



weekly **worker**

**Latest 'Star Wars' movie:
recapturing lost nostalgia or
a money spinning cargo cult?**

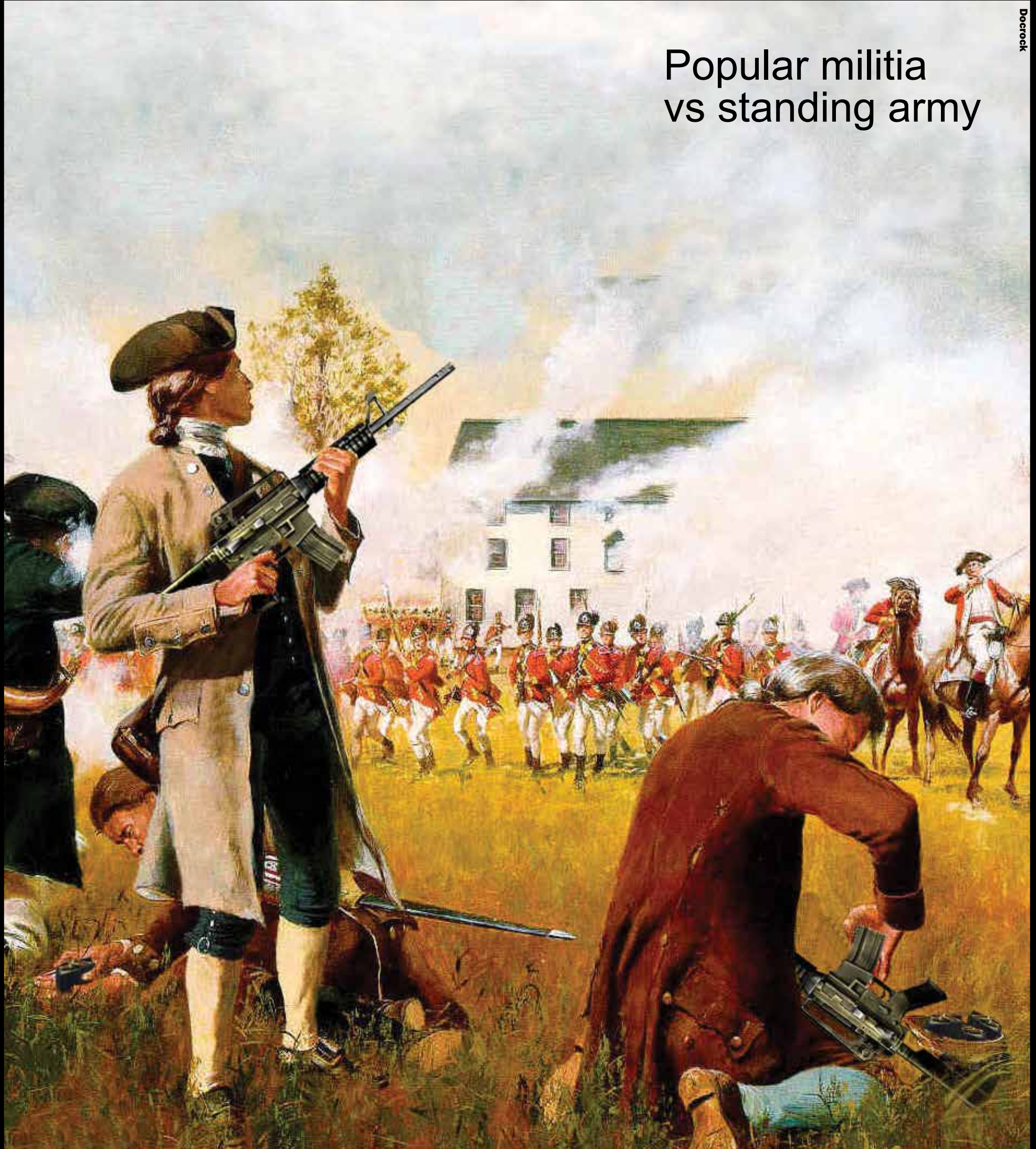
- Labour's reshuffle
- Saudi Arabia lashes out
- Neil Davidson's papers
- Herbert Spencer reloaded

No 1088 Thursday January 7 2016

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LETTERS



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

Labourism RIP

Labourism is dead. Long live socialism!

The doctrine that a political party representing the trade unions can bring socialism into being is now in the dustbin of history. Trade unions are calling for a limited fiscal stimulus to lift the UK economy out of a depression. This has as much in common with a globally planned classless society as the mummified body of an ancient pharaoh with a new born child.

At the 2015 Labour Party conference, the new trade union-backed leader declared he was a British patriot. He has subsequently compromised on going to war. He no longer calls for the ending of tuition fees and the restoration of student grants. He has dropped plans to nationalise the major energy companies. His shadow chancellor has abandoned the idea of bringing the Bank of England back into state control. Both have stated they are friends of business and industry.

Paul Marshall, co-founder of the \$22 billion hedge fund, Marshall Ware, has applauded Labour plans for "people's quantitative easing". He thinks it would be a useful means of stabilising the economy the next time there is a financial crisis. The Money, Macro and Finance Research Group also discussed the Labour leader's economic policies at a conference in September. This group consists of investment bankers, business economists, private equity and hedge fund managers. Contributors scoffed at the idea that creating money by order of the government would create hyperinflation.

In other words there are intelligent members of the ruling class who support the Labour leader and his advisory team of conservative Keynesian economists. They can see the point of using the Labour leader's mainstream economic ideas if policies associated with austerity fail to control increasingly popular anti-capitalist sentiment.

An economist called James Meadway has argued that the leader's economic manifesto is to the right of the Social Democratic Party's plans for the 1983 election. The 'moderate' SDP then called for the creation of 250,000 jobs over two years, including 100,000 jobs in the NHS and social services. Today's 'extreme' Labour Party leadership has no such similar commitment. There must be a real doubt whether Labour can restore cuts to public expenditure once in power.

The membership's choice of a Keynesian leader has administered a shock to the corpse of Labourism. This has the potential to create a zombie-like monster that eats its own flesh. Collective self-interest will draw the antagonistic poles of the membership and constituency MPs together in a vicious struggle leading to disintegration and internment. It will cause the leadership to abandon its veneer of principled decency. Once it has secured its position on the right, the leadership will be advised to turn on the left. Those who do not become the leader's henchmen and women will be purged. I expect *The Morning Star* to play a crucial role in policing left-leaning members in England and Wales. In Scotland I guess the Scottish National Party will play a similar role. This would be the last gasp of the old alliance between social democracy and Stalinism.

Nonetheless these are fertile times for Marxists. Marxists can intensify their educational and propagandistic efforts. They can continue to develop themselves intellectually and politically by organising study groups, formal debates and discussion forums. They can create a flourishing socialist counter-culture nourished by the rotting cadaver of Labourism. Until the ruling class decides to resort to repression, a culture that foregrounds the idea of a classless

society of freely associated producers can grow within and outwith the trade unions and the labour movement. At some point in the near future a consciousness will emerge of the need for a campaign for Marxist parties worldwide to support workers to realise this goal.

Marxists can extend and publicise their critique of Keynesian 'alternatives' and show that socialism is the only alternative to austerity. It is highly unlikely that the ruling class will allow the restoration of public expenditure and workers' rights to pre-1979 levels. This is a reason why the Labour leadership will continue its progress from left to right. Austerity needs to be fought at all levels - from above and below, globally as well as locally. Unscathed by the death spasms of Labourism, Marxists can play a significant role in the leadership of this fight.

The struggle against austerity entails the democratic mobilisation of workers around a plan that goes beyond cuts and workers' rights. This plan might include calls for full employment; a shorter working week; a living income in or out of work; free housing, fuel, transport, education, health, education and social care; the socialisation of transnational corporations under workers' control; the workplace election of managers; and the redistribution of resources from arms and fossil fuel to socially useful forms of production.

Such calls articulate needs that are part of a collective struggle to overthrow capitalism. They will be fully realised with the establishment of a democratically planned classless society worldwide.

Paul B Smith
email

Flower oil

Understanding the relationship between peak oil and the global economy is crucial to knowing how the present crisis of capitalism will play out. Debating socialism without grasping the energy issue in general and peak oil in particular is a futile exercise. This is a mistake most Marxists make, forgivable when energy was not an issue in the past, but an urgent issue today.

Because of the above, I was disappointed when Ted Hankin informed me privately that he no longer wished to take me on politically. The reason he gave was that I am incapable of sticking to one issue and I am constantly changing the goal posts. The comrade failed to give an example of this. Nor did he seem to realise that, if this was indeed the case, it was his duty to point this out publicly, not to use this as a pretext to discontinue the debate.

So why is Marxism, in the morose form of Ted, running away from debate? What annoyed Ted is that I haven't willingly placed my neck on the chopping block for him to remove the head with one swing of the executioner's axe and consign me to ideological oblivion.

Ted is refusing to debate Marxism with me because he believes Marxism, a 19th century narrative, is above criticism. I am sorry to have to disappoint people who think in this way, but it is not. I have already stated that modern, industrialised capitalist society was not driven forward by the circulation of capital as Marx claimed, but was the direct result of the energy revolution beginning in the 18th century, following the energy crisis in England which triggered the decline of feudalism. The money centred view of capitalist development, which Marxism shares, is the result of bourgeois political economy.

I have also pointed out that, contrary to the claim of Marx and his followers, production relations are not the function of productive forces, nor are they determined by them, but rather by the class that has control of the instruments of coercion. In a class society production relations grew from the sword, not the productive forces.

Avoiding debating these and other

issues shows that those opposing me do not view debate as a dialectical process which aims to get us closer to the truth. Obviously, there is little point in debating with people who agree with me. The dialectical conflict of opposites is a necessary part of the process of development. The problem with Ted's view is that it regards Marxism as existing outside of the dialectical process - that is, above criticism. But the laws of dialectics apply to Marxism as well. In other words, the Marxist 'thesis' is bound to generate an antithesis which leads human thought forward. Dogmas come from those who have abandoned the scientific method, and don't know dialectics.

This is why anyone who defends Marxism, or regard it as above criticism, should take me on in the pages of the *Weekly Worker*. Running away is simply abandoning dialectics. This is a form of suppressing criticism. As someone who believes in a democratic socialist society, to Ted I say, in a memorable communist slogan: "Let a hundred flowers bloom. Let a hundred schools of thought contend."

Tony Clark
Labour Supporter

No answer

In 'A perfectly ordinary, highly instructive document' (December 17), Lars T Lih writes: "The Bolsheviks rejected any sort of political agreement or alliance with the liberal bourgeoisie because they felt that these leaders would sell out the revolution after it started by making a deal or agreement with tsarism."

Very true. But, after the February revolution of 1917, there is no tsarism around to make a deal with - but there is still a liberal bourgeoisie intent on selling out the revolution. What then, Dr Lih? Lih refuses to recognise the sheer novelty of this situation and the equally novel political questions raised by it and to which the pre-1917 polemics among European and Russian Social Democrats could offer no unequivocal answer. Only Trotsky developed the correct answer before 1917 with his theory of permanent revolution. Lenin's *April theses* adopted the practice of the permanent revolution.

I developed this point against Lih in *Historical Materialism NYC* one year ago. Lih has studiously avoided even mentioning my critique. I'd like to think it is because he has no convincing answer to it.

John Marot
email

Dissolution

If people want to dissolve the Labour Representation Committee (Letters, December 17), as we have heard some leaders say, because they have won and Momentum has now taken that space, why don't they just resign instead of carrying out this totally undemocratic wrecking operation?

I was at the national committee meeting where Pete Firmin walked out and the decision there was to maintain the LRC because of the obvious lack of democratic structures in Momentum, but now there is only a political desire to prevent democratic debate and discussion in a bureaucratic manner. This is clearly a fear of the new influx of members into the Labour Party. Too many of them might turn up at the annual general meeting, like they did at the Brighton Labour conference fringe meeting, and who knows how they might vote on things like Labour councils who make cuts, and war in Syria? This sounds like fake leftists running scared from the new left. Best to keep them as a stage army and not allow them to develop their own political ideas. At all costs keep them from falling under the influence of any revolutionary ideas.

The special general meeting on February 20 is not the postponed 2015 AGM, so the NC is in breach of the constitution, having cancelled the 2015 AGM. It has now moved to bureaucratically stitch up the 2016 AGM. The proposed constitutional changes,

including to the structure of elected officerships and committees, should be decided at an AGM, not at the SGM, which has no such constitutional altering remit.

Also deciding that the conference arrangements committee reserves the right to rule on whether the subject of the amendments falls within the remit of the SGM, or whether they should be referred to the subsequent AGM (to be held later in 2016), means that the democratic rights of affiliated organisations are abolished. No AGM up to now had any such bureaucratic control on motions. Given the outrageous bureaucratic structures of Momentum so far, a 60-strong appointed anonymous committee with no democratic mandate, obviously chosen for the flexibility of political backbones, this move is to prevent any far more structurally democratic organisation like the LRC operating, lest it be far more attractive to the new membership than Momentum, which they will have no direct means of influencing.

The reason given for the bureaucratic manoeuvres in the opening paragraph - "Hostile elements still abound, in the parliamentary party, the organisational apparatus and beyond. There can be no place for routinism - the left must raise its game to meet the new tasks we now face" - in no way justifies this postponement. Its obvious motivation is to manoeuvre against its critics from the left and from the potential of the new membership. In the tradition of that master of bureaucratic manoeuvres, Uncle Joe, on some occasions the revolutionary or even more radical left is a greater enemy of those who command the apparatus.

The aim of this manoeuvre is to effectively abolish the LRC itself and its continued existence in a hobbled form is aimed at preventing any other democratic radical leftist organisation emerging that would develop the leftism of the new membership by giving them this democratic space, thus preventing embarrassment to Corbyn and McDonnell. I got the Grass Roots Left to affiliate and elect a delegate for 2015-16; my Unite branch would do so, as would Socialist Fight and the Irish Republican Prisoners Support Group and Brent and Harrow LRC. I notice that these groups (apart from the Unite branch), who have affiliated for the last several years, mysteriously do not appear on the list of affiliated organisations. Why the wiping from the record of those organisations that are now unacceptable, like the Irish Republican Prisoners Support Group? No highly embarrassing motion in support of the democratic right of republican prisoners in Ireland for *The Sun* and *The Mail* to latch on to now.

Gerald Downing
email

Programme first

It was good to read Tony Greenstein (Letters, December 17 2015) promoting my campaign for anti-unionist republicanism in the 2015 Bermondsey election "as a considerable rebellion against the conservative monarchical forces of Left Unity" and comparing it with James Connolly's Easter uprising against the British state.

With such high but, may I say with all due modesty, undeserved praise, I have decided to offer Tony the job as my spin doctor to continue his good work. But I think he should reference Captain America and Iron Man to fully capture the scale of my heroic deeds. Alistair Campbell: eat your heart out!

Even so, it doesn't seem right to compare Connolly's Irish Socialist Republican Party and Irish Citizen Army in their rebellion against the United Kingdom with an election campaign which identified Left Unity as hardly republican and certainly not anti-unionist. The argument with Left Unity is not about the tactics of standing in elections versus armed uprisings. It is all about programme.

In 1916 the Labour Party programme was neither republican nor anti-unionist and supported imperialist wars. Connolly stood for the opposite. A river of blood divided these two positions. In 2016 the Labour Party remains committed to the UK constitution based on the monarchy and the union, and has continued to back imperialist wars, despite the election of Corbyn and the over-excitement of the Trotskyist left.

My point about Left Unity and the CPGB's Communist Platform is not that they should organise an armed uprising any time soon, but rather that LU has no future unless it changes its programme and becomes an anti-unionist republican socialist party. Then and only then will LU be in a position to relate to Rise (Scottish left alliance). Then and only then will it place its relations with the Corbyn movement in England and Wales on a solid basis. LU will become a party with its own distinct democratic political objectives and not seem like some Corbyn groupie hanging around the stage door hoping for a sprinkle of star dust.

Tony makes one revealing gaff. He says that "When the political debate in this country is focused on the battle between left and right within the Labour Party", Left Unity is finished ("their day has long gone"). But what is meant by "this country"? Does he mean the UK, Britain or England (and Wales)? Scotland has different politics, which I highlighted in Bermondsey. (As he missed the key point in my election campaign, he just lost the job as my spin doctor!)

However, Tony does make a telling point that the CPGB is in a contradictory position over Labour and Left Unity by trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. Programme must come before tactics. Which side of the river of blood should socialists stand? On the right bank with Kier Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald's Labourism, or the left bank with James Connolly's anti-unionist republican programme? No contest.

Steve Freeman
Left Unity and Rise

Just the two of us

Only two branch members turned up for the Teesside Left Unity meeting on January 5, but we decided to proceed with business in so far as we could.

There was a shared frustration that Left Unity's leadership appeared to have done little since the national conference on November 21-22. It had taken a long time for an official statement about the conference to be published, and even that only came after prompting in the party's Facebook discussion forum.

A branch member had enquired to the LU office about whether motions not reached on the conference agenda would be considered by the party formally, and was disappointed that there seemed to be only an intention for the party's national council to discuss how they should be discussed.

We discussed concerns about the chairing of one section of the conference, during which Communist Platform speakers felt they had been treated unfairly. One of us felt there had been deliberate bias; the other thought the comrade involved had been out of his depth rather than consciously biased.

It was noted that LU's website appeared not to be updated as regularly as previously, with very few local branch meetings listed - ours had been omitted despite requests - and it made no mention of the LU trade union event due to be held in Manchester on January 23.

Despite a promising level of interest when the Teesside branch was launched in July 2015, a recent update from Left Unity HQ had revealed there were now only 10 members in the five-borough/seven-constituency area covered by the branch. Some members, as well as others on the branch's periphery who had shown an interest in getting involved, are known to have joined the Labour Party since Jeremy Corbyn's leadership victory.

Only half of the 10 remaining members acknowledged communications from the branch.

We agreed that we were not in a period when active recruitment of new members locally was likely to succeed, as the class war was mainly being fought out in the Labour Party, and the lack of a sense of direction in LU nationally would not encourage any newcomers to stay.

Although our small numbers possibly limit the impact of such statements, we affirmed our support for the 'Stop Trident' demonstration planned in London for February 27. We agreed statements of solidarity with the junior doctors' industrial action and the student midwives and nurses' campaign against the Tories' plan to scrap NHS bursaries. We agreed to condemn the 'Middlesbrough says no to refugees' march planned by a fascist group for January 16 and expressed our solidarity with those organising to oppose it.

Given the poor attendance at this and the previous meeting, we discussed whether it was worth continuing with branch meetings. However, we concluded that the meet-ups had some use for the moment, even if only for the two of us.

Steve Devey
Teesside

Pay day

Eddie Ford's article on the tax credits debate ('Tories screw hard-working families', November 5) was very useful and contained some informative facts and figures.

He made reference to the fact that in 1999 around one in 50 workers were on the national minimum wage and that, referencing *The Guardian* newspaper, this figure is expected to increase to one in nine by 2020. The implication is that the national minimum wage is acting to drag wages downwards and for some becoming in effect a maximum wage, and is therefore a bad thing, at least in part.

I am not sure that is necessarily a correct interpretation. It could mean that, whereas in 1999 the NMW was acting as a floor and a benefit for 2% of workers, by 2020 it will be providing a minimum floor for over 11% - ie, that it is benefiting a much higher proportion of the workforce than in 1999.

If the national minimum wage were to be increased to, say, £10 per hour, it should be obvious that this would mean an even higher proportion of the workforce would be on the NMW and that would surely be a good thing. If the current NMW were abolished, it is surely obvious that a lot of wages would fall below the current level, rather than rise upwards, as implied by 'drag' theorists.

It should be noted the Living Wage of £8.25 an hour, calculated by the Loughborough University Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP) for the Living Wage Foundation, is to cover the living costs of just one adult only. If you are in a family unit with, say, one partner and two primary school age children, the CRSP calculates a minimum income requirement for gross earnings of £37,176, equating to £17.82 an hour (assuming a 40-hour week). It should be obvious that two partners working full-time and both on the Living Wage of £8.25 would not earn enough to cover absolutely basic and essential costs.

It points to a further truth that, whereas in the past a single family bread winner's (usually male) wages were just about sufficient to provide for a basic household, in recent decades it has become increasingly the case that both parents or partners have to work in order to make ends meet. Capitalism 'pays' for this by depressing wage rates generally.

Both partners having to work full-time for as many hours as possible just to survive leads to wider social exclusion and marginalisation from participation in activities such as visits to friends, family, cinema, theatre and other cultural, social, sporting and political activities, which in any decent society should be considered the norm for all. As well as undermining the physical and mental health of those forced to work long hours, the impact of

all these factors is to undermine and limit the development of community, class and collective consciousness.

All parents should have reasonable time to spend with their children, so the answer to that problem is not to increase childcare provision but to reduce working hours and increase the national minimum wage to ensure no loss of income. Collectively provided and funded childcare is important in its own right to help develop and socialise young children, for families to become integrated in their local communities, and should not be used to 'allow' parents to work stupidly long hours for poverty wages.

We ought to advocate, as part of our minimum demands, that one partner's full-time wages or both partners' part-time wages should be adequate to ensure their family unit can have a decent standard of living. That implies a minimum rate of pay significantly higher than the current national minimum wage and the current living wage.

In my opinion, the setting of a much higher national minimum wage should complement and underpin the general wages struggle conducted by organised labour. Yes, this would mean a higher proportion of workers would be on the NMW, but surely this should be seen as a modest attempt to implement the law of the (socialist) plan, to limit the law of (market) value, which would push wages below any such minimum.

Such demands would help project a glimpse of a society with a much better work life balance in all aspects, with reduced working weeks, working years and working lifetimes, where surplus value was reinvested for the benefit of the working class and society more generally.

Andrew Northall
Kettering

Statistical lunatic

Michael Ellison's letter (December 17) says that there was a 62% turn out in the Oldham West and Royton by-election. The turnout was actually 40.3%. The Labour candidate won 62.1% of the vote. All the statistics put forward by this right Labour letter writer are wrong. He says there was a 55% turnout at the general election in Oldham West. The turnout was 59.6%. He then says that if Michael Meacher had a 62% turn out (the percentage of the vote taken by Jim McMahon) instead of the 55% turn out that Michael Meacher had in May (the turnout was 59.6%, he won just under 55% of the vote) then he may have won with a 17,000 majority. In this man's demented statistical mind that means that Labour, having won with a majority of 10,722 has lost 6,000 votes and Corbynism had turned them away to Ukip.

We are dealing with a lunatic here. Let's look at the reality. Labour's share of the vote went from 54.8% to 62.1%. If McMahon had stood on an identical voter turn out to Michael Meacher's he would have won with 26,740 votes compared to Michael Meacher's 23,630. In Michael Ellison's demented mind Labour has lost 6,000 votes in a comparative statistical shift, all of which have gone to Ukip. Meanwhile back on planet earth Labour, using the comparative statistic, increased its vote by 3,110. Labour didn't lose 6,000 votes, they gained 3,000. So much for the attempt to distort reality by this Blairite. The Tory percentage of the vote collapsed from 19% to 9.4%. That's a loss of 9.6%. Ukip's percentage went up by 2.8%. The Tory vote actually switched to Labour.

Labour increased its majority by winning seven out of ten of the Tory lost votes. Given the massive nationwide hate campaign generated against Labour and the dire predictions that Labour would be routed by Ukip, this result in Oldham can be construed as incredible, an indication of what is to come next May. Blair won in 1997 because faith in the Tories had collapsed. In the next decade or so Blair lost the Labour Party millions of voters and destroyed the democratic processes in the party and disenfranchised and disengaged the whole population. Blair is a Class A war criminal. He should by rights be in a prison cell.

Elijah Traven
Hull

Overdose

My friend Paul passed away recently. An overdose, either deliberate or accidental, is suspected. Paul died alone in his room at a local homeless hostel.

I had known Paul for nearly 30 years. Paul's hobby was metal detecting.

Until five years ago Paul attended a local mental health day centre. The day centre was then changed into a resource centre with the main aim of getting people into voluntary work and then paid work. This change to a resource centre was made by the county council at the instructions of the government.

The last Labour government really did believe that they'd abolished boom and bust with jobs for everyone, including those with mental health conditions. Hence their plans, put into practice by the Tories, to turn all mental health day centres into resource centres. When the day centre became a resource centre Paul stopped all contact. So he was left alone without any support in his room at the homeless hostel.

However, it's time not to mourn but to organise. I've applied to re-join the Labour Party. By doing so my friend Paul's death will not be in vain.

John Smithee
Cambridgeshire

Fighting fund

2016 success

I hope all readers had an enjoyable Christmas holiday. For our part, we celebrated the new year by raising the £1,750 we needed for our final fighting fund of 2015. In fact we just exceeded our target, as supporters rallied to their paper, donating £852 in the final two weeks of December and taking the total for the month to £1,777.

Amongst those deserving special mention were standing order donors SK (£230), MM (£75), JT (£75), RK (£50) and TT (£40) - not forgetting PM, who added an extra £30 to his regular £100! Then there were cheques for £60 from AD, £50 each from ST and NF, plus handy PayPal donations from PM (£50 plus £5) and TT (£40).

So now let's make sure we start 2016 as we mean to continue. And

it has to be said that January has begun with a tidy amount in the pot. First of all, those start-of-the-month standing orders came to £299 (there were 23 of them, including £30 each from TB, CG, SD and DL, £25 from FK and £20 each from II, DG, DL and NW. There was also a £10 Pay Pal contribution from BN. All that comes to £389 - not a bad start to the year!

Lastly, it is worth reporting that we had 4,045 e-readers over the last few weeks - a marginal increase, but then we have had a short break ●

Robbie Rix

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

ACTION

CPGB podcasts

Every Monday we upload a podcast commenting on the current political situation. In addition, the site features voice files of public meetings and other events: <http://cpgb.org.uk/home/podcasts>.

London Communist Forum

Sunday January 10, 5pm: Weekly political report from CPGB Provisional Central Committee, followed by open discussion and reading group. Calthorpe Arms, 252 Grays Inn Road, London WC1. Study of Ralph Miliband's *Parliamentary socialism*. This meeting: chapter 1, section 2: 'The Labour left'. Organised by CPGB: www.cpgb.org.uk.

Radical Anthropology Group

Tuesday January 12, 6.30pm: Introduction to anthropology. Chris Knight: Decoding Chomsky's linguistic theories: Science and revolutionary politics. Organised by Radical Anthropology Group: <http://radicalanthropologygroup.org>.

Save NHS bursaries protests

Saturday January 9, 12pm: St Thomas' Hospital, London SE1 - Facebook event: www.facebook.com/events/440660962797762.
Saturday January 9, 1pm: Grey's Monument, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 - Facebook event: www.facebook.com/events/982258368513379.
Saturday January 9, 12pm: Middlesbrough Town Hall TS1 - Facebook event: www.facebook.com/events/540874736083404.

The McDonnell Plan

Saturday 9 January, 2pm: Public Meeting, Saints Rugby ground, St James, Northampton. Speakers: John McDonnell, Shadow Chancellor; Dave Ward, UWC gensec. Organised by Northants Labour Party. Details: www.facebook.com/events/1715434058676362/

Israel and war against people

Wednesday January 13, 7.30pm: Public meeting with book author. Brighton Friends Meeting House, Ship St, Brighton, BN1 1AF. Talk with author of books on the Israel-Palestine conflict Jeff Halper. Free entry. Event page: www.palestinecampaign.org/events/jeff-halper-the-war-against-the-people/. Organised by Palestine Solidarity Campaign: www.palestinecampaign.org/.

Russian Revolution 100

Friday January 15, 1pm: Planning meeting: Marking 100 years since the Russian Revolution. Level 3/SU, Institute of Education, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL.

Syrians in revolution and war

Thursday January 21 7pm -8.30pm: Discussion of book with author. Five Leaves Bookshop, 14a Long Row, Nottingham NG1 2DH. Robin Yassin-Kasib will talk about his new book 'Burning Country - Syrians in revolution and war'. £3.00 entry. Please book at fiveleaves.bookshopevents@gmail.com.

Resisting police militarisation

Thursday January 21, 6.30pm: Planning meeting, Global Justice Now office, 66 Offley Road, London SW9. Share and learn from stories of police repression. Organised by Campaign Against the Arms Trade: www.caat.org.uk.

An economy to serve people, not profit

Thursday January 21, 10am to 4pm: Conference, Central Hall, Oldham Street, Manchester M1. Cooperative and labour movement discussion on alternatives to capitalism and austerity. Speakers include John McDonnell MP. £45, including lunch and refreshments. Organised by Cooperatives UK: www.uk.coop.

Stop Trident

Thursday January 21, 6.45pm: Meeting, Unity Hall, 277a Upper Street, London N1. Speakers include: Kate Hudson (CND), Asima Shaikh (Islington Labour councillor). Organised by Stop the War Coalition: www.stopwar.org.uk.

On liberty

Saturday January 23, 2.30pm: Corin Redgrave Memorial Lecture, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Speaker: Shami Chakrabarti. Entrance: £8 (£5 concessions). Organised by Peace and Progress: www.peaceandprogress.org.

The future society

Saturday February 6, 2pm: Participatory discussion forum, DIY Space for London, 96-108 Ormside Street, London SE15. What might we expect from the future 'utopian' society? Organised by Radical Assembly: www.facebook.com/radicalassembly.

Labour Representation Committee

Saturday February 20, 10.30am to 5pm: General meeting, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Speakers include John McDonnell MP and Matt Wrack (FBU). Organised by LRC: www.l-r-c.org.uk.

Homes for all

Saturday January 30, 12 noon-4pm: Left Unity sponsored conference on the housing question. Ladywood Community Centre. St. Vincent St., Birmingham, B16 8RR. Event page: <https://www.facebook.com/events/158053514559348/>. Organised by Left Unity: <http://leftunity.org/>.

Levelling and Digging

Saturday February 13, 1pm: Public meeting. Red Shed, Vicarage Street, Wakefield. The Levellers and the Diggers. Organised by Wakefield Socialist History Group: www.theredshed.org.uk/SocialHist.html.

CPGB wills

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

LABOUR

War of manoeuvre

Jeremy Corbyn still presides over a 'left-centre-right' shadow cabinet, writes **Eddie Ford**

After 30 hours of talks, Jeremy Corbyn finally completed his cabinet reshuffle in the early hours of January 6. As widely expected, Michael Dugher, shadow culture secretary, got the sack. As far as communists are concerned, good riddance to rightist rubbish - exemplified by his red-baiting comments about how a lot of Stop the War Coalition members "think the wrong people won the cold war", or attacking Momentum as a "mob" who condemned "good" Labour MPs who took a "very difficult decision" over military action in Syria.

Issuing a rather self-aggrandising statement, Dugher - a former aide to Gordon Brown who ran Andy Burnham's leadership bid - said he had "paid the price" for speaking out in defence of such colleagues, claiming that the biggest casualty in the reshuffle had been the "new politics" promised by the Labour leadership. He also accused the Corbyn team of deploying a "barrage of briefing" against "decent and loyal" shadow cabinet members. Sections of the media made a big thing about Dugher being a popular "working class MP", suggesting that his departure could represent a "danger" to the Labour leader.¹ Fairly predictably, Dugher was praised by the usual suspects on the centre and right of the party - Tom Watson, Labour's deputy leader, Andy Burnham, shadow home secretary, Vernon Coaker, shadow Northern Ireland minister, and a string of senior Labour MPs such as Lucy Powell, Jon Ashworth, Luciana Berger and Graham Jones. Watson, in particular, lamented the "loss" of a "rare politician" like Dugher - a "talented working class MP" who has "not lost his strong Yorkshire roots". Somewhat daftly, Graham Jones - MP for Hyndburn - made out that Dugher's sacking was a sign that "traditional working class Labour is dying", presumably at the hands of the London metropolitan elite represented by Jeremy Corbyn.

Also sacked for "incompetence and disloyalty" was Pat McFadden, the shadow Europe minister - replaced by Pat Glass, formerly the shadow education minister with responsibility for childcare. McFadden got the chop, it seems, mainly for his response to the blog post that appeared on the STWC's website, which said Paris had "reaped the whirlwind" of "western support for extremist violence" in the Middle East (which, of course, was taken completely out of context by the media and the Labour right). Full of innocence, McFadden mused on the BBC's *Today* programme that the Labour leader "clearly" interpreted "me saying terrorists are entirely responsible for their actions" as "an attack on him" - how on earth could Corbyn have thought such a thing? All he did was ask David Cameron to reject the view that terrorist acts were "always a response or a reaction to what the West did" and to agree that such an approach "risked infantilising terrorists, when the truth was that they were adults who were entirely responsible for their actions". More directly, John McDonnell told the same show that McFadden's comments had "played into an agenda which distorted Jeremy's views on how we tackle terrorism" and in general contributed to an "undermining of Jeremy's status". McDonnell is surely right.

Benn test

For weeks there had been feverish speculation that Hilary Benn would be sacked as shadow foreign secretary,



Pack of pro-war bastards: make them walk

prompting a mass walkout by at least ten shadow cabinet ministers. According to *The Guardian* and other papers, Corbyn had wanted to ditch Benn but in the end he was just too big to bring down and retained his job - so the warmonger remains in the shadow cabinet.

However, apparently "an agreement" has been reached with Benn, meaning he would be "obliged" to agree with Corbyn in public - a Labour source saying all future positions on foreign policy would be "directed" by the Labour leader. Or in the words of McDonnell, the shadow foreign secretary has "recognised the mandate" that Jeremy Corbyn has from the party membership and "will recognise his leadership on this issue". Slightly confusingly though, McDonnell also said that Benn will be "entitled to disagree" with the leader on "matters of conscience" like the bombing of Syria, but would have to do so from the backbenches in any future free vote rather than as the party spokesperson.² Stirring things up, both *The Telegraph* and the *Huffington Post* claim that Benn did not agree to "any new conditions" - but, on the other hand, he will "not be going out of his way to pick a fight with the leadership".³ Then again, Benn told Sky News on January 6 that he has not been muzzled and would be carrying on with his job "exactly as before". When it comes to the Benn test, it is not clear who has out-manoeuvred whom.

Maria Eagle, the pro-Trident shadow defence minister, was demoted to culture, replaced by Emily Thornberry - who gained momentary notoriety after she was forced to resign from her role as

shadow attorney general for tweeting a picture of a white van and St George's flag, an action that was interpreted as "drippingly patronising", and snobbish. We are informed that Eagle is "happy" with her new job. Elsewhere, Emma Lewell-Buck was promoted to shadow minister for devolution and local government. Angela Eagle, the shadow business secretary and twin sister to Maria, was given the extra title of shadow first secretary of state - allowing her to stand in for Corbyn at PMQ's. As a result of the reshuffle, there are now 17 women and 14 men in the full shadow cabinet - making a complete nonsense of the statement on *Newsnight* from Jess Phillips MP that the Labour leader was operating a regime of "low-level, non-violent misogyny". Interestingly, there is speculation that Rosie Winterton - currently shadow chief whip - could lose her role chairing the boundary review of parliamentary constituencies: a move that would amount to "an act of war" greater than any reshuffle change or sacking, as one Labour insider put it, given the opportunity to select more leftwing parliamentary candidates.

Rather luridly, *The Guardian* portrayed the reshuffle as "moves to quash internal disagreement" (January 6). But far from being a "Stalinist purge" or "revenge reshuffle" - a term first coined by Dugher in the *New Statesman* - it was more like a gentle pruning. Corbyn still presides over a 'left-centre-right' shadow cabinet, or the "big tent" approach, but has tilted the balance slightly leftwards - keen to stamp a larger degree of authority over the shadow cabinet and wanting greater "coherence" on foreign and

defence policy.

For Cat Smith, shadow minister for women, Corbyn was perfectly entitled to sack people like Dugher who spent more time attacking the Labour leadership than the Tories. As she explained, Corbyn is "trying to realign his top team to match more what the PLP is and more what the party is." It was understandable that Corbyn, albeit within the obvious limitations of a thoroughly right-dominated PLP, wanted to partially 'correct' the political balance and composition of the shadow cabinet.

But it was still too much for three shadow ministers. Jonathan Reynolds (railways) and Stephen Doughty (foreign) quit over the sacking of McFadden, and Kevan Jones quit his defence role in protest at the removal of Maria Eagle. In his resignation letter, Reynolds endorsed McFadden's comments about the Paris attacks, saying he could not "in good conscience endorse the world view" of the STWC - and also wanted to "exercise more freedom" to express his views on the future direction of the party. Similarly, Doughty did not want to be associated with a "narrative that somehow it's the West that is responsible" for terrorism - ie, STWC and hence Corbyn.

We in the CPGB have made our view plain on a number of occasions. Despite comrade Corbyn's reshuffle, which has some welcome features, he still has the same problem with the shadow cabinet - the right and the centre *set the limits* of what can be done. If you do this or that, we will walk: perpetual blackmail. But let the bastards walk, so be it. Yes, it would create a crisis if there was a mass walkout by the right. After all, who the hell do you replace them with? The PLP is hardly over-endowed with talented class warriors. But that is why our preference, under these concrete circumstances, is for a *pocket-sized* cabinet that does not try to cover every base.

Scandal

As almost everybody must know, the reshuffle has been accompanied by the ongoing Simon Danczuk scandal - now suspended for 'inappropriate' behaviour - sending numerous sextexts to a 17-year-old girl, Sopheha Houlihan, after she asked him for a job in his constituency office. In return, he asked her if she wanted a "spanking". The party's ruling National Executive Committee is now investigating his conduct.

Danczuk has "unreservedly" apologised for his behaviour, blaming a drink problem and a "weakness" for young women. But he is now facing a police investigation as well as a rape allegation dating back to 2006. At the weekend, Danczuk's first wife, Sonia Rossington, accused him of being a "sexual predator" fuelled by booze and cannabis, in an interview with the *Mail on Sunday* - to which Danczuk responded by saying she was "consumed by bitterness" and drink. Talk about kettles and pots. Then in a series of interviews over the new year, his recent ex-partner, Claire Hamilton, portrayed him as a man prepared to do anything to get his name in the press and say anything to inflate his already swollen bank account. In return, his second wife, Karen - the so-called 'Selfie queen' - is also being investigated by the police after she tweeted about Hamilton: "You forgot to say which married Labour MP gave you oral sex 24 hours before getting with SD".⁴ Hamilton demanded that Karen Danczuk remove the post from

Twitter, called the police when she refused, and is now threatening legal action. Making everything even more tawdry, another Sunday tabloid claims that Sopheha Houlihan, now 18-years-old, has appeared on a website calling herself Goddess Rosalie Von Morelli, a dominatrix - allegedly using the site to sell used thongs, "frenchies" and knickers for £15 a pair, and offered bras and toe-nail clippings for £10 a time.⁵

It is surely a pity that Danczuk has been suspended for *stupid* behaviour - rather than for having a regular column in the *Sun*, *Mail* and *Telegraph*, voting for war in Syria, agitating for a "coup" against comrade Corbyn, describing Nigel Farage as the "best leader" in Britain, openly toying with the idea of defecting to Ukip, arguing that foreign aid money should be spent on Britain, etc, etc. If the NEC does take disciplinary action against Danczuk on this matter, it would have an unfortunate whiff of John Major's laughable 'back to basics' campaign - which quickly backfired when it was revealed that half the Tory cabinet were having affairs or engaged in some form of financial corruption.⁶ From the communist point of view, we want an emphasis on *politics* - not individual failings. There but for the grace of God ...

Meanwhile, over the Christmas period there have been many hints that Momentum - Jeremy Corbyn's supposed praetorian guard - is going to be given a more solid organisational basis. This month it will hold its first national committee meeting, where up to 60 key members will agree a new leadership team, membership fees, making official links with a host of trade unions, and so on.⁷ Most importantly of all, of course, the committee will consider whether to apply to affiliated to the Labour Party as a "socialist society" just like the Fabians, the Jewish Labour movement, Labour Irish Society, Socialist Health Association, Chinese for Labour, etc. This would give Momentum a seat on the NEC, helping to strengthen Corbyn's position in the party. Though there will be plenty of talk about appealing to the grassroots and beyond, creating something new and fresh, Momentum is rightly orientated towards Labour and to giving organisational flesh to the Corbyn campaign that spontaneously developed last year - that is a no-brainer, as Corbyn himself and Jon Lansman (Momentum's director) have made quite clear right from the very beginning. Naturally, that leaves the 'strategy' of the Left Unity leadership up the creek without a paddle - having rejected the idea of affiliation and an orientation towards the Labour Party ●

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Notes

1. <http://www.itv.com/news/2016-01-05/could-axing-michael-dugher-spell-danger-for-jeremy-corbyn/>
2. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-35239232>
3. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/01/06/jeremy-corbyns-second-mee_n_8920390.html
4. <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/6839743/Karen-Danczuk-probed-by-police-over-oral-sex-accusation-against-Claire-Hamilton.html>
5. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3382392/Younger-women-Achilles-heel-admits-shamed-MP-Danczuk-reveals-drinking-three-bottles-wine-night-sent-sex-texts-17-year-old-girl.html>
6. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Back_to_Basics_\(campaign\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Back_to_Basics_(campaign))
7. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/momentum-controversial-left-wing-group-to-debate-joining-labour-in-boost-to-jeremy-corbyn-a6779916.html>

SAUDI ARABIA

Method behind the madness

While the Saudi kingdom's callous executions must be condemned, Yassamine Mather says Iran's official protests are sheer hypocrisy



Barbarism

It appears as if the new leaders of Saudi Arabia woke up on the first day of 2016 and thought, 'How can we make a terrible situation in the Middle East worse than it already is? How can we incite more sectarian violence, start new wars?' And then they came up with the brilliant idea of executing 47 prisoners. Forty-three Sunni and four Shia prisoners were killed; some were beheaded, others faced a firing squad. Amongst them the country's top Shia cleric, Nimr Al Nimr, who was injured during the course of his arrest in 2012. Saudi attempts at linking his execution to an anti-al Qaeda, anti-terrorist operation beggars belief. Nimr had been convicted of "sedition, disobedience and bearing arms". He never denied the political charges against him, however he and his supporters are adamant that he never carried weapons or called for violence.

Robert Fisk is right when he mocks the Saudi kingdom's election to the UN Human Rights Council in 2013 - with UK help - adding: "Now, only hours after the Sunni Muslim Saudis chopped off the heads of 47 of their enemies, including a prominent Shia Muslim cleric, the Saudi appointment is grotesque. All that was missing was the video of the decapitations - although the kingdom's 158 beheadings last year were perfectly in tune with the Wahabi teachings of the 'Islamic State'."

However, there was method behind this madness. The second most important prisoner executed on January 2 was Faris Ahmed Zahrani, described by the Saudi media as al-Qaeda's top religious leader in the kingdom. Saudi Arabian prisoner Adel al-Dhubaiti, who was convicted of the murder of BBC cameraman Simon Cumbers and the attempted murder of BBC correspondent Frank Gardner was among the other prisoners executed by Saudi Arabia. According to the *Independent*, "Cumber's parents, Robert and Bronagh, from Navan in County Meath, had previously called on the Saudi Arabian authorities not to execute their son's killer, adding their son Simon was a pacifist, someone who would not have wanted the death penalty and would have opposed it. We do not want this man to be executed if he is found guilty", Mr Cumbers said in 2009.

In a country where there is considerable sympathy and support for Al Qaeda and Islamic State, the inclusion of four Shias was aimed at reassuring the Sunni majority in Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf countries that the rulers

were still on their side, that Shia Iran remains the main enemy. The reality is that king Salman, like his predecessors, is far more concerned about the possibility of a Sunni, Salafi rebellion than protests by the Shia minority in the east of the country.

Once the Saudis took this step their Shia counterparts in Iran were bound to react with protests outside the Saudi embassy in Tehran organised by *bassij* (the state's right wing militia) but portrayed as a spontaneous outpouring of anger. The response by Iran's 'supreme leader', ayatollah Khamenei, to other ayatollahs, calling for "divine punishment of the house of Saud", prompted many criticisms inside the country. For the 'moderate' reformist opposition, who kept repeating their allegiance to the Islamic Republic but have been badly suppressed in the last 7-8 years, it is inconceivable that Iran would have shown more tolerance than Saudi Arabia towards an opponent calling for "the overthrow of the existing order" - as Nimr Al Nimr did in Saudi Arabia.

The 'reformist' leaders of the 2009 protests in Iran, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, never called for the overthrow of the Islamic Republic; on the contrary, they constantly reiterated their support for the supreme leader; yet they have spent the last 7 years under house arrest, with no trial. In the 37 years since the Islamic Republic of Iran came into existence, anyone who called for the overthrow of the religious dictatorship has faced execution.

Ironically, this week Mansoureh Behkish, the mother of five executed left wing activists, died in Tehran. Her children were all communists, members of Fedayeen Minority, and all executed by Iran's Islamic Republic. She once said she had spent most of her time outside Iranian jails. So for Iranian clerics, pasdars and *bassijis* to show anger at political executions in Saudi Arabia is hypocritical. No wonder everyone is talking of the pot calling the kettle black.

As for Nimr's own credentials, the Islamic Republic might be in denial, but far from being a constant ally of the regime in Tehran, when it came to making deals with the United States he showed the kind of pragmatism Shia leaders are famous for. Documents released by Wikileaks show how Nimr courted the Americans, claiming to have nothing to do with Tehran, and was prepared to do a deal in exchange for US support. According to CIA documents released

by Wikileaks:

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Classified By: CG JOHN KINCANNON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: In an August 13 meeting with PoOff, controversial Shi'ite sheikh Nimr Baqr al-Nimr sought to distance himself from previously reported pro-Iranian and anti-American statements, instead adopting a less radical tone on topics such as the relationship between Iran and the Saudi Shi'a, and American foreign policy. Arguing that he is portrayed publicly as much more radical than the true content of his words and beliefs, the Sheikh also espoused other conciliatory ideas such as fair political decision-making over identity-based politics, the positive impact of elections, and strong "American ideals" such as liberty and justice. Despite this more moderate tone, Al-Nimr reasserted his ardent opposition to what he described as the authoritarianism of the reactionary al-Saud regime, stating he would always support "the people" in any conflict with the government.

The CIA background notes on al Nimr are also interesting. He clearly sought to reassure the CIA that he wanted to befriend the US:

In the meeting with PoOff, al-Nimr stated that his fundamental view of foreign powers - including Iran - is that they act out of self-interest, not out of piety or religious commonality. Al-Nimr said he was against the idea that Saudi Shi'ite should expect Iranian support based on some idea of sectarian unity that supersedes national politics.

6. (S/NF) In addition to supporting Iran, al-Nimr's recent sermons have been laced with anti-American rhetoric, for example that America "wants to humiliate the world." In this meeting, the sheikh distanced himself from these ideas, saying that he has great affection for the American people. Al-Nimr stated that in his view, when compared with the actions of nations such as Britain, the European colonial powers, or the Soviet Union, the "imperialism" of the United States has been considerably more benign, with better treatment of people and more successful independent states. Al-Nimr said that this was evident in comparing the fortunes of West and East Germany, where the American-supported West was clearly more

successful than the Soviet-supported East. The Sheikh also cited Japan as another case of America properly compensating and building a nation. The Sheikh believes that US efforts in the Middle East are also better intentioned than previous imperial powers in the region, but that the US has made tremendous mistakes in Iraq.

The reformist faction of the regime, from president Hassan Rouhani to sections of the 'soft left', were unanimous in repeating ad nauseam that the January 2 attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran was a violation of international law. Contrary to the propaganda of more conservative factions of the Islamic regime in Iran, attacking embassies, be it the US embassy in the early years of the regime or the Saudi embassy this week, is neither radical nor is it anti-'arrogance' (the Iranian clergy's term for imperialism).

However the outcry of the opposition is also ludicrous. How can anyone talk of respect for international law when we live in a world where the hegemon power, the US, has broken every aspect of international law, even the basic rules governing military engagement covered by the Geneva convention, during its interventions in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan; when we know from recent history that UK soldiers in Iraq facing war crime charges are unlikely to face any punishment; when we know US and UK security agents who sat through interrogation and torture of Guantanamo prisoners will never face any court?

The whole idea of international law has become a joke, and anyone peddling it is either deluded or dependent on the financial contributions of western powers - a sad reality when it comes to large chunks of the Iranian opposition, including some masquerading as leftwing.

Having said that, the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran was stupid and irrelevant. At the end of the day it will be the Islamic Republic which will be even more isolated in the region. Already Saudi Arabia and a number of its allies, including Bahrain and Sudan, have broken off diplomatic relations. Senior clerics and pasdar leaders have already started distancing themselves from the Saudi embassy protesters ●

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Notes

1. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/saudi-arabias-executions-were-worthy-of-isis-so-will-david-cameron-and-the-west-now-stop-their-a6794046.html>

ARMS

Popular militia vs standing army

Jack Conrad takes issue with those on the left who oppose, shun or want to keep silent over a basic democratic demand

Many so-called Marxists consider upholding the right to bear arms divisive, unnecessary, provocative or dangerously off-putting. According to Sam Fairbairn, national secretary of the People's Assembly, calling for a popular militia risks the unity of the anti-austerity movement and should therefore be barred from consideration. In the attempt to stop the question even being debated, he bureaucratically announced that a Teesside motion - which advocated the "dissolution of the standing army and the formation of a popular militia under democratic control" - was "outside of the remit" of the December 2015 delegate conference of the People's Assembly.¹

Strange, given that the People's Assembly rejects the renewal of Trident, condemns imperialist adventures in the Middle East and opposes unjust and illegal wars.² Stranger still, given that comrade Sam Fairbairn, along with John Rees, Lindsey German and Chris Nineham, is a member of Counterfire. Their 2010 breakaway from the Socialist Workers Party proudly proclaims itself to be a "revolutionary socialist organisation". Sneakily, however, Counterfire is committed to "eliminating unnecessary barriers between our socialist politics and the thousands of activists being drawn into opposition to austerity and war."³ Presumably, the "dissolution of the standing army and the formation of a popular militia under democratic control" constitutes one of those "unnecessary barriers" that have to be eliminated.

No less strange, Romyne Phoenix vehemently supported comrade Fairbairn. With the backing of Peter Tatchell and Derek Wall, she stood on a Green Left ticket against Natalie Bennett in the August 2012 contest to be Green Party leader.⁴ Note: the Greens have a long standing peace and defence policy (as substantially updated in January 1990 and last modified in September 2014).⁵ In short, the Green Party demands scrapping Trident and a British withdrawal from Nato. Moreover, and this is the point, the Greens are programmatically committed to replacing the existing armed forces with a "body of civilian and military volunteers."⁶ In other words, a Green Party version of a popular militia.

While the Greens are not bad, at least on paper - amongst the economic left there is a morbid fear of anything that smacks of the constitutional demand for the "right to bear arms" and replacing the standing army with a popular militia.

A few years ago, we interviewed Dave Nellist of the Socialist Party in England and Wales. He was standing as the lead No2EU candidate in European Union elections for the West Midlands constituency. Revealingly, the comrade refused point blank to say if he supported or opposed our demand for a popular militia.⁷ Robert Griffiths, general secretary of the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain - standing top of No2EU's list in Wales - was, however, more forthcoming. He aggressively dismissed the demand for abolishing the standing army and a popular militia as "nothing to do with real struggle." There is, he dumbly pronounced, no revolutionary situation in Britain. Hence such a demand is to be lambasted as a CPGB "provocation". Showing his true colours, he cravenly stated that the very idea of a militia presented "a gift to the British state". If we advocate such an outrage, "MI5 will be around

straightaway".⁸

So, maybe comrade Griffiths thinks the words of *Internationale* are a risky provocation too. This is the second stanza:

*No more deluded by reaction,
On tyrants only we'll make war!
The soldiers too will take strike action,
They'll break ranks and fight no more!
And if those cannibals keep trying,
To sacrifice us to their pride,
They soon shall hear the bullets flying,
We'll shoot the generals on our own side.*⁹

Left Unity

Objectively then, when it comes to the standing army and the demand for a popular militia, it is clear that the Green Party stands well to the left of the cowardly economic left.

Take Left Unity. Cross-examined on Andrew Neil's *Daily Politics* in March 2014, Salman Shaheen, then one of Left Unity's four principle speakers, bent over backwards to present the organisation as broad, conventional and safely within the remit of 1945 Labourism (the comrade resigned in November 2015 with the stated intention of joining the Labour Party to support Jeremy Corbyn). Yet despite comrade Shaheen's self-identification as a "moderate", inevitably, Andrew Neil sought to paint Left Unity as "loony". Specifically, he cited our Communist Platform's standing motion to Left Unity national conferences.

Once again it is worth reproducing this motion in full. As will be surely appreciated, the popular militia it envisages is not only far more radical than the Greens' "updated" Territorial Army. It combines abolishing the standing army with a militant class struggle perspective:

Left Unity is against the standing army and for the armed people. This principle will never be realised voluntarily by the capitalist state. It has to be won, in the first place by the working class developing its own militia.

Such a body grows out of the class struggle itself: defending picket lines, mass demonstrations, workplace occupations, fending off fascists, etc.

As the class struggle intensifies, conditions are created for the workers to arm themselves and win over sections of the military forces of the capitalist state. Every opportunity must be used to take even tentative steps towards this goal. As circumstances allow, the working class must equip itself with all weaponry necessary to bring about revolution.

To facilitate this we demand:

1. Rank and file personnel in the state's armed bodies must be protected from bullying, humiliating treatment and being used against the working class.

2. There must be full trade union and democratic rights, including the right to form bodies such as soldiers' councils.

3. The privileges of the officer caste must be abolished. Officers must be elected. Workers in uniform must become the allies of the masses in struggle.

4. The people have the right to bear arms and defend themselves.

5. The dissolution of the standing army and the formation of a well-regulated militia under democratic control.



Minneapolis strikers, 1934. Since 1776 American progressives have fought with the best weapons available to them

Supposedly this reminded Neil of America's Tea Party. Or so he said. Would Shaheen be voting for this madness? No, the comrade cringingly replied. "I disagree ... I will be voting against ... The majority of Left Unity members are disaffected Labour voters."

Neil is, in fact, an Americophile. He has worked in the US and still owns a plush New York apartment. So you would have thought he might have recognised some of the well known phrases. In no small part, after all, our Communist Platform drew inspiration from the second amendment to the US constitution. Ratified to popular acclaim in 1791, it states: "A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed."¹⁰

The historic background forms part of our common culture. Those who made the American revolution, above all the urban and rural masses, saw a standing army as an existential threat to democracy. Eg, in her *Observations on the new constitution* (1788) Mercy Otis Warren - the mother of the American revolution - branded the standing army as "the nursery of vice and the bane of liberty."¹¹ At great sacrifice the common people had overthrown the tyranny of George III and were determined to do the same again if faced with another unacceptable government.

The American demand for a "popular militia and the constitutional right to bear arms" clearly referenced the 1689 English bill of rights. Having access to arms had long been regarded as a 'natural right' by radicals on both sides of the Atlantic.¹² Certainly the Levellers and their successors considered themselves duty bound to take up arms against tyranny. Hence the staunch opposition to James II's simultaneous attempt to maintain a standing army and disarm the "Protestant population".¹³ Buoyed by his crushing of the Monmouth rebellion (1685) - carried out under the green Leveller flag and supported by peasants and plebeians - the Stewart king pursued his counterrevolutionary programme. Suffice to say, turning

back the wheel of progress threatened the vital interests of the financial and merchant elite. And it was this class which took the lead in inviting William of Orange, the Dutch monarch, to launch his invasion.¹⁴

The subsequent - pro-capitalist - constitution, agreed by both houses of parliament and the newly installed dual monarchy, was founded on the Bill of Rights. Included amongst its provisions are these two vital formulations: "That the raising or keeping a standing army within the kingdom in time of peace unless it be with consent of parliament is against law." And directly below that we read: "That the subjects which are Protestants may have arms for their defence suitable to their conditions and as allowed by law."¹⁵ And, of course, the historical link between the English Bill of Rights and the US Second Amendment, has been repeatedly acknowledged, not least by the US Supreme Court (eg, *United States v Cruikshank* 1876).¹⁶

Theory and practice

Naturally Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels considered the second amendment part of their heritage. Clause four of the Marx-Engels Demands of the Communist Party in Germany (1848) is emphatic: "Universal arming of the people. In future armies shall at the same time be workers' armies so that the armed forces will not only consume, as in the past, but produce even more than it costs to maintain them."¹⁷

The Marx-Engels team never wavered on this. Read *Can Europe disarm?* Here, in this pamphlet written by Engels in 1893, ten years after the death of his friend and collaborator, we find a concrete application of Marxism to the dawning epoch of universal suffrage and universal conscription. Engels concluded that the key to revolution was mutiny in the armed forces. His pamphlet outlined a model bill for military reform in Germany. Engels was determined to show that the proposal to gradually transform standing armies into a "militia based on the universal principle of arming the people" could exploit the mounting fears of a pending European

war and the widespread resentment at the ruinous military budget.¹⁸

For propaganda effect, Engels proposed an international agreement to limit military service to a short period and a state system in which no country would be capable of aggression. Surely World War I would have been impossible if the European great powers had nothing more than lightly armed civilian militias available to them.

Not that Engels was a lily livered pacifist. He supported universal male (!) conscription and if necessary was quite prepared to advocate revolutionary war. However, his *Can Europe disarm?* was not intended to prove the military superiority of a militia over a standing army. No, he wanted a citizen army within which discipline would be self-imposed. An army where rank and file troops would confidentially turn their guns against officers who dared issue orders against the vital interests of the people. By winning hearts and minds such an army could be made ours.

As might be expected, the Marxist parties of the late 19th and early 20th century unproblematically included the demand for disbanding the standing army and establishing a popular militia in their programmes. Eg, the 1880 programme of the French Workers' Party, the 1891 *Erfurt programme*, the 1889 *Hainfield programme* of the Austrian Social Democratic Party, the 1903 programme of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, etc.

In the 'political section' of the programme of the French Workers' Party (Partie Ouvrier), authored jointly by Karl Marx and Jules Guesde, we therefore find the demand for the "abolition of standing armies and the general arming of the people" (clause four).¹⁹ A proposition faithfully translated by the Germans: "Education of all to bear arms. Militia in the place of the standing army" (clause 3).²⁰ The Austrians are adamant: "The cause of the constant danger of war is the standing army, whose growing burden alienates the people from its cultural tasks. It is therefore necessary to fight for the replacement of the standing army by arming the people" (clause 6).²¹ Then we have the Russians: "general arming of the people instead of maintaining a standing army" (clause c9).²²

After theory there must come practice.

Amongst the first decrees of the 1871 Paris Commune was the abolition of the standing army and constituting the national guard as the sole armed force in the country. Memorably, Auguste Blanqui, an outstanding leader in the 1848 revolution, proclaimed two decades earlier, "he who has iron, has bread!" By forging a new state based not on a repressive force that sat outside the general population, the Commune opened a new chapter in working class politics. And Russia took what happened in Paris to as yet unsurpassed heights. Formed in April-March 1917 the Red Guards proved crucial. Red Guards, and increasing numbers of army units, put themselves under the discipline of the Military Revolutionary Committee - a subdivision of the Bolshevik-led Petrograd soviet formally established at Leon Trotsky's initiative. On October 25 (November 7) 1917 the MRC issued its momentous declaration that the provisional government of Alexander Kerensky "no longer existed". State power has passed into the hands of the soviets of workers, peasants and soldiers.

Workers formed defence corps during the 1926 General Strike in Britain. American workers did the same in 1934. There were massive stoppages in San Francisco, Toledo and Minneapolis. As to resisting tyranny, in the 1920s the two main workers' parties in Germany established their own militias. The SDP dominated the soft-left Reichsbanner, while the Communist Party formed the much more militant Rotfrontkämpferbund (by 1929 it boasted 130,000 members). Despite its 1923 founding statutes emphasising ceremonial paraphernalia, marches and band music, the Schutzbund in Austria served as a kind of "proletarian police force".²³ When it came to strikes, demonstrations and meetings this workers' militia maintained discipline and fended off Nazi gangs. Though hampered by a dithering social democratic leadership, the Schutzbund heroically resisted the February 12 1934 fascist coup. In Spain anarchists, official communists, Pout, etc, likewise formed their own militias against the Franco uprising. Then, more recently, in 1966, there was the Black Panther Party. It organised "armed citizen's patrols" to monitor and counter the brutal US police force.²⁴ Even the "non-violent" civil rights movement, led by Martin Luther King, included within its ranks those committed to "armed self-defence" against Ku Klux Klan and other such terrorism.²⁵ Nor should we ever forget the miners and their heroic hit squads of 1984-85. Countless other such examples could be cited.

This is the "loony" tradition implicitly rejected by out and out pacifists such as Salman Shaheen and viewed with barely concealed dread, anger or embarrassment by social pacifists such as Sam Fairbairn, Dave Nellist and Robert Griffiths.

In that same dismal spirit, we have Rex Dunn writing in this paper.²⁶ A repentant refugee from Gerry Healy's Workers Revolutionary Party, the comrade nowadays seeks to reconcile Karl Marx's "rational optimism" with Theodor Adorno's "rational pessimism".²⁷ Naturally, as a self-declared "defender of classical Marxism," he stands by the right to bear arms ... at least "in principle." However, there is theory and there is practice, and at least with comrade Dunn, the two are never to be united ... certainly not at the moment.

Against those using the right to bear arms as a "virility" symbol of revolutionary credibility (the CPGB?), he fields America's "love affair with guns" and the country's horrendous murder rates. Though the infant US faced the threat of loyalist counterrevolution, that hardly applies today. So runs the comrade's argument. Moreover, because the class consciousness of American workers - and workers around the world - is at its "lowest ebb", he advocates what can only be characterised as Platonic Marxism.

Attempting to justify his Platonic Marxism, the comrade cites the backwardness of the US workers' movement: failure to resist austerity, refusal to oppose imperialist wars, tiny Communist Party, domination by Republicans and Democrats, hopeless atomisation, etc. If and when that situation is finally rectified by some miracle of history, only then "would it be the right time to raise this demand."

Comrade Dunn's parochialism is laughable. After all since 1791 bearing arms has been a constitutionally enshrined right ... in the USA. No mainstream American politician would dream of proposing to alter the constitution in this respect. Eg, introducing his recent proposals to tighten regulations on gun sales, Barack Obama told the American people: "I believe in the second amendment. It's there written on the paper ... No matter how much people

try to twist my words ... I taught constitutional law. I know a little bit about this. I get it."²⁸

Would comrade Dunn call for the abolition of the second amendment ... well until at last he credits the US working class with being educated enough, responsible enough, advanced enough? Either consciously or unconsciously the comrade advocates an *artificial* theory of stages. First workers must be organised around elementary economic demands, then arrives the fight to oppose imperialist wars, then there is the building of a mass party ... and finally, somewhere far down the line, is the demand for replacing the standing army with a popular militia.

Genuine Marxists take an entirely different approach. We present the working class with our *full programme*. Hence the straightforward declaration that our intention is to replace capitalism with a communist system which enshrines the principle of "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs." A maximum aim around which the working class can and must be organised ... now.

Of course, we cannot proceed straight to communism. That is why Marxists have a minimum programme. It arranges the key aims we pursue under capitalism ... and which in the fight to realise them strengthens, trains and readies the working class for revolution. As our *Draft programme* states, though "technically feasible" under capitalism, they can "only be fully realised through the working class coming to power, not only in Britain but on a continental European scale."²⁹

True, when it comes to the US there is the huge standing army. Numbering some 500,000, it has a roughly equal number of reservists. Of course, its origins lie squarely in the American revolution. The US army was sanctioned by an overwhelming vote by the Continental Congress in 1775. However, after decisively defeating the British-Hanoverian forces at Yorktown in 1781 the Continental Army was quickly disbanded. National defence relied entirely on the 13 separate state militias. It was the expansionist drive to crush the native Americans in the north west which saw the organisation of a standing army in 1791. That said, it was very small. Obviously the US army expanded considerably with the civil war and then World War I. But once peace was brought about the army was reduced once again. The decisive change came about after World War II. With the onset of the so-called Cold War the US decided to maintain a large standing army on a *permanent basis*. America had at last superceded Britain as capitalism's global hegemon.

Whatever the exact history, Marxists in the US are surely obliged to include amongst their programmatic demands opposition to this monster. It should be disbanded forthwith and replaced by a democratically controlled popular militia.

Does comrade Dunn consider such a demand premature?

His answer seems to rely on Theodor Adorno. Fleeing the Nazi menace, the intellectually over-refined Adorno was mortified by what he found in New York. Instead of the high bourgeois culture he had grown up with in Germany, there was what he derogatively labelled "commercial society": Hollywood films, the recorded music of Tin Pan Alley and the glossies and slicks of pulp fiction. All surely anticipated by the *normal* capitalist mass culture of 18th century Britain.³⁰ But Adorno was appalled. Famously he castigated the "sadism" of Charlie Chaplin's audiences, denounced jazz and snootily found every kind of radio music objectionable.³¹ He preferred sheet music.

America confirmed Adorno's historic pessimism. Not only did he expect fascism to endure in Europe - because it was considered a natural outgrowth of capitalism - he rejected politics and science for an obscurantist philosophising which discounted the working class as the agent of social change. After all, how could people whose minds were filled with the trash of the "culture industry" make a socialist revolution?

So while the writings of Adorno are full of moral outrage against fascism - and the immanent fascism contained in capitalist development since the days of the Enlightenment - there is no attempt to map out a *practical* strategy that could lead humanity to a radical change in social relations. Instead the future is written off as an inevitable "descent into a new kind of barbarism".³²

Comrade Dunn is treading in the pessimistic footsteps of Adorno. As the working class demonstrably failed to realise socialism in the 20th century, the only "rational" choice open to him appears to be a retreat into a Platonic Marxism. Necessarily that means abandoning, neutering, objecting to the demand for a popular militia.

Trotsky

Many of today's crop of social pacifists have a background in Trotskyism (eg, Sam Fairbairn, Dave Nellist, Andrew Burgin, Terry Conway and yes, of course, Rex Dunn). So, and not only for their benefit, it is worth quoting Leon Trotsky himself and his 'Programme of action for France' (1936). There is not a trace, not a hint, of the backtracking, cowardice and equivocation we see amongst his modern day followers.

Point 10 of the 'Action programme' carries this defiant title: "Disbanding of the police, political rights for soldiers".³³

Trotsky condemns the police and standing army and shows how they are used to "develop the *civil war* but also to prepare the *imperialist war*". He demands democratic rights for rank and file soldiers and the "execution of police duties by the workers' militia."

Further down, under point 15, we find Trotsky putting forward a militant plan for the main workers' parties and trade union federations to form their own militias and then uniting them "in action" against the growing threat from reaction. In February 1934 French Catholics, royalists and fascists called for a massive demonstration against economic chaos, weak government and political corruption. Armed with razors, clubs and knives, their gangs tried to invade parliament. Fifteen people were killed and 1,435 injured after gendarmes drove them back.

Trotsky, however, concludes, in point 17, warning against the delusion - spread by the Socialist Party and the 'official' French Communist Party - that the bourgeois police could be relied upon to disarm the reactionary gangs.

His slogan rings clear and loud: "*Arming of the proletariat, arming of the poor peasants! People's anti-fascist militia!*" "The exploiters," he explains, "are but a tiny minority" and will recoil from unleashing a civil war with their non-state fighting formations "only if the workers are armed and lead the masses".

Trotsky and his co-thinkers were subjected to exactly the same kind of dismissals that today we in the CPGB hear coming from the mouths of comrades Fairbairn, Shaheen, Griffiths and other social pacifists. Trotsky brilliantly, almost effortlessly, knocked down the objections one by one in *Whither France?* Hence we quickly come to his "least serious and honest" opponents. The blubbers who insisted that to "call for the organisation of a militia" is to "engage in provocation". This is "not an argument, but an insult", fumes

Trotsky.³⁴

Arming the working class flowed from the entire situation in France. Trotsky rhetorically asked if a workers' militia "provokes" fascist attacks and government repression? If that is the claim, he says, this is "an absolutely reactionary argument". Liberalism has always told workers that by their class struggle they "provoke" reaction.

Today in Britain, it certainly does not take the call for a "popular militia and the constitutional right to bear arms" to "provoke" MI5 infiltration, spying and wrecking operations; police kettlings, batterings and killings; the sequestration of trade union funds, etc.

Accusations that we Marxists are engaged in a "provocation" have long been used by timid opportunists. Trotsky recalls that the Mensheviks hurled the charge at the Bolsheviks after the December 1905 uprising in Moscow.

Trotsky turns savage: "Such accusations reduce themselves, in the final analysis, to the profound thought that if the oppressed do not baulk, the oppressors will not be obliged to beat them." This, says Trotsky, is the "philosophy of Tolstoy and Gandhi, but never that of Marx and Lenin".³⁵

Then there is that hoary old claim that "arming of the workers is only relevant in a revolutionary situation". Trotsky pours scorn on this proposition: it means, he says, that the workers must permit themselves to be "slaughtered until the situation becomes revolutionary". Peaceful, normal and democratic situations suddenly give way to storms, crises and unstable conditions, which "can transform itself into a revolutionary as well as a counterrevolutionary situation".

But revolutionary situations do not fall from the skies. They take form, mature and find direction in no small measure because of the long and patient preparatory work done by the Communist Party, including spreading the *idea* of "a popular militia and the constitutional right to bear arms".

Imagine

In common parlance, what comrades Fairbairn, Nellist, Griffiths, Burgin, *et al* advocate is the politics of the lowest common denominator. Broadness, acceptability, respectability are their watchwords. Therefore they begin by asking what "potential recruits", what "disaffected Labour voters", what "the overwhelming majority", etc are supposed to think. Having cut their message according to that cloth, then, as mass support is supposedly gained from one election to another, they promise to slowly reveal their 'true' principles.

The communist method is entirely different. "In our intransigent attitude lies our whole strength. It is this attitude that earns us the fear and respect of the enemy and the trust and support of the people" - so runs Rosa Luxemburg's famous rebuttal of the revisionists in the German SDP.¹⁴ We seek to win the majority to the principles of communism through an unremitting political struggle in the face of bourgeois diagnoses of extremism, unelectability and insanity. Necessarily that means taking on and defeating the forces of opportunism within the organisations of the working class.

For the sake of this discussion, imagine that Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party wins a majority in 2020. Are the courts, MI5, the armed forces and the police going to be staunchly loyal to the new government, or powerless to act behind ministerial backs, because of the results of a general election? Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, etc, rightly dismissed such naive politics as "parliamentary cretinism".

The Corbyn government would doubtless be committed to swiftly reversing austerity, renationalising the rails, ending British involvement in

Syria, cancelling Trident and maybe negotiating a withdrawal from Nato. However, say in the name of keeping the Labour right, the *Daily Mirror* and the liberal intelligentsia on side, the Corbyn government decides to leave in place the MI5, the police and the standing army. Frankly, that would be an open invitation for a British version of general Augusto Pinochet to launch a bloody counterrevolution. In Chile thousands of leftwingers were butchered after the September 11 1973 army coup which overthrew the Socialist Party-Communist Party Popular Unity reformist government under president Salvador Allende.

There are already rumours swirling around of unnamed members of the army high command "not standing for" a Corbyn government and being prepared to take "direct action".³⁶ Meanwhile, the *Financial Times* darkly warns that Corbyn's leadership will damage "British public life".³⁷

Why trust the thoroughly authoritarian British army? An institution which relies on inculcating "unthinking obedience" amongst the ranks.³⁸ An institution run by an officer caste, which is trained to command from public school to Sandhurst as if it is their birthright. And, of course, the British army swears to loyally serve the crown - believe it, more than a harmless feudalistic throwback. The monarch and the monarchy function as a potent symbol, and an ever-present excuse for a legal coup.

Why trust the British army, which has fought countless imperial and colonial wars, up to and including the latest horrors in Iraq and Afghanistan? A British army that has been used when necessary to intimidate, threaten and crush the 'enemy within'?

No, instead, let us put our trust in a "well regulated militia" and the "right of the people to keep and bear arms" ●

Notes

1. *Weekly Worker* December 10 2015.
2. http://www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk/cut_war.
3. <http://www.counterfire.org/about-us>.
4. <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/green-party-left-foot-forward/>.
5. <http://policy.greenparty.org.uk/pd.html>.
6. <http://policy.greenparty.org.uk/pd.html>.
7. *Weekly Worker* May 21 2009.
8. *Weekly Worker* May 21 2009.
9. <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/sounds/lyrics/international.htm>.
10. www.usconstitution.net/const.html#Am2.
11. http://constitution.org/cmt/mowarren/observations_new_constitution_1788.html.
12. Note, in legal terms, the ideologues of the American revolution - Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay *et al* - based their defence of the right to bear arms on English law, not least article 61 of *Magna Carta*.
13. RJ Spitzer *Gun control* Westport CT 2009, p101.
14. See AL Morton *A people's history of England* London 1974, pp280-288.
15. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/aep/WillandMarSess2/1/2/introduction>.
16. <http://www.constitution.org/2ll/2ndcourt/federal/11fed.htm>.
17. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 7, Moscow 1977, p3.
18. K Marx and F Engels *CW* Vol 27, London 1990, p371.
19. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/05/parti-ouvrier.htm>.
20. <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/1891/erfurt-program.htm>.
21. I am grateful to Ben Lewis for his translation of the *Hainfield programme*.
22. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1902/draft/02feb07.htm>.
23. M Kitchin *The coming of Austrian fascism* London 1980, p116.
24. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Panther_Party.
25. See CE Cobb *This nonviolent stuff'll get you killed* New York NY 2014.
26. R Dunn 'Gun violence and atomisation' *Weekly Worker* December 10 2015.
27. <http://www.rexdunn.co.uk/index.php/essays>.
28. *The Guardian* January 5 2016.
29. CPGB *Draft programme* London 2011, pp7-8.
30. See T Cowen *In praise of commercial culture* Cambridge MA 2000.
31. TW Adorno *Current of music* Cambridge 2008.
32. J Always *Critical theory and political possibilities* Westport CT 1995, p32.
33. L Trotsky *Writings* 1934-35 New York 1974, pp26-27.
34. L Trotsky *Whither France?* New York 1968, p26.
35. L Trotsky *Whither France?* New York 1968, p26.
36. *Daily Mail* September 20 2015.
37. *Financial Times* August 14 2015.
38. NF Dixon *On the psychology of military incompetence* London 1976, p244.

REVIEW

The Davidson papers

Neil Davidson, *Holding fast to an image of the past: explorations in the Marxist tradition* Haymarket Books 2014, 400pp, ISBN 978-1608463336, £15.99

We cannot escape history: nations, states and revolutions Haymarket Books 2015, 500pp, ISBN 978-1608464678, £17.99

It is, I guess, a symptom of my own advancing age that my initial reaction to receiving a review copy of *We cannot escape history* was to think that Neil Davidson is a bit young to be publishing a three-volume set of his collected papers: sort of like the old cliché of the policemen getting younger ...

The first volume, *Holding fast to an image of the past*, is in substance a collection of seven book reviews and review essays with five other essays, 'thematized' as being about individuals in or related to the Marxist tradition (Adam Smith can be included because of his influence on Marx). The second volume, *We cannot escape history*, is mainly essays around questions about the 'bourgeois revolutions'. As such, its interest suffers from the fact that Davidson has already published 840 pages worth of extended reflection on the same issue in *How revolutionary were the bourgeois revolutions* (2012).¹ The third volume, *Nation-states: consciousness and competition*, focusing on the national question, is due out in February.

Why?

'Collected papers' or 'selected papers' volumes have several uses. I have several volumes of this sort on my bookshelves at work, because academics writing about Roman law or about English or European legal history commonly publish in a mix of journals and edited books (collections of essays) published in several countries, so that even with the resources of the Bodleian Library to hand, some important work by eminent Professor X will not be available in the library unless it's reprinted in such a collection.

The old *Selected Works* of Marx and Engels, or of Lenin, Mary-Alice Waters' *Rosa Luxemburg speaks* (1970), Isaac Deutscher's Trotsky reader *The age of permanent revolution* (1973), and so on, performed a related function, of making a selection of texts available to readers (perhaps activists) who did not have access to a good library.

On the other hand, actual *Collected works* sets, properly done, including all sorts of ephemera and correspondence, provide both context for individual works, and a much clearer picture of the evolution of the thought of the author, than is available from individual texts. Hal Draper's *Karl Marx's theory of revolution* showed how much could be achieved in deeper understanding by actually using Marx and Engels' *Collected works*, as opposed to sticking to the 'big texts'.

Yet another possibility has been generated by US 'publish or perish', UK 'research assessment', and similar mechanisms: this is that academics are commonly not allowed, after the PhD, to take the time required to produce an actual monograph with a connected argument running through it; instead, they produce a series of essays on related themes, published individually in journals, and then string these essays together with an introduction and conclusion to make a book.

Comrade Davidson's two volumes so far don't quite fit any of these models. The larger part of the reviews in *Holding fast* and several of the essays in *We cannot escape*, are from *International Socialism* journal, and as such are available free, globally, online; the Socialist Workers Party has not, as yet, responded to Davidson's split from

its ranks by taking them down as a *damnatio memoriae*, and does not look likely to do so. So it's not a 'making available' project.

The essays cover a relatively short period (1996-2015) and are not presented in chronological order, so that this is not a 'collected works' and does not in any sense present an *evolution* of comrade Davidson's ideas. We may get more of this from the next volume due out in February, on nationalism, since there is a remarkable shift between comrade Davidson's hostility to Scots nationalism at the time of *The origins of Scottish nationhood* (2000) and *Discovering the Scottish revolution* (2003) and his more recent support for a 'Yes' vote in the referendum and for the left-nationalist Rise group. But don't bet on it.

There is no sign at all that comrade Davidson intends to print his contributions to debates connected with the SWP crisis (he was already somewhat 'dissident' by 2008) and his own departure, though some is on the web.

In *Holding fast*, Davidson has largely rewritten his previous material on Alasdair MacIntyre's 'Marxist period' in the 1950s-60s. But he has not reassessed at all the judgment that MacIntyre in 1961 left the Socialist Labour League run by Gerry Healy's sectarian clique in favour of Tony Cliff's open and democratic International Socialists. Now it might be perfectly reasonable to conclude that the 1960s IS was open and democratic, with bureaucratic centralism arriving only later. But writing after 2013 some mention of the issue is surely called for.

So not a 'collected works' any more than 'collected papers' or 'selected works' - nor pseudo-monographs constructed out of a series of articles. The articles in *Holding fast* ... are too diverse to amount to a pseudo-monograph, even on historical materialism as a method. *We cannot escape* is closer to being pseudo-monographic, but Davidson's *actual monograph* on the topic has already been published - *How revolutionary*.

So what is the function, or perhaps the message, of this product? We can look at it, in a sense, from two directions: that of the publishers, Haymarket, and that of the author. Haymarket is the publishing house of the US International Socialist Organisation. Once (and for a long time) the SWP/International Socialist Tendency franchise in the US, the ISO was expelled from the IST in 2001 for (allegedly) supporting a minority faction in the IST's Greek affiliate and (allegedly) failing to 'turn' adequately to the 'anti-globalisation movement', ie, failing to pretend to be anarchists. The SWP leadership alleged that this showed 'sectarianism'. Since the break, however, the ISO has pursued a more open policy towards the rest of the left.

From the ISO and Haymarket, therefore, publishing Neil Davidson's collected papers sends the message: see, the departed SWP opposition includes important theoretical writers (even if Richard Seymour's theoretical prominence has been much reduced by the 'chair-gate' farce together with the predictable failure of the Syriza government as an anti-austerity project). Such a message is perhaps affirmed by William Keach's rave review of *Holding fast* in the ISO's *International Socialist Review*, which celebrates Davidson as

providing an alternative to dogmatism.²

What about comrade Davidson? I guess that it must be flattering to have a publisher agree to produce one's 'collected papers'. But maybe comrade Davidson has an agenda in connection with the politics of the SWP split. The line of Alex Callinicos generally was that the SWP oppositionists were succumbing to 'new reformism' (and to 'feminism'): that beyond the 'Delta dispute' and related issues of party democracy were substantive breaks with 'revolutionary politics' - meaning Cliffism.

It is possibly also relevant that Alex Callinicos, reviewing *How revolutionary* for the *ISJ* in 2013, flagged up Davidson's argument that 'permanent revolution' was no longer a relevant strategy, while 'combined and uneven development' remained a fundamental Trotsky insight; Callinicos insists that permanent revolution is still fundamental. A similar approach was taken by Dominic Alexander, reviewing the book for *Counterfire*.³ Davidson has replied to Callinicos, and to a shorter comment by Donny Gluckstein, in the April 2014 issue of the *ISJ*, reprinted in Chapter 12 of *We cannot escape*.

In these contexts, perhaps Davidson, by republishing a good deal of his work over the last fifteen years *without* the polemics associated with the SWP crisis, is saying to the reader: "I am still a revolutionary Marxist", or, more specifically: "I am still a Cliffite: my organisational departure from the SWP represents only a limited critique of the recent SWP leadership, not a critique of the fundamental Cliffite project".

What?

At this point it is appropriate to outline briefly the content of the two books and to notice, equally briefly, a few issues I don't propose to discuss further. The one issue which I do think is worth discussing further is mainly posed by *We cannot escape*, but also surfaces in a few places in *Holding fast*. This is the interlocked questions of 'permanent revolution', 'combined and uneven development', 'bourgeois revolution from above', 'deflected permanent revolution', and Cliff state capitalism. It is worth discussing because, in my opinion, Callinicos and Alexander are right that Davidson's reinterpretation of the issues in *How revolutionary* - and in *We cannot escape* - poses large and debatable questions for the Cliffite project, and ones which Davidson's reaffirmation of his Cliffism by republishing a lot of substantially orthodox Cliffite work doesn't solve.

Holding fast is a collection of seven book reviews or review essays, and five other essays. The book reviews are of the Verso reissue of Deutscher's biography of Trotsky; Verso's reprint of Victor Kiernan's history of US imperialism, and Neil Smith on globalisation; Dave Renton on the Anti-Nazi League; the third edition of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined communities*; a response to Chris Nineham's review of Esther Leslie's biography of Walter Benjamin; Naomi Klein's *The shock doctrine*; Neil Rafeek's *Communist women in Scotland*; and Eric Hobsbawm's *How to change the world*.

The other essays, while not book reviews, are nonetheless broadly in the mould of 'literature reviews': on the political evolution of Tom Naim; on Marx and Engels on the Scottish

highlands; on Alasdair MacIntyre as a Marxist; on Antonio Gramsci's reception in Scotland; and on the uses of Adam Smith.

The diversity of the material makes it hard to comment coherently. I reviewed Davidson and Paul Blackledge's collection *Alasdair MacIntyre's engagement with Marxism* in 2010, and Davidson's updating of his account of MacIntyre's 'Marxist' period does not seem to have added much.

Overall, I find the essays most interesting when they are on issues of Scottish history: thus Tom Naim's evolution, Marx and Engels on the highlands, and to a more limited extent the reception of Gramsci in Scotland.

They are least interesting when they are fairly orthodox SWP journalism: thus, most clearly the piece on Deutscher; the use of Renton on the ANL to 'carry' a (very weak) argument - that neither the ANL, nor Respect, was a people's front; the review of Rafeek's *Communist women*, which unrealistically imagines the SWP playing the good parts of the role of the old 'official' CPGB.

More generally - and this is applicable to both books, as Callinicos and Gluckstein commented on *How revolutionary* - comrade Davidson shows a certain tendency to substitute the 'literature review' which begins the standard social science PhD for the interesting explicit fully rigorous analytic and/or dialectical theory, and/or empirical research which is supposed to follow.

Contrary to what is perhaps implicit in Callinicos and Gluckstein's criticisms, I do not think this problem is uniquely Davidsonian: there is a good deal of the problem in other *ISJ* authors and it is reflected in the common sprawling character of pieces in *Historical Materialism*. Part of what is involved seems to be a sort of 'pseudo' version of 'academic courtesy' which entails unwillingness to dismiss sufficiently summarily nonsense arguments which happen to be fashionable and produced by leftists. For example, the short (and obviously correct) grounds Davidson gives for rejecting the argument of Naomi Klein's *Shock doctrine* should not need the 23 pages he takes to discuss it.

In *We cannot escape* the shape and balance of the book is different. The opening essay is the long write-up of Davidson's contribution to the 2004 Deutscher Memorial Lecture (his *Discovering the Scottish revolution* shared the Deutscher prize with 'Brennerite' Benno Teschke's *Myth of 1648*). There follow two pieces on pre-capitalist societies: chapter 2, also from 2004, is a piece from *ISJ* defending John Haldon's 'tributary mode of production' against Chris Harman on the 'Asiatic mode of production',⁴ and chapter 3 is a contribution to a *Historical Materialism* symposium on Chris Wickham's *Framing the early middle ages*, based on a 2006 conference paper, though only published in 2011.

There are then four chapters on the bourgeois revolutions: chapter 4 'Scotland: birthplace of passive revolution', from a *Capital & Class* symposium on 'passive revolution'; chapter 5, a 2007 *ISJ* review of Henry Heller's *The bourgeois revolution in France*; chapter 6, 'The American Civil War considered as a bourgeois revolution', from a 2011 *Historical Materialism* symposium on John Ashworth's *Slavery, capitalism and*

politics in the antebellum republic; and chapter 7, a 2007 *ISJ* review of Pierre Broué's *The German revolution* (the translation by John Archer published by *Historical Materialism* in 2005).

The third part consists of five chapters more directly addressed to the theoretical issues: chapter 8, 'From uneven to combined development'; chapter 9, 'China: unevenness, combination, revolution?'; chapter 10, 'Third world revolution'; chapter 11, 'From deflected permanent revolution to the law of uneven and combined development'; and chapter 12, which I have already referred to, Davidson's reply to Callinicos's and Gluckstein's criticisms of *How revolutionary* ... The book closes with an 'Afterword' explaining its title (a quotation from Abraham Lincoln) and attempting to draw together some of the threads.

Permanent revolution ...

Why are other writers from the Cliffite tradition (Callinicos, Alexander) so concerned about Davidson's argument that 'permanent revolution' has ceased to be strategically fundamental, while 'combined and uneven development' remains theoretically fundamental?

Their reasoning is markedly problematic. Callinicos merely offers a distinction between the (alleged) marginality of democratic demands in the imperialist centres (which reflects merely the economism, or more exactly left-syndicalism, of the far left), and their (alleged) centrality in the semicolonial periphery - where, as Tunisia showed, revolution can be explicitly triggered by the economic impact of 'structural adjustment', and as Egypt has shown, working class class-political independence and the need for the construction of unions, cooperatives, mutuals and so on as an alternative to Islamist 'welfare' operations are fundamental to any *real* strategy. Alexander, on the other hand, deploys the usual use of the alleged 'non-dialectical' character of his opponents' arguments; and insists 'deflected permanent revolution' is still relevant because what is involved is a mode of escape from imperialist domination.

Thus Callinicos's interpretation of permanent revolution entails tailing the leaderships of 'democratic' movements in the Arab Spring, while Alexander's entails tailing the leaderships of 'national' movements against imperialism - reflecting the conjunctural differences between the SWP's 'Sunni' line and Counterfire's 'Shia' line on Syria at the time when these articles were written. In both cases, however, the need to create some sort of perspective which includes 'permanent revolution' is taken for granted, so that Davidson 'problematizing' this is seen as objectionable as such.

The fundamental problem is that Davidson's argument calls into question the absolute foundations of the political basis of the Cliffite tradition: its 'unorthodox Trotskyism'. It does so for two reasons. The first is that debates about 'state capitalism' and the Russian revolution in the 1920s, which were partly between Stalinists and Trotskyists, were also part of debates which opposed communists (including those who later became Trotskyists) to the 'Two and a Half International', and especially to Karl Kautsky and

Julius Martov - and to 'left' critics of Comintern among the anarchists and council communists. The particular form of Cliff's 'state capitalism' theory, and the idea of 'deflected permanent revolution', responded to the desire to avoid falling into either the Kautsky-Martov version of 'state capitalism', for which events in Russia were merely a deformed form of the bourgeois revolution, or the 'council communist' version, in which state capitalism had emerged in 1918. Davidson's argument risks unpicking this.

Secondly, the debates between Stalinists and Trotskyists were not only about 'permanent revolution', but also about economic management under working class rule (the New Economic Policy and related issues); about the concept of the party monolith; about 'socialism in one country' and 'national roads to socialism'; and about the 'united front' common workers front with open criticism, advocated by the Comintern in the 1920s, and the version of the 'united front' common front with *communist self-censorship for the sake of unity*, advocated by Georgi Dimitrov at the 7th congress of Comintern in 1935, and in the same argument extended to the 'people's front' to include left bourgeois parties and other forces.

These other aspects of the Stalinist-Trotskyist debates had already *ceased to be interesting* to Cliffites by the 1970s, by virtue of the fact that they characterised the USSR and its satellites and imitators as 'state capitalist'. They had, of course, never been interesting to other variants of state capitalism theory. The consequence, however, is that, believing that their 'state capitalism' immunizes them from adapting to Stalinism (a belief most strikingly on display in Davidson's essay on Deutscher in *Holding fast*), the Cliffites have in fact to a considerable extent *collapsed into* Stalinist positions: in particular on the party monolith (on which Davidson is in these books silent), and on the people's front (where, in reviewing Renton, Davidson defends Dimitrov's line).

After the fall of the USSR, 'state capitalism' is no longer a real *political* dividing line (though it still serves as a *theoretical* marker). 'Permanent revolution' then becomes a totemic marker of the difference between the Cliffites and the surviving 'official' communists; but it also has a peculiar character, that the focus is on an interpretation of 'permanent revolution' which is extraordinarily similar to the political line of the *Comintern majority* in the Chinese revolutionary movement of 1925-27, ie, that *working class class-political independence* is subordinated to 'mobilising the masses'. Witness, here, the SWP's and its cointinkers' extraordinary somersaults in the aborted Egyptian revolution of 2011-13.

Hence - from a very different point of view - the argument of "Michael Ford", in his critique of Left Unity, that a really useful regroupment would be one between the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain, *Socialist Action* and *Counterfire*:⁵ all that would be needed, though Ford doesn't mention this point, would be for *Counterfire* to give up the Cliffite ties - 'permanent revolution', and so on - which no longer have any operative significance in their politics.

Stages

We should step back from these immediate present political issues slightly in order to understand what is going on. To begin with, the starting point for 'permanent revolution' may in a certain sense be the 1850 *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League*;⁶ but for practical purposes it was discussions of the perspectives of the workers' movement in Russia and other 'backward' parts of Europe, beginning with Marx and Engels. It is quite false to say, as Trotskyists commonly do, that there is no basis in Marx and Engels' work for a "stages theory". On the contrary, they *did* propose different programmatic positions - radically

different ones - in relation to the agrarian question, for those countries in which there was an existing capitalist development of agriculture, and for those countries in which feudal relations persisted in the countryside; and these proposals profoundly shape national political strategy.

In relation to existing capitalist agriculture, they started with the slogan of the nationalisation of the land: "expropriation of landed property and application of ground rent for state expenditures" (*Communist Manifesto*).⁷ In the *Manifesto* this formed one of a series of demands "pretty generally applicable", "in most advanced countries"; in an 1869 letter Marx commented that "In England the land could be transformed into common property by act of parliament in the course of a fortnight. In France it must be accomplished by means of the proprietors' indebtedness and liability to taxation".⁸

In contrast, in relation to countries in which feudal relations persisted in the countryside, they argued for a French-style peasant revolution against the landlords. Thus, for example, Engels argued in 1848 that "The big agricultural lands between the Baltic and the Black Sea can escape from patriarchal-feudal barbarism only through an agrarian revolution which transforms the enserfed or corvée-burdened peasants into free landowners, a revolution which is altogether the same as the French revolution in the countryside."⁹ Marx argued in 1851 that what was needed in Italy was "the complete emancipation of the peasants and the transformation of their sharecropping system into free bourgeois property".¹⁰ On Ireland, Engels commented in 1888 that "A purely socialist movement should not be expected from Ireland for some time. The people first want to become small landowning peasants, and when they do, the mortgages will come along and ruin them once again. In the meantime there is no reason why we should not help them to liberate themselves from the landlords, that is, to change over from a semifeudal to a capitalistic condition."¹¹

These differences are grounded in an analysis of the class character of the petty proprietors which precisely insists - as Marx and Engels insisted in the *Communist Manifesto* and *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* as well as elsewhere - that capitalist development and the rise of the proletariat is a necessary precondition

for socialism. 'Stages' is thus intimately linked to deep fundamentals of Marxist theory. The problem is that the property-holding peasant and urban petty-bourgeois classes are too committed to their private property holdings to be capable of a real collective management of production. (The same is true of the intelligentsia, and of the bureaucracy, which are particular forms of the property-holding urban petty-bourgeoisie holding *de facto* 'intellectual property possessions' in the first place, and 'turf' or jurisdictions in the second.) The *displacement* of these forms of petty property-holding by wage labour is therefore a precondition for socialism; and this displacement can only take place through capitalism, not through forced collectivisation, as the Stalinists proved by dreadful experiments in Russia and China (Great Leap Forward, etc).

It is this *core* concept which forms the underlying basis of the wider theorisation of 'tasks of the bourgeois revolution,' modelled on the French revolution, and meaning the 'solution' of the national question (national unification and independence), the land question, and the 'democratic question', ie, the introduction of some form of liberal constitutionalism.

The concept of the permanent revolution grows out of the 1850 *Address* and the idea found there of the refusal of the bourgeoisie to make the revolution, leading to the need for the working class to organise itself independently of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois radicals in order to carry the revolution through to the end - even if, for most of the Second International writers collected in Day and Gaido's *Witnesses to permanent revolution*, this 'end' meant merely the full implementation of the 'tasks of the bourgeois revolution' in the way most favourable to the working class.

Parvus and Trotsky's argument in 1905-08 was more specific, and grew out of what is later theorised as 'uneven and combined development'. This did not, however, mean what Davidson makes it mean in chapters 8-9 of *We cannot escape*, ie, Gerschenkron-style 'advantages of backwardness' and the specific *local* recombination of rapidly growing high-

industry with rural backwardness and 'feudal survivals'. It meant *integration in the world market, including integration of peasant agriculture in the world market*: argued at length by Parvus in his 1896 *Neue Zeit* series 'The world market and the agrarian crisis'.¹²

The result of this approach is that in *Results and prospects*, Trotsky argued - unlike Lenin - that there could be no stable worker-peasant alliance or 'democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry'. Hence, while the working class would be driven to *take* power in order to complete the 'tasks of the bourgeois revolution' in Russia, it would necessarily *lose* power within months of doing so unless the socialist revolution broke out in western Europe. Although Lenin thought the democratic revolution probably would trigger the socialist revolution in western Europe (which was very widely expected in the near future), his argument on the basis of *The development of capitalism in Russia* saw a *national* development of capitalism, not tied to the world market (except in a limited sense and imitatively), and (hence) the possibility of a strategic worker-peasant alliance holding power in a single country for a more or less prolonged period.

By the time of his 1930 rewrite in *The permanent revolution*, Trotsky had unavoidably moved towards Lenin's position on this question: precisely because his own arguments in *Results and prospects* would support the conclusion that objective forces would compel the Russian Bolshevik regime, in the absence of socialist revolution in western Europe, to become a state-capitalist form of the transition from feudalism to capitalism - as Kautsky and Martov already argued in 1918-20.

Hence, *The permanent revolution* not only broadens the case for 'permanent revolution', as Davidson argues; it also conceptualises it in terms, not of the outbreak of a European revolution, but of a series of national Russian-style revolutions, and including what is, in fact if not in form, Lenin's medium-term strategic alliance of the proletariat and peasantry (*smychka*), albeit the peasantry is expected to follow the leading role of the proletariat.

However, this reinterpretation could only make sense insofar as the Russian soviet regime actually was post-capitalist and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Because if it wasn't, there would be no case for conceptualising it as a form of the socialist revolution; and then, in turn, the case for 'permanent revolution' as opposed to 'stages' would fall to the ground.

Cliff's version of state capitalism avoided being Martov's or Kautsky's version because it was largely orthodox Trotskyism in nearly everything except the label. The Soviet regime not only was the dictatorship of the proletariat, but remained the dictatorship of the proletariat until the outright victory of the Stalin group in 1929-30. Rather than seeing state capitalism as a form of the transition to capitalism, as Kautsky and Martov did, Cliff's interpretation was substantially closer to Schachtman's 'bureaucratic collectivism' as a post-capitalist social order (in Cliff's terms, it was a 'highest stage' of capitalism beyond Lenin's imperialism). Though this still logically implied that there was a problem with permanent revolution - because 'Cliff state capitalism' seemed to be the natural outcome of 'permanent revolutions' - after 1945 'deflected permanent revolution' could serve, like the epicycles of Ptolemaic astronomy, to

'save the phenomena'.

... and Davidson

Davidson does not abandon the fundamentals of these arguments. I have made the point above, that the whole exercise of the 'Davidson papers' can be read as reasserting his continued commitment to Cliffism. But the truth is that, if he is right about the meaning of 'bourgeois revolution', then in the aftermath of 1989-91 the *ground* for holding Cliffite as opposed to Kautsky-Martov views of the Soviet regime is destroyed. The Russian revolution would be merely a very long and painful detour in the transition from feudalism to capitalism; and endeavours to pursue any sort of 'permanent revolution' policy would be completely hopeless.

Davidson does, indeed, try to 'save the phenomena' in a different way, by insisting on the difference between the Russian revolution (worker-led, involving spontaneity, 'from below', and so on) and the later 'deflected permanent revolutions' - China, and so on - which he puts either into the class of 'political' revolutions which do not alter the class order of society, or into that of 'passive revolutions' (Gramsci) or 'revolutions from above', like German and Italian unification.

The problem with this approach is simple. In order to take the Russian revolution as a success, as anything more than a larger version of the Paris Commune, it is necessary not to stop its story in October 1917, but *at least* to carry it down to 1921 and Red victory in the Civil War. But when we look at Red victory in the Civil War, the whole character of the revolution as 'from below' in the language of SWP-thought disappears. Leon Trotsky becomes the organiser of a regular army, employing former Tsarist officers (albeit with commissars and the Cheka watching over them), and primarily recruited from peasants, to fight a war as far as possible in the countryside. The Chinese Communist Party, originally created out of an urban worker movement, by the 1940s had become a peasant-based military apparatus. Russia is *not different enough* from this pattern to 'save the phenomena' for Cliffism.

I do not agree with the structure of Davidson's arguments about the bourgeois revolution (I have argued the relevant points elsewhere); and Dominic Alexander's review, besides its 'Counterfire' tics, makes some entirely valid points against Davidson about the *international* character of the *bourgeois* revolution. Nonetheless, Davidson is addressing real problems; he is just - as yet - insufficiently willing to think through the implications of these problems for Cliffite theory ●

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Notes

1. Reviewed in *Weekly Worker* by Marc Mulholland "Review: How liberal were the bourgeois revolutions?" October 10 2013. Cf also comrade Mulholland's own *Bourgeois liberty and the politics of fear* (2012) and my review of this, *Weekly Worker* July 17 2014.
2. <http://isreview.org/issue/97/critical-openness-imaginative-commitment>.
3. Callinicos, 'The dynamics of revolution' *ISJ* 137, January 2013; Alexander, www.counterfire.org/articles/book-reviews/16301-in-defence-of-permanent-revolution, February 14 2013.
4. On this issue, Davidson had moved on by the time of *How revolutionary ...*, recognising that Haldon's theory is not helpful, though on questionable grounds.
5. <http://leftunity.org/left-unity-modest-flutter-2/>.
6. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/communist-league/1850-ad1.htm. See the introduction to Gaido & Day (ed) *Witnesses to permanent revolution* Haymarket 2011 for antecedents to this.
7. *MECW* 6:505, cited Draper *KMTR* ii pp404-409, with general discussion.
8. *Manifesto* loc cit; letter quoted in Draper *KMTR* ii p408.
9. 'Debate on Poland' quoted from Draper *KMTR* ii pp430-431.
10. Letter to Weydemeyer, quoted from Draper *KMTR* ii p426.
11. Interview in *NY Volkszeitung*, quoted from Draper *KMTR* ii p428.
12. 'Der Weltmarkt und die Agrarkrisis' *NZ* (available at <http://library.fes.de/nz/>) 14:1 (1896), pp197-202, 276-283, 335-342, 514-526, 554-560, 621-631, 654-663, 747-758, 781-788, 818-827.

How revolutionary was the bourgeoisie?



REVIEW

Money spinning cargo cult

JJ Abrams (director) *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (12A), 136 minutes, general release



We have feelings too

The latest film in the *Star Wars* series, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, has already broken several box office records, taking over 1.5 billion dollars since its release. Given that it has yet to be screened in the lucrative Chinese market (projected to overtake the US as the world's largest cinema going country by 2017), it seems probable that it could become the most financially successful film of all time - a record currently held by James Cameron's *Avatar* which made \$2.8bn.

While the first six films in the *Star Wars* franchise were made by George Lucas, the new film has been made by Walt Disney after they bought George Lucas' company Lucasfilm for more than \$4 billion in 2012. Disney were making a calculated risk when they spent that money. For their investment to pay off, they need not only *The Force Awakens* to be a commercial success, but the next two films in the planned trilogy too.

But financial success does not rely on the films alone. Whereas the first six *Star Wars* films have made a highly respectable \$6 billion, other franchises like *Harry Potter* and *James Bond* have made far more at the box office. The real money comes from all the related merchandise: the computer games, toys, books and comics and spin-off television series. When all this is included, *Star Wars* towers above its rivals, with the franchise valued at more than \$30 billion.

Disney then has their eyes set on a far bigger prize than the mere box office success. To profit on what they paid out for Lucasfilm, they need to milk *Star Wars* for everything they can get. In addition to the trilogy they have already announced two other films set in the *Star Wars* universe, and anything even tangentially related to *Star Wars* will be furiously marketed.

Raking over the financial prospects may seem rather unseemly in a film review, but it is key to understanding the context in which *The Force Awakens* has been made and the pressures on the creative team behind it. Put simply, this film has been made in order to make money. This may well sound unnecessarily pessimistic - after all, in a capitalist market the demand to make money will always play a role in the creative process, and all too often, artistic imagination is forced to

give way to commercial demands - but the way in which Disney has quite explicitly decided to milk this film seems particularly shameless.

The original *Star Wars*, released in 1977, was unexpectedly successful. When a film is more successful than critics and studios expect, there is a tendency to mythologise a heroic individual. In this case George Lucas was lionised as the creative visionary who succeeded despite all the odds. Lucas himself has liked to play up to this narrative in interviews, but although there is an element of truth here, there are other factors that contributed to its success. Films are necessarily collective enterprises, and the people Lucas assembled undoubtedly had tremendous talents: the special effects team developed innovative approaches that were later used in many of the 1980s action blockbusters; the designers created a distinctive fantastic world with their sets and strange aliens, spaceships and droids; and John Williams composed an epic and instantly recognisable soundtrack. Nor should it be forgotten that, while George Lucas wrote and directed the first *Star Wars* film, the second and third were directed and co-written by other people.

The success was also due to the setting and the plot of the original films. Lucas borrowed liberally from all manner of disparate sources. Although set in a strange galaxy with an unfamiliar history and culture, that history and culture is painted in such broad brush strokes that it does not alienate casual viewers with its complexity. *Star Wars* hints at wider history, with mentions of the 'Clone Wars' and the 'Old Republic', but resists the temptation to spend screen time explaining what these things are, other than through the famous opening sequences. The eponymous *Star Wars* are a galaxy-spanning civil war, but that is merely a backdrop for a plucky band of rebels fighting against an evil empire. The plot focuses on archetypal characters and the relationships between them. The resulting films rather cleverly present a fantastical universe that, although superficially strange (increasing the capacity for escapism), is actually about a comfortably familiar mythical story of an orphaned farm-boy going

on a journey and fulfilling his destiny through previously unknown mystical powers. The success of *Star Wars* then was due to that juxtaposition of the familiar and the unknown.

Following the release of the third of the original trilogy, *Return of the Jedi* in 1983, George Lucas could have been forgiven for resting on his laurels. He had created a series with a lasting cultural impact and had made an enormous personal fortune. In the late 1990s however, Lucas was tempted back to the *Star Wars* universe to make a second trilogy, set before the original series. His motivations seem plausible enough: he had written a great deal of expanded history for *Star Wars* which had not been revealed in the original films; and he was keen to make use of the technological innovations that had been developed in the succeeding years.

The prequel trilogy was released between 1999 and 2005, and told the story of how Luke and Leia's father, Anakin Skywalker, was seduced by the Dark Side of the Force and became Darth Vader, the principal villain of the original series. Although the prequel made a great deal of box office money, the second and third films made less than the first. People who had enthusiastically bought tickets for *The Phantom Menace* did not all return to watch the second and third instalments. The prequel trilogy was heavily criticised and mocked by fans of the original series. George Lucas had fallen victim to his own hubris. Whereas the original trilogy offered tantalising hints about a wider background to the *Star Wars* universe, the prequel trilogy went into much greater detail and the result was sadly not up to the expectations of the fans. Equally, whereas the innovative special effects of the originals had captivated the audience, the prequel trilogy relied heavily on computer generated effects that offered nothing new.

Ultimately the prequel trilogy led to the kind of acrimonious break-up between George Lucas and his fans that we can thank the internet for facilitating. Fans who felt a misplaced sense of entitlement lambasted Lucas for betraying the *Star Wars* that existed in their own heads, and Lucas responded in increasingly petulant terms. On the eve of selling his

company to Disney in 2012, he asked a journalist from *The New York Times*, "why would I make any more when everybody yells at you all the time and says what a terrible person you are?" One might feel that the pro-war Labour MPs who recently complained about being bullied on social media did so as much out of political opportunism as any genuinely hurt feelings, but Lucas genuinely appears upset by what must have seemed to him to be incessant criticism of his artistic creation.

Regardless, George Lucas is now thoroughly out of the picture. When Disney took over they made it clear that his involvement was no longer welcome. His continued defence of the derided prequel trilogy makes Lucas an economic liability. To make as much money as possible out of *Star Wars* Disney clearly feel they need to expunge all trace of the prequel trilogy and focus on recapturing the spirit of the original trilogy. So Disney appointed JJ Abrams as director for the new film, best known for his reboot of *Star Trek*, a franchise that became rather lacklustre after the glut of *Star Trek* spin-offs in the 2000s that also suffered criticism for not being sufficiently faithful to the original feel of the series.

The Force Awakens sets out to recapture the sense of nostalgia that many people feel for the original films, and in that regard it succeeds. Though it will satisfy those who want more *Star Wars*, it is stunningly lacking in ambition or originality. Whereas the originals drew on a plethora of different sources of inspiration, the only reference material used in this new film are the old films.

The settings are a greatest hits compilation. The action moves from the desert planet Jakku (like Tatooine from *A New Hope*, but with added wrecked Star Destroyers), to the Millennium Falcon, to a jungle planet with loveable aliens (combining the cantina scene from the first film with the forest moon from *Return of the Jedi*), and ends on a planet that combines the ice planet from *The Empire Strikes Back* with the Death Star. The sets look magnificent, of course. They are filmed with a loving attention to detail, and - in deliberate contrast to the prequel films - they are made up mostly of practical effects

rather than digital ones. Their appeal, however, lies in revisiting the fondly remembered settings.

The new central characters, Rey and Finn, are ably played by two young British actors, Daisy Ridley and John Boyega. Both are likable and have suitably mysterious pasts that will no doubt be revealed in future instalments. In a nod to modern sensibilities the actors are a white woman and a black man, in contrast to the overwhelmingly white and male cast of the original films. The real draw to the cinema going public, though, is the inclusion of familiar old faces: Carrie Fisher's Leia, now a general in charge of the Resistance, Harrison Ford's loveable rogue Han Solo and his co-pilot Chewbacca. Luke Skywalker appears as only a mythical figure for most of the film, and the plot revolves around searching for him and his lightsabre. Indeed, Rey and Finn speak about the earlier characters as if they are figures from legend rather than of recent history (the film is set 30 years after *Return of the Jedi*). While the droids from the previous films do make an appearance, their role is taken by a new droid designed to be even more cute and loveable than R2-D2.

The central villain is where the film is at its most self-referential. Darth Vader was an iconic villain in the original films, with his sinister black uniform and his voice hissing from within an all enclosing helmet. But having died at the end of *Return of the Jedi*, JJ Abrams had to resort to grave-robbing to recapture his appeal. His equivalent in *The Force Awakens*, Kylo Ren, speaks to the crushed helmet of Darth Vader, treating it as a kind of religious fetish. He wants to emulate Darth Vader; he almost wants to be possessed by his spirit. Like Darth Vader, Kylo Ren also wears a helmet that obscures his face, but seemingly for no other reason than for him to try and imitate his predecessor. Here then is a perfect metaphor for the film as a whole: *The Force Awakens* has taken the material trappings of the earlier films and, like a cargo cult, attempts to use them to magically invoke their spirit.

Considering that it is clearly intended to be a family film, it is also quite shockingly violent. There are mass executions barely off screen, an act of planet-wide genocide and large numbers of storm troopers are gunned down. The central character, Finn, is a Stormtrooper who has deserted from the overtly fascist First Order, and through him we learn that Stormtroopers are abducted as children and raised to be soldiers. Finn is able to feel emotions and exercise agency, so the same must be true, to at least some extent, of the other Stormtroopers. They are as much victims as they are villains. Yet, they die in droves, killed by the heroes with no expression of remorse. As in other Hollywood films, when heroes die it is presented as a tragedy, when villains kill innocent people it serves to illustrate how evil they are, but the deaths of the supposed baddies are treated as a good thing. It is even more jarring when these deaths are juxtaposed with the overall light-hearted jaunty feeling of the film. *The Force Awakens* tries to feel like a fairy tale, with goodies and baddies, and it does an admirable job of portraying the villains as truly evil, but this moral certainty is undermined by the way that the heroes - and the creators of the film - seem to be callously indifferent to death.

Jeremy Hunt

THEORY

Back to Herbert Spencer

Chris Cutrone argues that the libertarian liberalism of the late 19th century still has relevance today

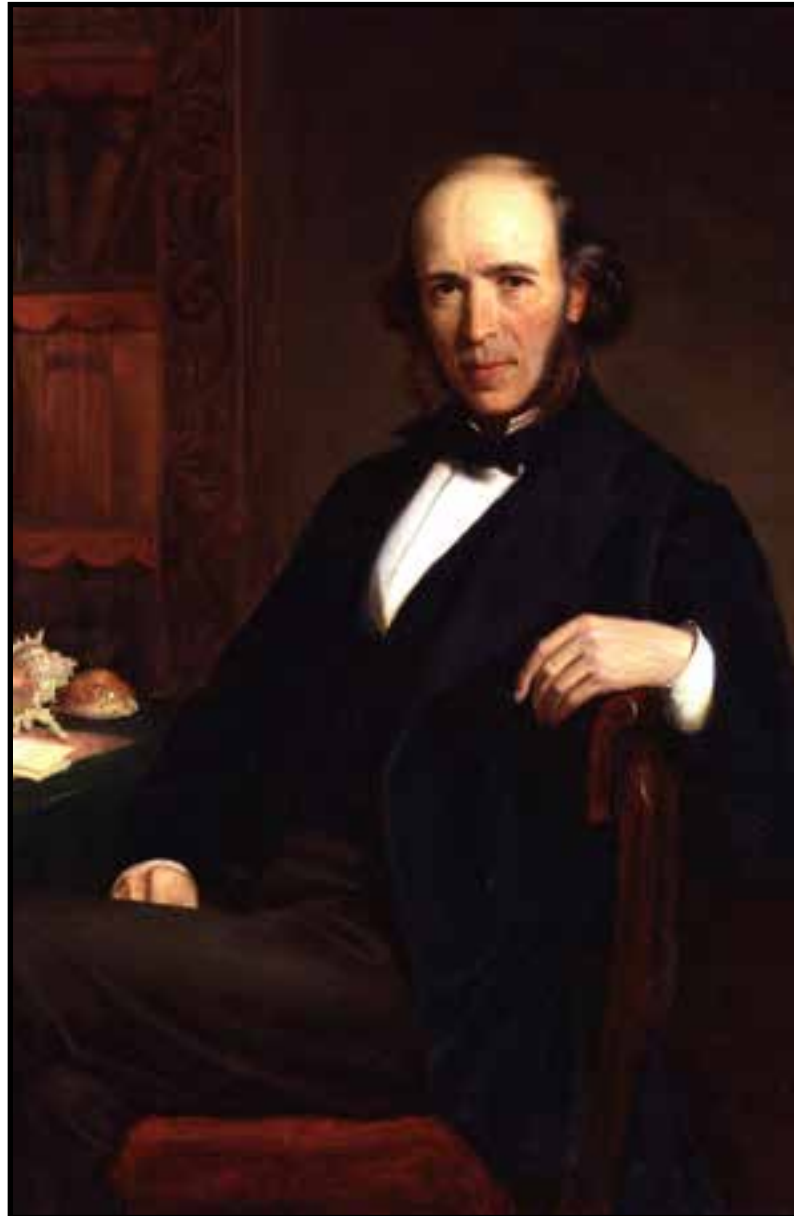
Herbert Spencer's grave faces Marx's at Highgate Cemetery in London. At his memorial, Spencer was honoured for his anti-imperialism by Indian national liberation advocate and anti-colonialist Shyamji Krishnavarma, who funded a professorship at Oxford in Spencer's name.

What would the 19th century liberal, utilitarian and social Darwinist, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who was perhaps the most prominent, widely read and popular philosopher in the world during his lifetime - that is, in Marx's lifetime - have to say to Marxists or more generally to the left, when such liberalism earned not only Marx's own scorn but also Nietzsche's criticism? Nietzsche referred to Spencer and his broad appeal as the modern enigma of "the English psychologists." Nietzsche critiqued what he took to be Spencer's assumption of a historically linear-evolutionary development and improvement of human morality leading to a 19th century epitome; where Nietzsche found the successive "transvaluations of values" through profound reversals of "self-overcoming" (*On the genealogy of morals: a polemic*, 1887). Nietzsche regarded modern liberal morality not as a perfection but rather as a challenge and task to achieve an "over-man," that, failing, threatened to result in a nihilistic dead-end of "the last man" instead. Marx regarded Spencerian liberalism as an example of the decrepitude of bourgeois-revolutionary thought in decadence. Marx's son-in-law, the French socialist Paul Lafargue, wrote, just after Marx's death, against Spencer's "bourgeois pessimism", to which he offered a Marxist optimism.¹ Such Marxism fulfilled Nietzsche's "pessimism of the strong." By the late 19th century, Marxists could be confident about transcending bourgeois society. Not so today.

Spencer's distinction of "militant" vs "industrial" society (*The principles of sociology* Vol 2, 1879-98) - that is to say, the distinction of *traditional civilization vs bourgeois society* - is still, unfortunately, quite pertinent today, and illuminates a key current blind-spot on the ostensible 'left', especially regarding the phenomenon of war. Spencer followed the earlier classical liberal Benjamin Constant's observation ("The liberty of the ancients as compared with that of the moderns" 1816) that moderns get through commerce what the ancients got through war; and that for moderns war is always regrettable and indeed largely unjustifiably criminal, whereas for ancients war was virtuous - among the very highest virtues. Do we moderns sacrifice ourselves for the preservation and glory of our specific "culture," as "militants" do, or rather dedicate ourselves to social activity that facilitates *universal freedom* - a value unknown to the ancients? Does the future belong to the constant warfare of particular cultural differences, or to human society? Marx thought the latter.

The question is whether we think that we will *fight* or, rather, *exchange* and *produce* our way to freedom. Is freedom to be achieved through "militant" or rather "industrial" society? Marx assumed the latter.

When we seek to extol our political leaders today, we do not depict them driving a tank but waking at 5 o'clock and staying up past midnight to do society's business. We do not speak of



Herbert Spencer by Bagnold Burgess

their scars earned in combat but their grey hairs accumulated in office. Not enjoying the spoils of war on a dais but getting in their daily morning jog to remain fit for work. We judge them not as cunning warriors but as diligent workers - and responsible negotiators. In our society, it is not the matter of a battle to win but a job to do. Carl Schmitt thought that this has led to our dehumanization. But few would agree.

What would have appeared commonplace to Spencer's contemporary critics, such as Nietzsche and Marx, must strike us today, rather, as profoundly insightful and indeed critical of our society. This is due to the historical regression of politics and society since Marx's time, and, moreover, to the liquidation of Marxism. What Marx would have regarded as fatally one-sided and undialectical in Spencer, would today seem adequate to the prevailing condition, in the absence of the Marxist-Hegelian dialectic. The Marxist critique of liberalism has been rendered moot, not in the sense of liberalism's actual social supersession but by historical regression. Society has fallen below the historical threshold of not only socialism but of classical liberalism - of bourgeois emancipation itself. Not only have we fallen below the criteria of Kant and Hegel that surpassed 18th century empiricism, we have fallen below its 19th century successor, positivism, as well. The question is the status today of liberalism as *ideology*. It is utopian. As Adorno put it, it is both promise and sham.

Militant and industrial tendencies confront each other today not as different societies, but as opposed aspects of the same society, however

contradictorily and antagonistically, in capitalism. Similarly, the phases of "religious," "metaphysical" and "positive" forms do not succeed one another sequentially in a linear development but rather interact in a dynamic of social history. What Spencer regarded as regressive "metaphysics" remains valid in capitalism, as "ideology" calling for dialectical critique. We cannot now claim to address problems in the clear air of enlightenment.

If Adorno, for instance, critiqued sociological "positivism," this was not as a romantic anti-positivist such as Max Weber, but rather as a critique of positive sociology as *ideology* in capitalism. For Adorno, positivism and Heideggerian ontology, as well as Weberian "cultural sociology," opposed each other in an antinomy of capitalism that would be overcome not in one principle triumphing over another, but rather in the antinomy itself being succeeded dialectically in freedom. Weber denied freedom; whereas Spencer assumed it. Both avoided the specific problem of capitalism. To take a condition of unfreedom for freedom is the most salient phenomenon of ideology. This is what falsified positivism as liberal enlightenment, its false sense of freedom as already achieved that still actually tasked society. Freedom is not to be taken as an achieved state but a goal of struggle.

An emancipated society would be "positivist" - enlightened and liberal - in ways that under capitalism can only be ideologically false and misleading. Positivism should therefore be understood as a desirable goal *beyond* rather than a possibility *under*

capitalism. The problem with Herbert Spencer is that he took capitalism - grasped partially and inadequately as bourgeois emancipation - to be a condition of freedom that would need yet to be really achieved. If "metaphysics," contra positivism, remains valid in capitalism, then this is as a condition to be overcome. Capitalist metaphysics is a real symptom of unfreedom. Positivism treats this as merely an issue of mistaken thinking, or to be worked out through "scientific" methodology, whereas it is actually a problem of society requiring political struggle. The antinomy of positivism vs metaphysics is not partisan but *social*. As Adorno observed, the same individual could and would be scientifically positivist and philosophically ontological-existentialist.

Spencer's opposition to "socialism" in the 19th century was in its undeniable retrograde illiberal aspect, what Marx called "reactionary socialism." But Marx offered a perspective on potentially transcending socialism's one-sidedness in capitalism. Spencer was entirely unaware of this Marxian dialectic. Marx agreed with Spencer on the conservative-reactionary and regressive character of socialism. Marx offered a dialectic of socialism and liberalism presented by their symptomatic and diagnostic antinomy in capitalism that pointed beyond itself. 18th century liberalism's insufficiency to the 19th century problem of capitalism necessitated socialist opposition; but liberalism still offered a critique of socialism that would need to be fulfilled to be transcended, and not dismissed let alone defeated as such.

Only in overcoming capitalism through socialism could, as Marx put it, humanity face its condition "with sober senses." This side of emancipation from capital, humanity remains trapped in a "phantasmagoria" of bourgeois social relations become self-contradictory and self-destructive in capital. This phantasmagoria was both collective and individual - socialist and liberal - in character. Spencer naturalized this antinomy. His libertarian anti-statism and its broad, popular political appeal down through the 20th century was the necessary result of the continuation of capitalism and its discontents.

Spencer regarded the problem as a historical holdover of traditional civilization to be left behind rather than as the new condition of bourgeois society in capitalist crisis that Marx recognised needed to be, but could not be, overcome in Spencer's liberal terms. Marx agreed with Spencer on the goal, but differed, crucially, over the nature of the obstacle and, hence, how to get there from here. Not only Spencer's later followers (more egregiously than Spencer himself), but Marx's own, have falsified this task. It has been neglected and abandoned. We cannot assume as Marx did that we are already past Spencer's classical liberalism, but are driven back to it, ineluctably, whether we realize it or not. Only by returning to the assumptions of classical liberalism can we understand Marx's critique of it. The glare of Marx's tomb at Highgate stares down upon a very determinate object. If one disappears, they both do ●

Notes

1. 'A few words with Mr Herbert Spencer' 1884 - see www.marxists.org/archive/lafargue/1884/06/herbert-spencer.htm

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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Shabby photo-ops hide lack of strategy

After the deluge

The winter floods provide yet more evidence that capitalism is unable to manage humanity's relationship with nature, argues **Paul Demarty**

The last month has been a tale of two floods.

In Britain, there has been a series of extratropical storms named Desmond, Eva and Frank, assailing much of the north of England and Scotland. Faced with, in some areas, three times the seasonal average rainfall, rivers duly burst their banks; villages and cities alike were inundated. The pictures piled up of drowned Lake District tourist spots; in one striking photograph, Carlisle civic centre rises like Avalon from three feet of water. A vast chunk of Manchester was left without power. Fresh devastation is still being visited, as I write, on Scotland and the north-east of England.

Meanwhile, in the south-eastern United States, people wait in trepidation. Similarly unseasonal rainfall has caused floods in the midwest, in Illinois and Missouri, with vast property damage and a body-count to boot. All that water is currently bearing down the grand old Mississippi. With state officials in its eponymous state, Tennessee and Louisiana gearing up for a thorough sousing in the coming days, some having already declared a state of emergency.

There is a clichéd leftwing and/or Green response to this sort of event: that its common billing in official news bulletins as a 'natural disaster' is woefully inaccurate - these 'natural' phenomena are not so natural as that. Unfortunately, the cliché is true.

It is, first of all, no kind of wild theory to link this winter's inclement conditions to anthropogenic climate change. Oxford University researchers, using one modelling tool, suggested that storm Desmond may have been made 40% more likely due to global warming.¹

More generally, the best indications of climate science are that we will face an awful lot of unpredictable weather, shifting rapidly in the worst case into dramatic transformation of whole ecologies. Temperate lands become deserts, or swamps, or icy wastes: the sheer complexity of the forces operating on the climate mean we can have little certainty as to what disaster will befall whom, but also that things can change very rapidly when a tipping point is reached. There is plenty of evidence that the UK can expect warmer, wetter winters - and this was the warmest, wettest December on record by some considerable margin.

If you sat down with pen and paper and attempted to design a social system that would maximise the volume of pollutants in the earth's atmosphere after a century or two, you would invent capitalism. A system predicated on limitless economic growth can only be driven, with all the single-mindedness of a crack addict, to plunder the earth's resources; to make use of them as cheaply as possible; to look only far enough ahead to keep shareholders happy; and to frustrate



Welly boots and looking leaderly

any attempts at collective human action to mitigate or repair damage.

Indeed, the recent inundations serve as a neat coda to December's UN climate conference in Paris, at which delegations from 195 countries signed a document declaring global warming to be a man-made problem, and noting that further temperature rises beyond 2 degrees would likely be catastrophic. Alas, those assembled kept to the tradition of such gatherings of committing nobody to actually do anything about it. It is almost as if there is some invisible force paralysing them...

Even if we leave global warming aside, however, this is all a distinctly human drama. Readers may distantly recall last winter, where in this country it was the Somerset levels that found themselves drowned. There was a great hue and cry. Politicians turned up in wellies and tried to look leaderlike (more of which anon). Task forces were set up. Money was found down the back of the Treasury sofa for flood defences. All that now looks rather like the hot air that brought us storm Desmond. Much attention has been given to the invisibility of a certain Philip Dilley, chair of the Environment Agency, who found himself rather embarrassingly on vacation in Barbados at the exact moment the inadequacy of his preparations became clear.

Yet throwing money at problems is not enough to solve them, unless one is prepared to print enough fivers to soak up the rain. The question nobody

much is asking is: what is the plan, and why?

Last year we got a lot of promises to dredge rivers and build higher walls. We must assume this is still the *modus operandi* of the EA. In the context of floods in Somerset, this looks just a little suspicious, given who is calling the shots. This is a sparsely populated area, much of it on what you could plausibly call floodplain, whose voters are Tory to their bootstraps.

The alternative is neatly demonstrated by the Dutch government, coming as they do from a country which is basically one enormous floodplain. They are not dredging rivers, but *widening* them, and conducting other measures such as afforestation that reduce flood risk. In doing so, of course, they must *move* people out of the way. The property rights of individuals are trumped by the needs of the country.

The point is this: in dealing with *immediate* crises of nature, as in wartime, capitalist governments can adopt a certain 'socialism' - a coercive collectivism directly at odds with the individualistic official ideology. Sometimes, after all, one simply has to get things done. (There is nothing terribly capitalist about Louisiana's state of emergency, except that only capitalism could make an emergency out of the flooding of floodland.) Cameron's decision is not exactly the opposite, but markedly different: taxpayers' money was to be earmarked to defend the quaint lifestyles of the

Tory heartlands.

Given the scale of the damage wrought this time around, things are somewhat different - we are dealing with disasters that encroached on Manchester, after all. Yet the country seems incapable of demanding more from the government than the vague sense that there is some sort of plan. The vilification of Philip Dilley seems to use his holiday as a rough proxy for his usefulness to the people of the north. Thus he had to fly home and get his wellies on, following various government worthies. Jeremy Corbyn attracted some flack for not visiting the north, to which he replied that he would probably get in the way. Clearly, he does not yet understand that a full schedule of utterly pointless gestures is apparently necessary to win an election in this degraded age.

The shabby photo-ops of politicians may not seem directly related to the capitalist system they serve, but in the end capitalism requires a pliable political regime. Pliability consists in the exclusion of the masses from effective decision-making, and presenting political choices in a form sufficiently pre-digested to exclude anyone inconvenient coming within a sniff of power. To this end, capitalist politicians have two weapons in their armouries - subterfuge and bribery. The theatrical appearance of 'leading from the front' in your wellies: that is subterfuge. The channelling of government funds to friendly constituencies, no matter how irrational - that is bribery.

If anything, this phenomenon is more acute along the banks of the Mississippi. It's a big river, and it floods an awful lot. 'Natural disasters' are often characterised by the frequency with which one of a given severity occurs - thus we have the concept of, say, a '500-year flood'. The Mississippi has had three '500 year floods' in the last two decades. The response, invariably, is to build the levees higher.

This is especially stupid. For reasons nobody understands, southern Illinois and Missouri sit on an area of high seismic activity. Two hundred years ago there was a series of catastrophic earthquakes which altered the course of the river in several places, wiped out a burgeoning settlement and changed the height of the ground by up to fifteen feet. Another such quake could cause untold devastation. It would not be kind to levees.

Yet rebuilding levees is a big infrastructure project. It brings in jobs. It is the sort of thing a senator slips quietly into a funding bill when election season looms. Not so earthquake preparation. As the travel writer Maciej Ceglowski acerbically notes, "the twin weapons of preparedness are massive earthworks and denial. If seismic retrofitting involved more bulldozers, it would be a lot easier to get it funded."²

Which in a roundabout way brings us back to global warming: isn't this combination of denial and fatuous technical fixes exactly what has passed for bourgeois 'debate' on the climate question for decades? Capitalism cannot maintain a metabolic, responsive relationship between humans and the natural environment. It can only switch chaotically between complacency and militarised disaster management. Ever more destructive weather patterns provide another reminder that time is running out to get rid of it. In the meantime, readers might want to buy futures in rubber footwear - we will be watching a lot of politicians trudging around in drowned villages yet ●

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Notes

1. *The Guardian*, December 11.
2. http://idlewords.com/2015/07/confronting_new_madrid_part_2.htm.

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