a live radio broadcast for the Bad Punk show on Resonance FM.com on the Friday night, which felt very special, not least because of the improvised musical score accompanying it (performed by Stuart Wilding, Skye McDade-Burn and the seasoned Band of Holy Joy team). The words of Bertolt Brecht and Rosa Luxemburg sat so well within that spontaneous sound design that it can somehow seem quite uncanny how well they fit together.

An added beauty is that the show is then immediately archived and available for playback on the Mixcloud site, so I was able to listen back to it, as I walked into the conference venue on Saturday morning, and could not be happier with what we had achieved in this world-premiere performance of Brecht's versification of the *Communist manifesto* - with a counterpoint of Rosa's engagement with nature from her prison-cell window.[1]

To then find a first-thing Saturday session entitled 'Catastrophe: with and against including a first presentation of The post-apocalyptic manifesto' sounded intriguing indeed. Presented by Håkan Thörn and Carl Cassegård, it was described thus:

> Based on our book, *Postapocalyptic environmentalism: the green movement in times of catastrophe* (2022), we present a first draft of a pamphlet titled *The postapocalyptic manifesto*. The manifesto is structured in four parts.
>
> The first part, 'Against progress', critiques the ideology of the hegemonic bloc that legitimises global capitalism through appeals to historical progress and claims of compatibility between economic growth and ecological sustainability. We argue that efforts to restore neoliberal globalism - or to promote a socialist version of green progress, such as the Green New Deal - will only accelerate the ongoing catastrophe, while failing to offer a postapocalyptic alternative for a just society on a liveable planet.
>
> The second part, 'Against apocalypticism', critiques movements and cultural currents that oppose the hegemonic bloc by invoking the looming threat of an imminent global apocalypse. Such apocalypticism comes in the guise of sometimes diametrically opposed political movements, involving environmental movements calling for action to avert the apocalypse, as well as leftwing and rightwing accelerationists that mobilise to speed up developments that will ultimately bring about global apocalypse.
>
> The third part, 'The postapocalyptic condition', diagnoses the present as postapocalyptic: the global apocalypse is no longer a future threat - it has already begun. We live amid an ongoing environmental catastrophe, which, combined with social, economic and cultural crises, exposes the catastrophic essence of western capitalist (un) civilisation.
>
> Finally, the fourth and most important part, titled 'Towards a postapocalyptic movement', provides directions for future-oriented collective action, addressing the already emerging, but far from unified, global postapocalyptic socialist movement, which involves climate activism, indigenous anti-capitalist struggles, as well as sections of the transition movement and the movement for the rights of nature.

Like Marx and Brecht, it raises the spectre of communism and, like our show, adds the catastrophe being inflicted upon nature into the mix. It genuinely overwhelmed me with its power. It is now in the hands of Verso Books and hopefully will see publication soon - not least because we would love to explore what the two manifestos could offer together.

I was so pleased that we opened up contact with Håkan and Carl and they were hugely enthusiastic about our show, saying they had already passed it on to their comrades. This feels like exactly what the 2026 Historical Materialism conference and our efforts towards a Diderot Gesellschaft Movement (which Esther and I laid out in our Sunday session, attended by Håkan and Carl before they returned to Gothenburg) are all about. A great many more contacts were made and will be pursued over the coming days and weeks - along with much food for thought and avenues to explore.

To then have the day school built around the launch of Chris Knight and Jerome Lewis's book, *The revolutionary origins of language*, happening two days later, felt incredibly fortuitous, to say the least, and I was still reeling from all that as I travelled back to Glasgow hours afterwards.

Finally, to have sandwiched between these two momentous Marxist experiences a meeting with the great radical comedian, Mark Thomas, as the first step towards a performance inspired by that book, and the importance of laughter that it displays, makes me chuckle with joy ●

## Notes

1. www.mixcloud.com/Resonance/bad-punk-6th-november-2026.

REVIEW

# Dancing the word

Chris Knight and Jerome Lewis **The revolutionary origins of language** New Haven CT 2026, pp384, hbk £25

First a confession: I know and very much admire Chris Knight. For many years now we have welcomed him, and other members of the Radical Anthropology Group - eg, Camilla Power and Ian Watts - to Communist University. Their contributions have always been well-argued, thought-provoking and, in scientific terms, cutting-edge.

We have long wanted to include Jerome Lewis amongst our regular CU speakers. But over the summer months he is always away, deep in Congo's vast tropical jungle, visiting the BaYaka hunter-gatherers. He is, though - and this matters - no disinterested outside observer. Yet another 'objective', here today, gone tomorrow academic, who sees the BaYaka as mere objects of study. Jerome Lewis is deeply committed to the BaYaka people and their communist way of life. His son, Nando, underwent their none too demanding male initiation ceremony (fittingly the Knight-Lewis book is dedicated to the BaYaka).

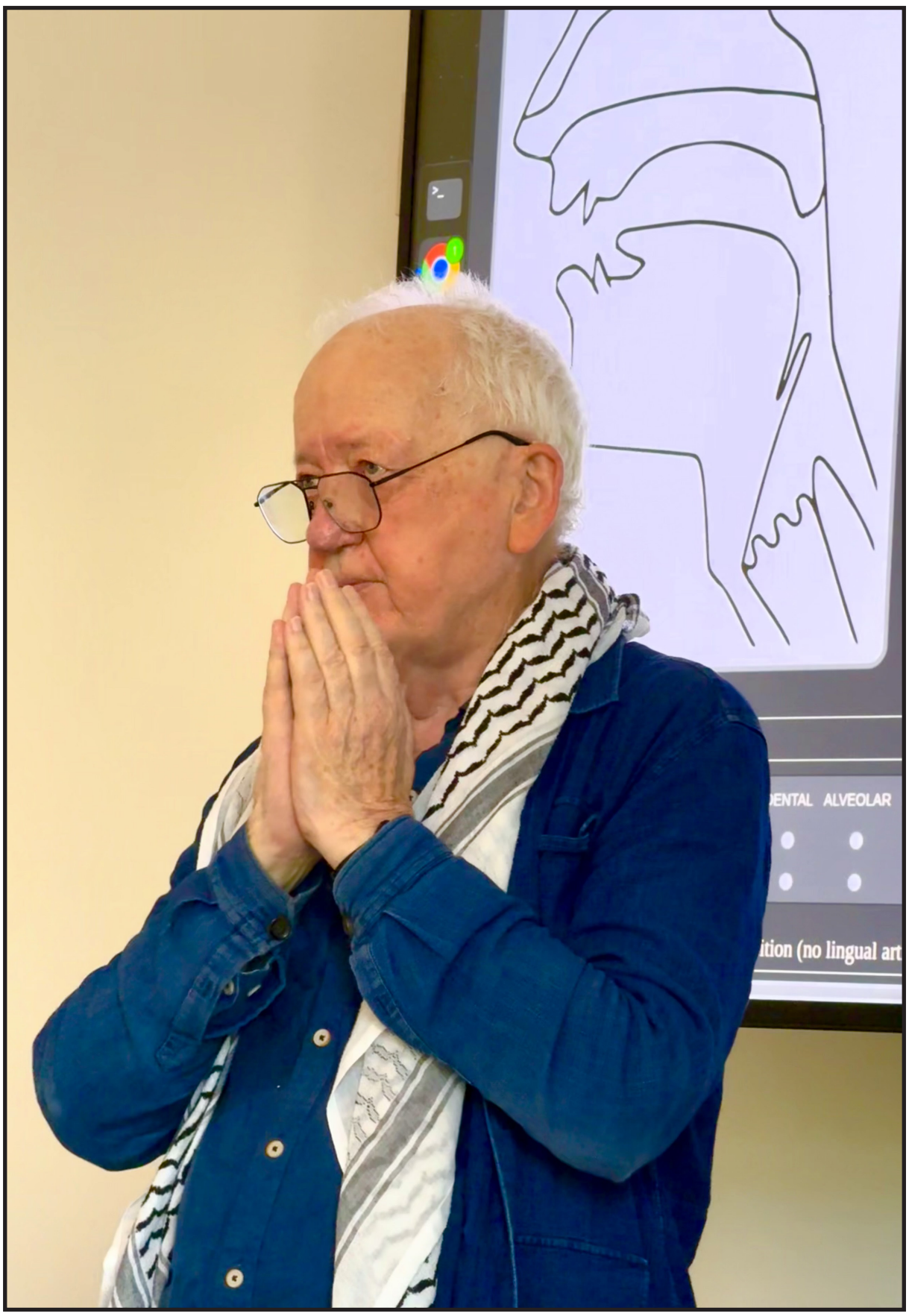
That said, I have listened to, questioned and learnt much from Jerome at RAG's meetings (when they were just down the road from me in Camden Town). So I write as someone who is familiar with, and is already thoroughly convinced by, the basic argument of *The revolutionary origins of language*: language is unique to human beings, must necessarily have had a Darwinian - ie, evolutionary - background, but cannot be accounted for by natural selection and gradual adaptation.

*Revolutionary origins* follows *Decoding Chomsky*. This 2016 book saw Chris Knight publicly enter the minefield of academic linguistics with a bold, frontal assault on what had been the dominant paradigm. Established by Noam Chomsky with *Syntactic structures* (1957), his 'revolution in linguistics' discounted all notions of Darwinian evolution and language as a social phenomenon.

Yes, humans have a *natural* facility for language. But how come? According to Chomsky, it is because of our unique neural architecture - effectively a language acquisition device lodged in our brain. Brought about by a mysterious accident, in a single individual, this macromutation, ie, saltation, happened some 70-50,000 years ago. At first, language was purely internal. The single individual talked to themselves, no-one else. Only later - presumably because of the advantage that this conferred - were words used to communicate with others: a useful byproduct, but nothing more.

Essentially language is equated with a computer programme. Hence the forlorn search by Chomsky and his acolytes for language's 'deep structure' and building a 'universal grammar' machine: everyday English could thereby be translated into battlefield instructions for missiles and bombs. You can see why the whole project was funded and promoted by the Pentagon. Needless to say, Chomskyism is nowadays largely viewed as a failure. LLMs and AI do not work according to its principles. Instead, the likes of Chat GPT and Gemini rely on statistical probability, neural networks and massive amounts of training data.

With *Revolutionary origins*, Knight and Lewis set out to provide an alternative paradigm. A hugely ambitious project. Language, as they say, is the most difficult question in science. Certainly it is the most important: after all, the prime focus of any human science should be humanity itself.




**Chris Knight at CU 2026**

## Alternative

The explanation for language cannot just rely on our large, 1,200-1,350cc brains. Everyone knows that, secure in a loving, domestic, human environment, the common chimpanzee (brain size: 380cc) can be taught sign-language: eg, 'Hug', 'Play', 'Listen', Drink'. Washo acquired 350 signs. She even combined them to describe new things: 'Water bird'. Nim Chimpsky came out with the longest recorded chimpanzee sentence: "Give orange me, give, eat orange, me eat orange, give me, eat orange, give me, you." Note, the complete lack of human syntax. Despite that there is a string of distinct words. Yet, left to their own devices, chimps almost instantly abandon such an essentially cooperative form of communication. They revert to standard primate vocalisation and dominance displays.

In the wild it is fierce competition that rules, not least over food and sex. Communication is essentially honest, because it is costly. It can therefore be trusted in a chimp world, where the distrust of other chimps is the norm. Calls are instinctive and can be physically draining, because they involve the whole body, as in a pant-hoot: 'Woo-ooo-woo-ooo-WOO-ooo-WOOOOOOO!' It unmistakably announces food, location and status to other chimps. There is though no thought-through subtlety, no minutia involved. Such involuntary calls are often referred to as analogue, or graded forms of communication by evolutionary linguistics. Humans still communicate in such ways, as, for example, when we sob, scream, uncontrollably laugh or cry out in pain: 'Ouch!' or 'Aaaargh!'. But that is not language.

Chimps, *Pan troglodytes*, are intelligent and highly political animals. Males form complex coalitions, so do females. However, there is a steep *male-dominated* hierarchy and life for those below is often hugely stressful. For newly mature females this is especially the case. To avoid incest they migrate away from their biological kin in the hope of being accepted into a neighbouring group. They are resented, sometimes driven away, by established females, but welcomed by randy males. Ovulation is visibly signalled with sexual swellings - a trigger for an alpha male to violently monopolise and guard her from other males. What can only be called rape is commonplace.

Mothers are always single-mothers. All care and provisioning relies on her. Males supply sperm, nothing more. And her young offspring are always at risk from both newly risen alpha males and rival females alike. Babies will never be handed to another female for momentary care. There is not the least possibility that they can be trusted. Infanticide is all too frequent. Best hope lies in working up the hierarchy by courting allies through grooming, sex and raising strong, potentially alpha sons.

It is not just a matter of biology. Environmental factors count too. Knight and Lewis use the closely related bonobos to make the point. The common chimpanzee lives alongside highly aggressive gorillas and have to range far and wide to obtain food. Gorillas have voracious appetites and hoover up most of the leafy, so-called fallback, food.

Separated by some 1.5 million years of evolution with the formation of the uncrossable Congo river, bonobos have a much easier time. No gorillas, abundant food. At the risk of gross simplification, the result is that the *Pan paniscus* hierarchy to the south of the river is female-dominated. It is females, helped along with lots of bonding G-G sex, who form the winning coalitions.

At some point, therefore, females *must* have overthrown the male-dominated hierarchy of the common *Pan* ancestor. This allowing the evolution of a distinct, slightly smaller, more friendly subspecies. Eg, incoming female bonobos are welcomed by established female bonobos.

## Growing brains

Not that brain size is unimportant, when it comes to language. Far from it. Knight and Lewis trace the increase in the brain size of our immediate ancestors. *Homo habilis*, the first of the *Homo* lineage, lived some 2.4-1.56 million years ago, and had a brain which ranged from 500-650cc. *Homo habilis* made stone tools and skilfully butchered carcases. But there exists no evidence of fire-maintaining, let alone fire-making.

It was *Homo erectus*, beginning about two million years ago, which broke through the 'grey ceiling'. Early *Homo erectus* had a brain size of around 800cc. However, late *Homo erectus* took this up to 900cc - much bigger than *Homo habilis*. The burden for mothers must have been correspondingly much bigger too. Knight and Lewis turn to the 'grandmother thesis', first proposed by Kristen Hawkes and her colleagues in the late 1990s (they wanted to explain how the menopause evolved).

There is a shift from patrilocal to matrilocal living: instead of moving away from their kin group, daughters stay put with their mums. It is they, the grandmothers, who help out with the extra care and provisioning needed when it comes to the prolonged pregnancy and childrearing required for big brains. This too would allow *Homo erectus* females to form powerful coalitions. As a sub-species *Homo erectus* regularly *made* fire (the earliest reliable evidence dating

back ~400,000 years). Their women therefore not only cooked: they probably chorused and collectively danced too.

So far, so just about Darwinian … and *Homo erectus* successfully spread out from their southern and eastern African homeland into Asia, reaching China and even Java.

## Political strategy

We *Homo sapiens* took things still further. Males could be and were recruited into the work of provisioning females, their offspring … and their extended families.

Drawing on the archaeological record, fossil evidence, the insights of indigenous hunter-gatherers and the theorisation provided by fellow anthropologists - crucially Sarah Hrdy, Kristen Hawkes and Camilla Power - our authors, Knight and Lewis, argue that female-centred coalitions, coalitions which actively sought to recruit sons and younger brothers, overthrew alpha male domination: the human revolution.

Collective laughter, play, ritualised symbolism and, if need be, a little bit of force, established a new social order. But this was no re-run of Congo's *Pan paniscus* revolution. This female-driven revolution was *militantly egalitarian*. Something brilliantly achieved by mapping social relations - and therefore sexual relations - onto the light and dark phases on the moon.

Notice that the lunar month is 29.5 days. Today a woman's menstrual cycle, is, on average 28 days. That near match cannot be mere coincidence. It is surely significant. Knight and Lewis convincingly show that achieving, or simulating, synchrony around the phases of the moon played a key role in counterdomination and women collectively seizing control over their sexual availability to the opposite sex.

Menstruation signalled unavailability. The first word, say Knight and Lewis, is 'no'. In return for men providing meat, they were given a 'yes'. All females were expected to abide by the rule and show solidarity - dalliance with some new-found beau being akin to scabbing. Rape becomes absolutely taboo.

Dark moon is when lions hunt because of their excellent night-vision. Full moon is when we humans see better and therefore can safely hunt. Lions largely do not bother under bright conditions, because they can easily be spotted and are either gingerly skirted or warned off.

The militant egalitarianism of original communism continues to exist to this very day. Lewis and his accounts of the BaYaka show that in no uncertain terms: there is collective childcare - everyone has more than one mother - something which goes hand-in-hand with equal shares for all, personal autonomy and the active, often theatrical subversion of male arrogance. Any hunter who comes back to camp preening and priding himself about his prowess invites jokes, mimicry and takedowns … especially from the older women. The hunter is expected to self-reflect and quickly join in the general merriment.

Each month, as the moon begins to wax - and conditions become favourable for men to hunt - the women announce their coming 'sex strike'. Dancing together, they sing out their message loud and clear, rhythmically stamp their feet and tease the men with bawdy jokes. Collective female power is thereby visibly asserted. Bodies are liberally painted with bright red ochre as a stand-in for menstrual blood.

The everyday world is reversed. The community symbolically returns to a parallel, a deeper world of creation, when humans, animals, everything was mutable. To this day the 'Eland bull dance' is still performed by hunter-gatherers in southern Africa. Women present themselves as the 'wrong sex', the 'wrong species', at the 'wrong time', with sticks standing in for horns and penises. Woe betide the foolish male who dares mock the 'picket line'. It is sacred.

The conservative nature of symbolic culture, evidence from ancient rock paintings and the discovery of traces of red ochre in the archaeological record indicate that this, and similar dances, date back at least 170,000 years. Knight and Lewis suggest that it would have taken many millennia to *fully consolidate* the human revolution. The crucial marker being the use of red ochre. Beginning some 500,000 years ago, it becomes ubiquitous throughout Africa some 300,000 years later.

Camilla Power coined the term, 'Female Cosmetic Coalition' - there being a close symbolic association between red ochre and the blood of animals killed in the hunt. Essentially, what the women are saying is something like this: 'We're showing the red signal of the sex strike; now you go out and bring back the red blood of the game animal.'

Here in the crucible of symbols and an artificially created virtual reality are the conditions needed for language and what we understand as human consciousness. Words are cheap, they are digital, but they rely on metaphor and therefore on collective trust. Once trust is firmly established, the doors of language are flung wide open.

Words then come at the flood. All manner of things are named, including things that only exist in the imagination: tomorrow, the world to come, trickster gods, animal spirits, dead ancestors who come back to life. One word is joined together with another. Grammar and syntax spontaneously form around accepted usage. Fantastic stories get told and retold and humans collectively cross over into the realm of culture.

## Weapon for today

For dogmatic 'Marxists', Knight and Lewis can only be right if they are out to prove Marx right, Engels right … both of them right. Nothing could be more foolish, nothing more mistaken. Like Marx and Engels, Knight and Lewis are guided by science: finding the best available evidence, establishing the best theory, the best explanation. If that contradicts, corrects, what Engels happened to say at this or that date - for example, in his famous 1876 essay, *The part played by labour in the transition from ape to man* - so be it.

Engels, of course, centred bipedalism, free hands and tool-making in *this* account. Essentially he echoed Benjamin Franklin and his *Homo faber* (admittedly a high achievement of the 18th century Enlightenment). Despite that the Grantite Revolutionary Communist Party automatically, unthinkingly, defends the 1876 Engels essay as a "masterpiece of dialectics". There is even the claim that, if Engels were alive today, he would "rewrite" *The part played by labour in the transition from ape to man* "with fundamentally the same view" (communist.red/engels-and-human-development). An obvious absurdity.

Today, Engels, if he were alive, would be looking forward to celebrating his 206th birthday on the 28th of this month. But that is not, of course, my point. No, in my opinion, Engels would take an entirely different approach … because he would be guided by the science.

And, basing themselves on the *best* science, Knight and Lewis emphasise sexual reproduction, female-centred coalitions and their revolutionary overthrow of alpha male domination. Tools, though undoubtedly important, constitute something of a footnote. The indisputable fact of the matter is that technological development during the Palaeolithic was remarkably slow. Only with the Neolithic *counterrevolution* did things really take off in this respect: kiln pottery, polished stone weapons, sickles to harvest domesticated plants, ropes, pens and halters to control and manage domesticated herds (something conjoined with what Engels later called the "world-historic defeat of the female sex").

If the Knight-Lewis theory can be disproved through some startlingly new discovery in the fossil, archaeological … or extra-terrestrial record, again, so be it. They will then, if they are to remain *genuine* scientists, and not collapse into mere ideology, have to suitably modify their theory. That or simply go back to the drawing board. Eg, if something like Arthur C Clarke's entirely fictional black monolith is discovered on the moon and can reliably be dated back 300,000 years, then our views on the human revolution and the origins of symbolic culture, militant egalitarianism and language *might perhaps* be in need of urgent revision.

But it is more than stupid to rely on the *word* of Marx and Engels. After all, they could only but rely on the severely limited and often shockingly racist anthropology available to them during their day. That said, interestingly, because of their rigorous method, because of their ever-expanding world view, because of their accumulated body of theory, Marx and Engels were able to sift through the dross.

Certainly with Lewis Henry Morgan's *Ancient society* (1877) they discovered 22-carat gold. Marx eagerly devoured his book in 1880 and after his death left behind his so-called *Ethnographic notebooks*. Engels dutifully read them in 1884 - and Morgan for the first time. Writing to Karl Kautsky over in Zurich he said that Morgan's "*definitive* book" is "as definitive as Darwin's was in the case of biology" (February 16 1884). Over the course of the next few months he produced his celebrated *Origin of the family, private property and the state*. A *creative* homage to Marx's notes and the *best* available anthropology. Hence, in fact, a great deal, if not all, of what the late Marx-Engels team had to say about pre-class social formations has withstood the test of time: eg, original communism, matrilineal decent, matrilocal residence, no bonds of marriage, bride service, collective childcare, etc.

Sadly, pathetically, much of what passes itself off as contemporary 'Marxism' still relies on the means of labour - ie, tools - to the neglect of social relations. Certainly because there exists a widespread economistic fear of talking about female coalitions, sexual politics, menstruation and symbolic blood, the work of radical anthropologists such as Knight and Lewis usually goes studiously ignored.

For example, in his *People's history of the world* (1999), Chris Harman, a former *Socialist Worker* editor, completely skips over the human revolution. His account of 'before class' is entirely based on a banal biological gradualism and technology:

> humans were genetically programmed for extreme flexibility in response to the world around them - by being able to use their hands to hold and shape objects, being able to use their voices to communicate [language] with each other, being able to investigate, study and generalise about the world around them and being able, through long years of child-rearing, to pass on their skills and learning. All this required the growth of big brains (p4).

Big brains and language are assumed, not explained. Not surprisingly Harman devotes the same number of pages to the invention of the vacuum cleaner as he does to the rise of women's oppression: three pages each.

## Conclusion

If I have a complaint, and I do, the Knight-Lewis book is incomplete. There is much more that needs to be said, but goes unsaid. Too much is short-hand. Too much is left incomplete. Too much needs further elaboration. Maybe I am being patronising, but I am not sure the average reader will be able to fill in the gaps. After all, we are dealing with popular science.

*The revolutionary origins of language* is a medium-sized book which surely needs a big-sized book to do the arguments full justice by providing more background, more facts, more theory and more polemics.

There are also far too many typos and proof-reading errors. A prestigious publishing house such as Yale really ought to go to the modest expense of employing skilled proof-readers. Even a quick AI scan would help. A niggle doubtless, but it is still a pity. I very much hope such problems can be ironed-out with the paperback edition.

Nevertheless, this is a groundbreaking book. Nothing can take away from that. Genuine Marxists will certainly greet it as a triumph of historical materialism and a vindication of the dialectical leap.

Buy it. Read it. Recommend it ●

**Jack Conrad**

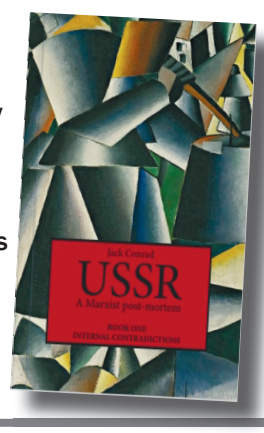
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# What we fight for

- 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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**La France Insoumise is committed to reform, not revolution**

# Strikes, streets and strategy

There have been massive protests of school and university students. November 5 took things to a higher level by mobilising the trade unions. What needs to happen next? **Jean Laurel** argues against the idea that rioting is positive, the way forward, something to celebrate

On Thursday November 5, France experienced a day of nationwide strikes and massive protests across the country. According to the unions, the demonstrations drew in more than 1.5 million people, but the number of strikers is quite difficult to estimate. What is clear is that the strike was widely supported in certain sectors known for their militancy, such as rail and education.

However, it is clear that the strike was not sufficient to have a real impact on the economy: for example, since strikes are common in the rail sector, there is an entire system in place to ensure that the railway continues to operate despite a relatively large number of strikers, by replacing them with managers or replacement workers hired for that purpose. Train lines can therefore continue to operate almost normally. This day was thus a success on the streets in terms of numbers, but not particularly within workplaces, contrary to what is claimed by Révolution Permanente (a Morenist group close to the Argentine PTS). It asserts with its usual triumphalism that "the convergence with the labour movement is taking shape".[1]

However, this day had the merit of breaking with the practice - inherited from the Yellow Vests movement - of weekly Saturday demonstrations, which were intended to allow people to protest without going on strike. This form of protest, moreover, appears to have been on the decline in recent weeks: there were 800,000 of us on October 24, 500,000 on October 31, and 250,000 on November 7. So we have seen a real loss of momentum on that front, although it should be noted that these demonstrations are more often suppressed - or even banned in certain cities - than the calls for action issued by the inter-union coalition on weekdays.

There has also been a slowdown in high schools, although a number of them remain blockaded (it fluctuates from day to day: a few dozen according to the ministry, more than a hundred according to high school organisations). There was a huge surge in blockades on November 5 for the national day of mobilisation - many determined young people continue to participate in the movement and carry out actions at their high schools. But it is primarily the universities that continue to participate in the movement, with about 40 still blockaded as of November 10. And this is despite sometimes ridiculous divisions even among Marxist activists, as evidenced by the emergence of *two separate* general assemblies to 'lead' the student movement - one controlled by the NPA Révolutionnaire (a splinter group of the Fourth International United Secretariat) and the other by Révolution Permanente.

Unfortunately, there are few prospects following the events of the 5th, and it seems clear that the student movement risks losing momentum. Indeed, on November 10, there was a strike in the education sector with low participation, and a small demonstration, consisting mainly of political and union activists. The 5th also led to negotiations between the unions and the government, resulting in a paltry increase in the minimum wage of about €20 (which is actually only a five-euro gain, compared to the automatic adjustment). Unions are demanding an increase of between €100 and €150. This led to a call for another day of strikes and protests, but only in the public sector, and without the second and third largest union federations - the CFDT and Force Ouvrière - which are waiting to continue negotiations.

Meanwhile, the meetings between student and high school unions and the government have been no more successful. The government refuses to give an inch to the students, certainly because it is aware that the movement is on the wane. It knows these student organisations actually have very little grassroots support and do not really lead the movement.

## Violence

In a letter to last week's paper, Nicolas Girard responded to my October 29 article ('Readying for the next stage' October 29). He found it "despicable". He argues that my failure to support the acts of vandalism makes me an authoritarian Stalinist: "Perhaps comrade Laurel and the *Weekly Worker* crew would have joined the French Communist Party in railing against 'irresponsible' street-fighting students in early May 68."

It is true that the French Communist Party's characterisation of the students in 1968 as "petty-bourgeois leftists" was a purely moral attack, ultimately justified by their unwillingness to really confront the state. Nevertheless, it is also true that the Grenelle Accords were not won through the cobblestones thrown by the students, but through mass strikes, made possible by the existence of mass organisations of the working class.

Similarly, regarding recent events in France: it is not a matter of morally condemning violence, but of opposing it politically. I am not opposed on principle to all violence, or to everything that is legally considered a 'crime'. Violence is not a moral taboo: it must be examined in context, as a tactic within the framework of a revolutionary strategy.

However, individual violence is not a means by which we can move towards overcoming capitalism, which is the goal we must set for ourselves. I think all Marxists can agree on this point. If smashing things were enough to bring about socialism, you'd find me in the streets wearing a mask and wielding a crowbar, attacking every storefront in my path. If, instead, you find me writing for the *Weekly Worker*, it is because I believe that the "autonomist" strategy of individual and disorganised violence is a dead end. The Yellow Vests achieved absolutely nothing through




**Anger needs to be directed, organised**

this approach: the government was able to simply wait for the images of burning trash cans in the media to scare the majority of the population, all the while stalling with false promises.

Obviously, it would be absurd to reject outright any action that is not directly aimed at overthrowing capitalism. We must be clear that this violence is first and foremost the product of the violence of capitalist society (social violence in general, but also the police violence directly experienced in recent weeks), and that it constitutes, in part, a response to it. I obviously have no sympathy for the storefronts of big-box retailers charging exorbitant prices or for the injuries sustained by cops who have spent the last few weeks maiming children. Of course, we must also oppose at all costs the judicial and police repression being unleashed on the rioters (the 'rioter pays' law, expedited legal proceedings), as well as the vile and racist media commentary being spouted.

I therefore do not understand how comrade Girard could have interpreted my position as being to the right of the Trotskyists, who, "while rightly pointing out that destroying small shops is counterproductive, correctly recognised street fighting with police and attacks on private property as an expression of fully justified anger against the government, price-gouging capitalists big and small, and police violence in general". This is an analysis of these acts of violence that I fully share. The question is what political response we should propose.

In fact, it is comrade Girard who is shifting the debate onto moral ground by accusing me of veering to the right: since the sociological background of the rioters is working class, he argues that it would be wrong to oppose them. But the sociological background of the rioters is not an argument in favour of automatic support for every action they take. We must not unconditionally support all acts carried out predominantly by the working class.

The fear of 'playing into the hands' of the prevailing media narrative certainly pushes many Marxists to tone down their criticism of acts of looting. But I believe it is important to offer a political opposition to these actions, which are often glorified by a segment of the far left - even among Marxists - without, however, jumping on the bandwagon. We must precisely offer a political critique of these actions to break free from the sterile dichotomy in which the government is trying to trap its opponents ("You have to choose a side: either that of the republic and law enforcement, or that of the rioters," stated prime minister Sébastien Lecornu).

My goal is not to 'wag my finger' at the rioters, but to address the growing number of people who believe there is no other way to get a few crumbs than by rioting, and who appreciate the rioters' actions without necessarily participating in them. This sentiment stems in part from the absence of a socialist and communist perspective for overthrowing capitalism, which must be championed by the working class organised within a Communist Party.

## Revolutionary?

I believe that the role of Marxists is not to go along with public opinion, but rather to propose a strategy that can counter the ineffectiveness of large-scale union mobilisations: strengthening the organisation of the labour movement, within unions and political parties, to give political direction to the discontent. Progress can be achieved not by smashing more storefronts, but by workers organising mass strikes. Otherwise, if there is violence, at best we will see a few appeasement measures and probably nothing at all if there is not.

This is not the political direction of La France Insoumise, with which we cannot be accused of being aligned, contrary to what comrade Girard claims. Quoting Jean-Luc Mélenchon as saying that such actions are "not our methods" was certainly a blunder on my part - but mainly because he was not referring to the organised labour movement, but to his own electoral hopes. Unlike Mélenchon, who seeks to channel the movement towards an electoral outcome in the 2027 presidential election and fears that chaos could lead to a victory for the far right, I am not asking the police to maintain order. I believe the working class should be able to organise against both the police and the dismantling of social programmes if necessary, to ensure that these days of mobilisation are demonstrations of strength and to radicalise the movement.

Finally, it is wrong to say that mass protests are failures, compared to days when violence breaks out. In my view, the fact that the same number of people take to the streets again a week later - despite the crackdown and propaganda - is indeed a political success. It shows that the government's tactic is not working and that social anger continues to be expressed.

As for the accusation of conspiracy-theorising regarding the analysis of the looting on October 17, I maintain that the 'law enforcement' strategy consisted in part of focusing on cracking down on protestors, while at times deliberately overlooking the vandalism and looting[2] (this is in fact what the mayors of Paris, Marseille and Lyon argued). The political objective was to use the violence to crush the protests and foster 'national unity' behind law enforcement. This is accompanied by distorted figures - such as those uncritically repeated by comrade Girard, who speaks of 30,000 looters in Marseille: this figure, provided by the government, has since been refuted; in reality, there were 10 times fewer.[3]

The reality is, of course, more complex, and the police may indeed have been overwhelmed in certain situations. But my aim in highlighting this aspect was, above all, to counter the triumphalist narrative of those who claim that the situation was revolutionary in the wake of October 17, because the state supposedly proved to be incapable of maintaining order ●.

## Notes

1. www.revolutionpermanente.fr/Plus-d-un-million-dans-la-rue-le-5-novembre-il-faut-transformer-cette-force-en-greve-generale.
2. www.lecanardenchaine.fr/police-justice/55230-comment-nunez-a-laisse-au-repos-14-compagnies-de-crs.
3. actu.fr/provence-alpes-cote-d-azur/marseille_13055/30-000-pilleurs-a-marseille-le-17-octobre-les-chiffres-de-la-prefecture-mis-a-mal-par-le-parquet_64958788.html.