A paper of Marxist polemic and Marxist unity

**thinking the alternative**

Mike Macnair

Debating old Bolshevism and the challenge of 1917: Jim Creegan and Lars T Lih

- Letters and debate
- General election campaign
- SR: shading into the green
- Left Unity and safe spaces

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The ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in Marx’s context was meant to be global: if not absolutely every single territory of the earth, then at least in very short order all the advanced countries, and as a form of political global of rule. Comrade Macnair’s attribution of my argument to a particular technique is mistaken. This causes him to recognize the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as well as of egalitarianism against the basis of exploitation and the development of high productive technique. Lenin, by contrast, followed Marx and elaborated this in theoretical sociological terms, but in the historical social relations of ‘bourgeois right’, which characterise the capital relation.

Marx mistakes capitalism for capital surplus: that, so long as advanced technique allows the opportunity for accumulation of surplus through knowledge of specialist technicians, it will be necessary to suppress them. But capital is not like the surplus of grain in peasant agriculture, on which capitalism is based.

According to Bukharin’s ABC of communism, capital is not a thing, a mere mutual relationship, nor even the condition of exploitation of the worker by an exploitier, but a relation of the worker to the exploitier, and not of the exploitation of workers by an exploitier. Capitalism is the organisation of the society by the valorisation process of capital. This is a change and crisis of both political and social activity in society. Marx distinguished between the phases of bourgeois society in co-operation and industry, and the need for just this reason. Industry was a crisis of its own, not due to technology itself, but in its role.

According to Moishe Postone’s interpretation of Marx’s critique of capital, after the industrial revolution the issue is the accumulation not of capital, but the means of reproduction. But capital is the means to command not the value of work, and to control distribution of capitalists as either entrepreneurs making a killing through competition (in order to capitalise on the needs of society, but rather by capital in its ‘valorisation process’. Liberalism is inadequate to this just problem. Furthermore, capital dominates - constrains and distorts - not only living, but also, dead, labour. So credit is an entirely different matter in capitalism than previously. Interest stands above property and is imperative to increase productivity in time, and not for the purpose of profit, but to transform the form of value of capital from the depreciation of the capital (i.e. the process of production in the changing organic composition of capital. Over-valuation of capital will not mean a continuation of wage-labour, in its abolition. The combination to wage-labour is necessary by workers, capitalists, but rather the need to valorise capital in society - at least according to Marx. Macnair finds labour subsisting.

The point is that the social value of capital is for Marx the (distorted expanded) ‘work, general social intellect’ and the (self-contradictory) social relations of this, which is no longer a mere mutual relationship, adequately mediated by the value of the exchange and circulation of labour power - and is the true means of production, and not the means of production to the class means of production through the self-alienation of their wage-labour. Capital is the ‘general social intellect’ and the capital means a social relation of the capitalists to the means of production through their self-alienation, but not the means of production. Financial capital is social relation of the capitalists to the means of production through their self-alienation, but not the means of production. Social capital is a social relation of the capitalists to the means of production through the self-alienation of the wage-labour. So the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in Marx’s context was meant to be global: if not absolutely every single territory of the earth, then at least in very short order all the advanced countries, and as a form of political global of rule.

Problems of Bernstein as well as Kautsky is the endless deferral of the political revolution for socialism at all. Bernstein pleads that you should not take us to get out of capitalism. Neither the storming of the Bastille nor the Tennis Court oath nor the Continental Congress’s Decision against monarchy is a necessary realisation of Machiavelli’s visions of politics or a confirmation of Hobbes on the political. The spectre of them consolidated bourgeois society politically and ideologically: these are the contradictions of capital. Liberal democracy expresses the failure of society.

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Future class

Mike Macnair accuses me of error in ‘Toryism’ (‘Magn’a Carta and long horn’ (May 16, 2015)). I don’t know that natural response would be to accuse him of the things of the natural response. Macnair’s recent article ‘(Thinking the alternative,’ April 9) has accused me of being a ‘true socialist’, in however, in a favour of new issue: the politics of ‘class’ beyond the socialist revolution.

Still, the problem of Bernstein as well as Kautsky is the endless deferral of the political revolution for socialism at all. Bernstein pleads that you should not take us to get out of capitalism. Neither the storming of the Bastille nor the Tennis Court oath nor the Continental Congress’s Decision against monarchy is a necessary realisation of Machiavelli’s visions of politics or a confirmation of Hobbes on the political. The spectre of them consolidated bourgeois society politically and ideologically: these are the contradictions of capital. Liberal democracy expresses the failure of society.

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Kingleys Abrams. My answer was simply that the big capitalists had three policies: (1) to accept the vote for Tory, Liberal Democrats and Labour. So there was no reason why the CPGB should not have two more socialist alternatives.

We need one to represent the best of the old and another for a revolution. Standing under one banner is simply the last trick of the old order. When it is not when it is full of holes. Of course, the Republican Socialists have not launched a single legal campaign for the moment, the campaign is about making the case for a revolution but then Tusc and the Republican Socialist, if that is the straw that blows them to do it, then it can make them do it. If the Republican Socialists and Trade Union Socialists had the same policies and programme, then it would be counterproductive, if not sectarian, to have a single one.

This is obviously not the case here. Both are anti-austerity. But that is where it ends. One, it is not needed by people to recognise what politics is staring them in the face. Tusc and the Republican Socialist, if that is the straw that blows them to do it, then it can make them do it. If the Republican Socialists and Trade Union Socialists had the same policies and programme, then it would be counterproductive, if not sectarian, to have a single one.

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Now that their manifestos have been published, the general election contenders are bickering as if with wedges. David Cameron has promised to scrap inheritance tax on homes worth up to £1 million, spend an “extra” £8 billion on the NHS by 2020 and resurrect the dream of a property-owning democracy by giving 1.3 million households a stake in the home. Lord Ashcroft, mainly very poor, the right to buy, owns The Times. As for Ed Miliband, he is now portraying Labour as the party of “fiscal responsibility” that will cut the deficit every year. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats have said they would not form a coalition with the Tories if they insist on forcing through £12 billion in cuts to social security. They also agree with Lord Ashcroft that it is a “useless dweeb or a power-hungry cad” to the final outcome (internet surveys overestimates Liberal Democracy by 8% or 9%, whereas the Greens are down to 4.5% with online polling, yet slumps to 1% over the winning line. Thinking big, the Labour leadership elections – by Michael Fallon, the defence secretary, who suggested that the Labour leader’s support, then dent the Labour leader’s support, then surely the case that, apart from Nick Clegg, some senior Lib Dems – let alone the ordinary membership – would be a lot better to find themselves in partnership with Labour as opposed to the SNP, as the Daily Telegraph has said, the Vince Cable, after all used to a Labour member – in 1970.”

8. The Guardian.
10. h-index scores, the combined votes of both the Union and Nationalist and Conservative parties.
It seems a week cannot go by without Socialist Resistance – the British section of the Fourth International, and the self-described ‘Marxist-feminist-ecosocialist’ contingent most aggressively dragging Left Unity to the right – giving us some reason to despair. Last week, there was the fallout from SR’s calamitous intervention in the transgenders ‘debate’ within feminism (more like a dirty war, at this point), in which SR managed to alienate more or less all interested parties – either by deciding to run a piece by Victoria Smith objecting to transgenders politics, or beating an undignified retreat and slipping a ‘trigger warning’ on it when the screams of fury built up from the Twitter/Tumblr intersectionalists.1 Now, there is the small matter of a truly staggering statement from Resisting Socialism’s national committee on the ‘Green surge’. It lists off the numbers: the membership of the Green Party in England and Wales “has doubled in the past year and currently stands at 54,500, making it the fourth largest party in Britain – bigger than the Lib Dems and UKIP”, while its Scottish sister party “has increased [its membership] in the last few years by a staggering 700% to 8,500 members today.”2 Thus begins a serious puff-piece. The Greens “have shifted to the left in recent years”, and are occupying the space to the left of Labour effectively: “most young people find the Greens an easier option to contemplate rather than going directly to the more radical socialist (or revolutionary) organisations.” Glowing encomia to Caroline Lucas and Natalie Bennett follow.3

**Low profile**

This is not the first time that Resisting Socialism has gotten a little starry-eyed over a few left Greens of course – that ‘ecosocialist’ branding is designed as a licence to schmooze with such characters. So what do the comrades actually hope to achieve on the basis of this gulf? In practical terms, unfortunately, it amounts to a call for Left Unity to keep a low profile. After all, that space for a ‘broad party to the left of Labour’ is now presently occupied. Perhaps it could result by carving out its own space, as a radical socialist alternative to the capitalist order? Certainly not: “The danger is that the ultra-left in LU will attempt to push LU to the left and force it to abandon the space in which a broad party can be built.” (No prizes for guessing whom the comrades mean here, although why they do not just say it defies me.)

Instead, socialists “should work with the Greens in the campaigns and encourage LU to do so. We should urge LU to seek electoral arrangements with them if possible.” Those of us who are concerned that this will mean LU abandoning its own profile to act as leftist bag-carriers for Bennett, etc, need not fret: Although [the Green Party] is a response to the space to the left of Labour, it does not resolve it in the form of the kind of a broad radical left party that is required in order to build a socialist alternative … The main reason for this is that it has a substantial conservative wing that would never accept its transformation into such a party. Only LU, or something like it, can produce the right kind of party: provided, presumably, its own ‘conservative wing’ (viz Socialist Resistance) find it in themselves to accept it.

The core of this argument is fatuous in the extreme. We may first of all deal with the calumny against the ‘ultra-left’: we in the Communist Platform, the semi-official ‘ultra-left’ of Left Unity, have argued all along for a party that will fight for what we need, for what happens to be popular during a Socialist Resistance NC meeting. That means a party committed to the independent revolutionary action of the working class: a Communist Party. Whoever happens to be grabbing the votes of well-meaning leftist youths right now is a secondary, tactical question. (I will say that I have heard the argument parodied here advanced in earnest, that LU should move to the left as an instrumental and tactical manoeuvre in response to the success of the Greens and SNP - but not from any traditionally ‘left’ quarters of the organisation.)

SR’s scheme, however, amounts to a patchouli-scented popular front: its right wing, the Green Party, will inevitably discredit itself, and LU - as grimly envisioned by SR - will emerge as the ‘best fighters’. SR’s only novelty is to skip out the social democratic component of the popular front entirely, subsuming itself directly into its ‘radical bourgeois’ component. The most striking consequence is that the substance of the Greens’ politics escapes notice almost entirely: they are anti-austerity, yes, they are concerned with the environment, yes; and there is a malevolent ‘conservative wing’ of some kind.

Yet the Greens’ alternative to capitalist austerity is localism, preferential treatment for small business over large, and so on. It is, from a certain perspective, quite an inspiring vision - it is a clearer view of an alternative future than radicalising youth are likely to get from, say, SR comrades, who can only ever fret about ‘campaigns’, - which are almost invariably against things nowadays (cuts, closures andsuchlike).

Those more vulgar leftists who say the Greens are straightforwardly ‘just another capitalist party’ ‘miss the point’ - the Greens offer a petty-bourgeois utopia. It is utopian because capitalism grows anew out of all commodity production; a utopia of small businesses can only be the prelude to the return of the dark Satanic mills. By burnishing the ‘anti-austerity’ and eco credentials of the Greens, SR becomes insouciant about all these radicalising youth dedicating themselves to a project that by definition cannot possibly work.

**Why bother?**

Alas, in what went before, I have made the error of assuming that the Greens are not a working class organisation! How fortunate that the good ‘Marxists’ of Resisting Socialism are on hand to correct me:

Some argue that the Greens are not working class parties ... [but] most members of the Green Party and most of those who vote for them have to sell their labour-power as much as do the supporters of the Labour Party, Left Unity or any left-wing group.

Taking this bizarre sentence at face value, one could first object that a considerable majority of people in this country are, from the Marxist point of view, working class; they do not all vote Labour, Green or far left. What about the Scottish Nationalists, comrades - are they now a working class party? Hell, what about UKIP, or even the Tories? There are not enough capitalists to get the Tories in on their own, and it is certainly not pinstriped bankers who go out on the knocker for them come election time.

Then one could reply, crudely, that it is not a party’s votes that matter so much as its sources of funding: the Labour Party gets the majority of its funding from trade unions, and would go into financial crisis without that money. The Tories are straightforwardly reliant on money from big business. The Greens are funded, in the main, by the type of people who own quaint shops in the North Laines. It is petty bourgeois in its social base, as well as in its politics.

But really we feel we are beyond the point of sensible argument here. What a sorry pass we have come to when ‘Marxists’ - even if they are ‘Marxist-feminist-ecosocialists’ - present sophistries as intellectually vacuous as this little gem! We wonder why SR even bothers to keep ‘Marxism’ on its masthead. Marxism is time-consuming; there are so many books to read and, while some are great works of world literature, others certainly are not.

Moreover, Marxism leads the humble Marxist to sometimes ‘squeamish’ about specific political conclusions. We are no longer permitted to evaluate political phenomena on the basis of an instinctive ‘feel-good’ factor, but instead we must analyse what its unconscious motive forces are. We cannot separate whatever nice things Natalie Bennett says from what she is likely, or indeed able, to do. It is exactly this that makes Marxism its power; however, for it allows us to plan strategically, to think about politics over decades, and even centuries, not week by week.

So is the ‘Green surge’ a progressive or reactionary development? On the face of it, it is both: a positive thing that many people are willing to be active participants in politics outside the neoliberal consensus; but a negative thing, in that the Green ‘alternative’ is a petty bourgeois utopia. The real story here, however, is the departure of the far left from the field of political struggle, and with it the severe weakening of even the idea of independent working class politics.

The latter is an effect of world-historical transformations, principally the collapse of the USSR, but it hardly helps matters when the likes of SR attempts, as it does here, to demobilise itself in the face of epistemological shifts in bourgeois politics. It is one thing to be swept into the gutter by one’s enemies, but quite another to polity set up camp there of one’s own accord. And we are supposed to be the wackers ... .

Notes

1. pavel.demarty@weeklyworker.co.uk

Thinking the alternative to capitalism

Peter Hudis

Marx's concept of the alternative to capitalism

Haymarket, 2013, pp241

Michal Polak

Class, surplus, and the division of labour

Palgrave Macmillan, 2013 (Kindle edition)

What is the final goal of communist political activity, or the strategic alternative to capitalism? The CPGB's Draft programme, along with the tradition of Marxist thought, identifies this as a fundamental issue.

The higher stage of communism is a free association of producers. Everybody will contribute according to their ability, and take according to their need. Real human history begins and society leaves behind the realm of necessity. In the realm of freedom people will become endowed, fully social individuals, who can for the first time truly develop their natural talents.

But is this option really posed to us by capitalist development, or is it merely another utopia? And if it is posed to us by capitalist development, what are the implications of this final goal for present-day political orientation?

This is the problem I would like to address in this series of text. I think that to approach these questions it is useful to begin by looking at two fairly recent books which bear on the issues. They are very different in character. Peter Hudis, Marx's concept of the alternative to capitalism is the book of his 2011 PhD at London School of Economics, which is a fairly standard Marxist political text.

Michal Polak's book, Class, surplus, and the division of labour is also a PhD thesis, but one based in the sociology of Economics. It is almost the opposite of Hudis's book. Polak's investigation of Marx's argument is at best skeletal. He offers, in a fact, a criticism of Marx, which he vigorously engaged with, the near-defunct 'analytical Marxist' school; but which, he suggests, at the end of the day reinterpret the ideas of class and exploitation at a higher level of generality than that used by Marx. He is not concerned with detailed examination of the developments which have occurred since Marx's time; in particular, the Soviet regime and its imitators, and their obvious failure to do away with class. This is a somewhat odd question which - whether or not we end up agreeing with its conclusions - can force us to think about the foundations of our ideas.

In the conclusion, this review will primarily descriptive of what the books contain, with critical elements scattered throughout the text, but in the third part of the series, I will deploy issues which have arisen out of these reviews, and will add some further criticisms of the arguments.

Hudis

Peter Hudis is a prominent leader of the International Marxist-Humanist Organisation, one of the several splinters which have emerged in the 19th century from the US News and Letters Committee, originally led by Raya Dunayevskaya (1910-87). This background creates an inevitable risk that his account of Marx will be biased to finding Dunayevskaya in Marx's work. Hudis on the other hand is a willing and able student of the young Marx and the post-capitalist society in the drafts of Grundrisse.

This background creates an inevitable risk that his account of Marx will be biased to finding Dunayevskaya in Marx's work. Hudis on the other hand is a willing and able student of the young Marx and the post-capitalist society in the drafts of Grundrisse. The first issue is the ground covered chronologically, looking for what, if anything, they contain of the image Hudis paints of Marx's vision for a post-capitalist society.

The two chapters on "the drafts of Capital" - broadly based on the published state of the text in three volumes. Hence it starts with Volume 1 (first published in 1867, second edition 1872, and a revised French edition 1872-75, in Marx's lifetime), and proceeds to Volume 2 (published by Engels in 1885 from a draft revised by Marx after the publication of Volume 1) and then to Volume 3, which was edited (not without considerable textual interference) by Engels, and published in 1894, on the basis of drafts Marx wrote before the publication of Volume 1. It might have fitted better with the chronological approach to the development of Marx's thought for Hudis to have placed Capital Vol 3 with the drafts in chapter 4, and to have treated slightly more systematically the differences between the second German edition of 1872 and the first French edition, the last in Marx's lifetime, of 1872-75. Then it is a brief reference (p164) to Marx's "popular" version of some of his core arguments in Value, price and profit (1865, published 1888).

Chapter 4 - Marx's late writings on post-capitalist society - covers The civil war in France (1871) and its young Marx; but, though Hudis cites Leopold, he does not reply directly to Leopold's argument, but mainly to Engels and Hegel (chapter 2) and Marx and Feuerbach (chapter 3).

The final substantive section of the first chapter, on the 'Draft articles on the Communist Manifesto', stresses the leading role of the proletariat as a class, and the abolition of private property proposed in the Communist Manifesto, in the post-capitalist society. Hudis takes the opportunity here to polemicise against "Kautsky's and Lenin's interpretation of the Manifesto", the workers' movement "from the outside" (p80), citing an article of Allan Milne's (in The Socialist, 26-Mar-2004) which makes a similar point. But is this option really posed to us by capitalist development, or is it merely another utopia? And if it is posed to us by capitalist development, what are the implications of this final goal for present-day political orientation?

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in terms of a ‘communal network of associations, in which value production is reduced by the community to a systemic level’ (p101). While this view is specifically attributed to the Grundrisse, this kind of formulation in fact involves ‘reading back’ aspects of The Civil War in France into the Grundrisse in a way that is at odds with the specific context in which the two works were written. What is true is that there is a philosophical grounding of a socialist or communist alternative that is based on a concept of a society that is self-regulated, where the problem of production is reduced to the concept of ‘ownership and control’ (p101).

Key Points:

- The book is an exploration of the basic theory of class, understood primarily as an economic phenomenon.
- The starting point is that Marx’s theory of class is based on a series of concepts (a) by means of production and (b) by antagonist relations of production.
- These approaches have been developed in a way that does not require any particular writing since the time of Eduard Bernstein and a great deal of academic production has been based on these three principles, which is the first point concerned with the concept of Marxist class. As Bernstein identified, while the old Marxist theory of class is not as well defined, it still has results, since capitalism has no clearly defined social class, who cannot be simply identified as skilled workers (though some people who identify as ‘middle class’ are clearly of skilled work). Many non-Marxists and Gardner Means and, following them, James Burnham argued, that modern capitalism is based on the separation of ownership and control and, in particular, using dispersed groups of capital (banks, funds, etc.) and actual control by senior executive managers (in recent years this type of manager is considered to be the major contributors of a large share of the corporate profits, fraudulently identified as ‘salaries’ or ‘management fees’ (p207).

Thus, the rest of the criticism becomes the claim that it is not a viable alternative to capitalism, and is not a serious challenge to the system as a whole. This is a criticism that is not as well defined, as some people who identify as ‘middle class’ are clearly of skilled work (p207). In conclusion, the author argues that the book is a comprehensive and critical analysis of exploitation, and that it is not a viable alternative to capitalism, and is not a serious challenge to the system as a whole. This is a criticism that is not as well defined, as some people who identify as ‘middle class’ are clearly of skilled work (p207).
Is Lars T Lih a disinterested scholar without a political agenda? Jim Creegan argues against the creation of yet another mythical Lenin

Lars T Lih in a recent letter to the Weekly Worker challenges certain of my factual assertions about the political situation in Russia upon Lenin’s return in April 1917 - “April in Petrograd”. Lih has dubbed it - as well as my larger argument that his April theses represented a break with ‘old Bolshevism’ - as exhibiting a misconception of Lenin’s position on Russian Revolution. The key words in this sentence are: “dubbed” and “misconception”. Lih seeks to bolster his argument, made more extensively in other articles and talks, that Kamenev and Stalin, the two most prominent Bolsheviks to return to Russia before Lenin, shared his position of conditional support for the Provisional Government (hereafter the PG) and that Kamenev’s April theses were ‘unacceptable’, contrary to Lenin’s position at the time. Lih also states that Lenin did not call for an insurrection against the PG in April, either as a tactical or strategic objective. What I actually wrote - and what is true - is that Lenin posed the overthrow of the PG and the transfer of power to the soviets as the key issue of the time. He added that the overthrow could not take place immediately because a majority in the soviet still supported the socialist compromisers, who comprised its executive and in turn supported the PG. In Lenin’s perspective, the Mensheviks and right social democratic opportunism had to be discredited through agitation and a further unfolding of the revolution before the soviets could assume state power. MIsunderstanding or left turn? In his most recent article, Lih seeks to demonstrate that Lenin and the PG were always clearly defined. Kamenev and Stalin, he states, were perceived as siding with the right, to the rejoicing of the Allies in June. Lih also states that Lenin did not call for an insurrection against the PG in April, either as a tactical or strategic objective. What I actually wrote - and what is true - is that Lenin posed the overthrow of the PG and the transfer of power to the soviets as the key issue of the time. He added that the overthrow could not take place immediately because a majority in the soviet still supported the socialist compromisers, who comprised its executive and in turn supported the PG. In Lenin’s perspective, the Mensheviks and right social democratic opportunism had to be discredited through agitation and a further unfolding of the revolution before the soviets could assume state power.

Would ‘old Bolshevism’ passively wait upon events? Is the counterrevolutionary ‘process’ more or less automatic; or shorter depending upon the progress of capitalist development, made longer if, in 1917, the PG represented the bourgeois-democratic revolution too fearful of the masses to carry out the bourgeois-democratic revolution through to the end. This task fell to the workers and peasants. Hence the need for a revolutionary dictatorship. In this sense, Lenin had said in 1917, the PG represented the bourgeoisie, and the soviets embodied the working class. The right would be overthrown by the workers and peasants; the left saw the PG as a bourgeois, completely unconditional opposition to the war effort as a whole. The right urged support of the PG insofar as it moved to consolidate and broaden revolutionary gains, and opposition insofar as it acted as an obstacle. For its part, the left saw the PG as a bourgeois, completely counterrevolutionary government, to be overthrown by the workers and peasants, and not worthy of even the most qualified support.

Left-right differences revolved around what the Bolshevik attitude should be toward the war and the PG. The right gravitated toward a ‘revolutionary defencist’ position, which, while denouncing any annexationist designs and calling on the government to sue for peace, urged soldiers and sailors to remain steadfast at their posts and answer the enemy “bullet for bullet, shell for shell” (Kamenev’s words) in defence of Russia’s newly won “revolutionary democracy”. The left, on the other hand, regarded the war as no less imperialistic under the PG than it had been under the tsar, and advocated unconditional opposition to the war effort as a whole. The right urged support of the PG insofar as it moved to consolidate and broaden revolutionary gains, and opposition insofar as it acted as an obstacle. For its part, the left saw the PG as a bourgeois, completely counterrevolutionary government, to be overthrown by the workers and peasants, and not worthy of even the most qualified support.

Lenin returned to Russia in early April as the most powerful and consistent champion of the Bolshevik left, and succeeded, in the face of much initial hostility, in clarifying the left position and winning the party over to his viewpoint in a month’s time. Lars Lih argues that Kamenev’s prediction that the masses and the PG would eventually clash means that he had no real difference with Lenin on this score; that his disavowal of Lenin’s revolutionary defeatism during a trial in a tsarist court in 1914, his declaration in Pravda that the April theses were “unacceptable”, and his opposition to Lenin in party conferences at the time were all the result of a misunderstanding. There is, however, another interpretation of Kamenev’s prediction of a clash more in keeping with his conciliatory character, attuned to all who knew him: that he felt compelled to modify his position of conditional support for the PG in response to vociferous objections from the party rank and file; is, that he obeyed his congenital instinct to cleave to the middle of the road. Kamenev’s subsequent demurral, in the Menshevik press on the eve of October, of Lenin’s plans for an insurrection, in addition to his efforts to form an all-socialist coalition government, including the Mensheviks, even after the Bolshevik seizure of power, suggests that his disputes with Lenin in April may have involved something more than a misperception. Kamenev was in this period the most right-leaning of all the Bolshevik leaders.

Lih argues in addition that Lenin, no less than Kamenev, relied on a further development of the revolutionary process for a final break with the PG. He forgets to add, however, that the processes each relied upon were very different. Kamenev anticipated a further movement of the government to the right under mass pressure as an eventuality which could possibly mean a rupture between the government and the soviets, and presumably necessitate the complete withdrawal of support. For Lenin, on the other hand, non-support for the PG was not contingent on any future actions on its part; the PG was completely rotten, as things stood. The only process he thought necessary for its overthrow by the soviets was a campaign of “patient explanation” to persuade the soviet majority and the masses to this view - a task which he was confident would be aided by further objective developments. Kamenev’s “process” was more or less automatic; Lenin’s largely reliant on Bolshevism initiative: ie, agency.

Old Bolshevism

Closely related to the attitude toward the PG was a different understanding of ‘old Bolshevism’ - the party’s understanding of the future dynamics of the Russian Revolution. It was elaborated by Lenin during and after 1905. Kamenev and other right-leaning Bolsheviks invoked old Bolshevism in defence of their less than categorical opposition to the PG. Where the bourgeoisie had involved the PG in the bourgeois phase of the revolution had not yet been completed. Lenin, on the other hand, always clearly defined the “revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry” had been rendered obsolete by the emergence of the soviet as an alternative forms of government in 1917. The party debates on this question are somewhat confusing because they conflate what are actually two distinct questions: (1) was old Bolshevism compatible with the overthrow of the PG by the soviets, as advocated by Lenin?; and (2) was it compatible with the future actions on its part; the PG was completely rotten, as things stood. The only process he thought necessary for its overthrow by the soviets was a campaign of “patient explanation” to persuade the soviet majority and the masses to this view - a task which he was confident would be aided by further objective developments. Kamenev’s “process” was more or less automatic; Lenin’s largely reliant on Bolshevism initiative: ie, agency.

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How not to arm ourselves

Yassamine Mather looks at the problems resulting from the attempt to create 'safe spaces' in universities and student unions

W e live in terrible times. Terrifying wars in the Middle East seem endless, with atrocities committed by imperialist allies as well as jihadists. Throughout the world and even in advanced capitalist countries, inequality and poverty are so widespread that even bourgeois economists are concerned about the gap between rich and poor. The future of our planet is in doubt because of the destructive, wasteful and polluting logic of capitalism. In most societies, sexism, racism and xenophobia are widespread, and prospects for many can be worrying and depressing.

In the words of Friedrich Engels, “if the whole of modern society is not to perish, a revolution in the mode of production and distribution must take place”; or, as Rosa Luxemburg put it, we are witnessing a “regression into barbarism”. However, in the midst of all this despair and disaster some of us still know it is possible to change the world. It is possible to fight imperialism’s warmongering in the Middle East without supporting reactionary jihadists; it is possible to fight Islamophobia without becoming chauvinistic; it is possible to fight imperialism to those who have been duped into believing such divisive nonsense. We want to change the world, not escape from it.

We do not believe human beings are born racist or sexist - they are made so by the social conditions they inhabit. We believe that ultimately only a minority whose class interests are served by exploitation, war and destruction will resist change. We are confident in our ability to persuade the majority. We are convinced that the best way to fight nationalism and xenophobia, for example, is to explain the history of colonialism and imperialism to those who have been duped into believing such divisive nonsense. We want to change the world, not escape from it.

Unlike social workers we do not aim to keep out immigrants. Better jobs with better pay cannot be achieved by keeping out immigrants. It is possible to fight the barbarism created by the continued existence of capitalism and it is in this respect that we call ourselves revolutionaries rather than reformists. We believe that better jobs with better pay cannot be achieved by keeping out immigrants. The problem is capitalism and we see it as our responsibility to explain this to those sections of the working class that blame foreigners for job losses, low wages, poor housing and cuts.

We do not seek to create non-racist zones in impoverished areas, where migrants can be protected from racist or chauvinistic attitudes. We want to change the world, not escape from it. Unlike social workers we do not aim to help workers find individual temporary relief. We are for a collective fight and we need comrades prepared to fight imperialism’s warmongering in the Middle East without supporting reactionary jihadists; it is possible to fight Islamophobia without becoming chauvinistic; it is possible to fight imperialism to those who have been duped into believing such divisive nonsense. We want to change the world, not escape from it.

We are not in the business of satisfying reality. We reject the idea that racism and sexism can be fully defeated under capitalism and we refuse to go along with the notion that we should aim to create little zones free from racism or sexism in an unjust capitalist world. On the contrary, we argue that the system relies on divide and rule, that racism and sexism are by-products of the prevailing economic order. We are not in the business of combating these evils with reform here, legislation there: we want a new kind of society, not just here in Britain, but for the world. That is precisely why in our political activity, in our political organisations, we cannot hide from reality - we cannot and should not seek "safe spaces".

We openly confront international, national and local evils. More importantly we are not in the business of combating these evils with reform here, legislation there: we want a new kind of society, not just here in Britain, but for the world. That is precisely why in our political activity, in our political organisations, we cannot hide from reality - we cannot and should not seek "safe spaces".

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for "BME students". In case anyone was in doubt, the poster advertising the screening stated: "We are not averse to the idea of ‘African, Caribbean, Arab, Asian, South American ethnic origins’, and not least because we believe the media to clarify the screening was to be a ‘BME-only’ social happening." Indeed, the media claim Smurthwaite's work against discrimination ended up attracting a racially segregated ‘safe space’. The same university gave another example in November when a group, Students United, had booked a comedian, Kate Smurthwaite, to perform a gig. The booking was cancelled, and a meeting was called at a meeting of the society, but a group of students took exception to Smurthwaite's support for the Nordic model of sex work, which criminalises the customers of prostitution, not the sex workers themselves. Smurthwaite and some members of the Nordic model argue that the policy cuts down on prostitution without targeting sex workers, but their opponents argue it drives prostitution underground, making it more dangerous. Some feminist and antiracist groups backed Smurthwaite's support for the Nordic model and called for the group to be excluded. It was the first time a group was in violation of the student union's safe spaces policy. They argue that this is at odds with the film show, and the organisers, in conjunction with university security, decided to cancel the event.

Free from judgement

As a result, the student union explains that its safe spaces policy aims to achieve "an accessible environment where students feel comfortable, safe and able to gain knowledge about specific issues and organise, free from intimidation or judgement." The policy is not about censorship or punishment. It is based on the idea that students "should be able to express their ideas in a comfortable and safe environment for our members. We are for revolution, and this for us is about discipline, and with, not protection from all the evils of the capitalist order - from war and mass destruction is not covered by safe spaces policies, whereas reading the views of some philosophers is taboo. This is not about having to rewrite the rules and then have the critics quip that you are making a bad joke if it was not so serious, adversely affecting our ability to study. We do not really distinguish between the past. How are students supposed to learn about the effects of military wars, genocide, pillage and rape are censored? In literature, poems and their refugee, a woman who was effectively forced into - isn't a 'safe space'. The violence this women experienced did not require a trigger warning, but rejecting an abortion does. ‘Seemingly, this one article, where a feminist spoke of her regret, was enough to invalidate the entirety of the blogging network.

Currently, 'a safe space' seems to mean a space that should be free from criticism, and not even educate the public about the sex industry because such criticism creates an 'unsafe space' for students who are involved in it - the fact that students may actually be unsafe when engaged in such work seems to be of no consequence. Apparently some student unions would effectively bar students for a speech that is not seen as a good joke if it was not so serious, adversely affecting our ability to study. We do not really distinguish between the past. How are students supposed to learn about the effects of military wars, genocide, pillage and rape are censored? In literature, poems and their refugee, a woman who was effectively forced into - isn't a 'safe space'. The violence this women experienced did not require a trigger warning, but rejecting an abortion does. ‘Seemingly, this one article, where a feminist spoke of her regret, was enough to invalidate the entirety of the blogging network.

The examples I have given - and there are dozens more - all deal with identity and for this we need discipline, and familiarity, with protection from all the evils of the capitalist order - from war and mass destruction is not covered by safe spaces policies, whereas reading the views of some philosophers is taboo. This is not about having to rewrite the rules and then have the critics quip that you are making a bad joke if it was not so serious, adversely affecting our ability to study. We do not really distinguish between the past. How are students supposed to learn about the effects of military wars, genocide, pillage and rape are censored? In literature, poems and their refugee, a woman who was effectively forced into - isn't a 'safe space'. The violence this women experienced did not require a trigger warning, but rejecting an abortion does. 

Fighting fund

University authorities and their security officers have been known to use student union safe spaces policies to ban free speech. About a year ago, the London School of Economics demanded the screening of speakers and a list of conditions including one on its campus to make sure the safe space "will not be undermined". For some universities a number of subjects are considered too sensitive, too controversial and too prone to the "subject matter might be considered as politically offensive or the group will be considered as too sensitive or controversial for the safe space." Staff in academic institutions have voiced their frustration, yet colleagues have made the rounds of standing orders - thanks go to WSU DW at UCL, and AN (10). And, speaking of which, two new SOs have been pledged - from JM (amount as yet unconfirmed) and KB (20 a month).
The April 11 talks between the presidents of the USA and Cuba, which were followed by a joint press conference, represent a highly significant step towards the ending of the US blockade and the ‘normalisation’ of relations between Washington and Havana.

The meeting between Barack Obama and Raúl Castro took place during last weekend’s Summit of the Americas, held in Panama. Two days earlier US Secretary of State John Kerry had met Cuban foreign minister Bruno Rodríguez - the first such meeting between top state representatives since Richard Nixon (then vice-president) met Fidel Castro, Raúl’s older brother, in 1959.

This in turn followed the December 2014 announcement that the two countries would seek to re-establish diplomatic relations. But, according to The Daily Telegraph, agreement on the details of these relations has not progressed, because Cuba is “still raising other issues, such as demands for the closure of America’s Guantanamo Bay naval base on the island”. How unreasonable?

Prior to the summit, there had been speculation that Cuba was about to be removed from the list of four countries - the others being Iran, Syria and Sudan - to be a “state sponsor of terrorism”, as recommended by the US state department. However, the widely predicted announcement to that effect did not take place in Panama, but was made three days later on April 14.

According to Obama, “This shift in US policy represents a turning point for the entire region” - although, paradoxically, Venezuela was declared in March to be an “extraordinary and unusual threat to US security”. But on April 7 the White House declared that this was actually the case - apparently it was all down to a faulty template, upon which the statement announcing sanctions against seven Venezuelan officials had been drawn (their assets in US territory have been frozen).

So, leaving aside the limited sanctions imposed on Venezuela, the latest move do signify a marked change in US policy. As Obama himself explained, “The cold war’s been over for a long time. I’m not interested in having battles that frankly started before I was born.” He added that the days are over when “our agenda in this hemisphere so often presumed that the United States could meddle with impunity”. And now he was abandoning the “failed policies” of previous administrations.

Those “failed policies” actually date back to 1960, when US sanctions were first imposed. Over the following half-century, Washington did everything in its power to weaken, undermine and overthrow the Cuban regime - the most notorious action being the infamous Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 - CIA operation that president John F Kennedy claimed was a rebellion by Cuban anti-communist patriots.

Then there were the numerous attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro. In 1975, the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities substantiated no fewer than eight of them between 1960 and 1965. They involved poisoned or exploding cigars, an infected scuba-diving suit, a booby-trapped conch, a poisoned hallucinoid pill… Castro is said to have remarked: “If surviving assassination attempts were an Olympic event, I would win the gold medal.”

But now a substantial section of the US ruling class wants to put all that behind them - much to the fury of the Republican right. According to them, the US does not “meddle” in the business of other states, but merely acts to further its own vital interests. Didn’t Obama know that Cuba was still a dictatorship? Florida Republican representative Ileana Ros-Letikien said the move will “only undermine US national security and send a signal to the Cuban people that, instead of disapproving of the Castro regime’s methods, the US is rushing to embrace two deceitful tyrants in their twilight”.

Another Republican representative, Scott Garrett, called Obama’s move “misguided, dangerous and offensive to the families who have been torn apart because of Cuba’s active participation in terrorist activities”.

The Castro regime is harbouring a “number of terrorists”, many of them fugitives from the United States, claimed Garrett. They include Joanne Chesimard (aka Assata Shakur), who was granted asylum by Havana in 1979 after escaping from prison, where she was serving a sentence for first-degree murder. Shakur, a supporter of the Black Liberation Army, was found guilty of killing a state trooper in 1973 in New Jersey.

For the pro-Cuban left, however, “socialist Cuba” has won a tremendous victory, thanks to the dogged determination of its government and people. The comrades from the Cuba Solidarity Campaign were so overcome that they enthused not only about the “historic talks”, but also the “historic handshake” and “historic press conference” within the first two lines of their April 14 emailed circular.

For the Revolutionary Communist Group and its Fight Racism, Fight Imperialism paper, “These developments represent a victory for the Cuban revolution” and its “revolutionary government”. Mind you, this was written in response to earlier US moves and published in the February-March edition of FRFI.

The RCG, like those other, equally dozy, Castro fans, the comrades from the Labour Party and the Socialist Party of Britain. The Star has made no editorial comment and its only feature article on the Panama summit was taken directly from the US Communist Party’s People’s World. Even though this article was published in the Star four days after the summit ended, it was written before it took place and so does not even mention the Obama-Castro talks.

It goes without saying that the ending of the blockade will be something to celebrate. Just like the imperialist sanctions on Iran, the blockade has imposed untold suffering on ordinary Iranians, while the elite has been largely unaffected - in the case of Iran, at any rate, some at the top of the regime have actually gained substantially from their ability to influence the black market.

But, if anything, US-Cuban normalisation is likely to result in a speed-up of Chinese-style developments: ie, the coming into being of a thriving capitalist and state-capitalist sector. Cuba never was, and cannot be, “socialist”. The Castro regime can rightly claim some achievements, not least in health and education. But many of these resulted from the huge subsidies poured in by the Soviet Union at the height of the cold war and are characterized by numerous bureaucratic defects. Genuine socialism can only be international - it can only result from the democratic action of the global proletariat, first and foremost in the advanced capitalist countries.

Notes
1. ‘Panama summit is no place for Che's killers’ revolutionarycommunist.org/americas/cuba/3891-
2. ‘Panama summit is no place for Che's killers’ Morning Star February-March 2015.
4. ‘Panama summit is no place for Che’s killers’ Morning Star April 15.

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Notes
1. The Daily Telegraph April 11.
2. “historic talks”, but also the “historic handshake” and “historic press conference” within the first two lines of their April 14 emailed circular.
3. “socialist Cuba” has won a tremendous victory, thanks to the dogged determination of its government and people. The comrades from the Cuba Solidarity Campaign were so overcome that they enthused not only about the “historic talks”, but also the “historic handshake” and “historic press conference” within the first two lines of their April 14 emailed circular.
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10. Genuine socialism can only be international - it can only result from the democratic action of the global proletariat, first and foremost in the advanced capitalist countries.